



The Warlord

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Enter the omegaverse world inspired by the Greek myths of Cassandra and Achilles from internationally best-selling author Jocelyn Montana.

The last citadel has fallen. The Warlord now rules. But he has one last conquest left ...

Princess Cassandra was supposed to live her life dedicated to the gods in a mountain temple. But when the brutal Warlord Lodan topples her family from the throne, he takes Cassandra captive.

She's a trophy of war. His sworn enemy. The focus of his wrath. An Omega of royal blood to trot out at his side proving his dominance of the world. And her. But he isn't content with her captivity.

He wants her in his bed.

He won't take her by force. He thinks he can use Alpha tricks to slowly seduce her. Make her crave him. Make her beg for him.

It's a battle of wills. A battle against desire. Because every moment with him flames more passion. But she won't give in.

She'll never lie with her enemy. With someone who will never care for her.

And she will never, ever, beg.

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PROLOGUE

Sing to me of the wrath of Lodan the Warlord.

Tell me of his great choice.

For he can die in everlasting glory at the gates of his greatest enemy,

Or live a long life, his name unknown to all but those who love him.

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The warrior's gaze bore into Cassandra from beneath his burnished bronze helm. It was him. The Warlord. The one leading his Myrdinian army across Anatolia like a swarm of locusts, destroying all in his path.

He swung off his horse and strode across the blood-drenched beach to where she stood between two guards. "I'll put her in my tent."

Her knees turned to jelly, and she swayed. Hands bound in front of her, she dug her toes into the sand to keep her balance. She wouldn't collapse. "I'm a priestess of Suilani. I'm devoted to the goddess and a vessel for prayers only." A priestess—and her vow of chastity—was supposed to be sacred and respected. Maybe, just maybe, he believed in the sanctity of the temple rituals and would leave her alone. Maybe he didn't know who she truly was.

The hard gaze didn't change. "You may have been in a temple, but we know you're the Sardi princess. We found your letters to the king."

She swallowed down panic. "I cast off my former life to follow the goddess."

"Must have been a fickle following considering your letters begged to return home."

She sagged. No true priestess would want to leave her temple. "That was ..." Her mind went blank. "That was?—"

"Enough. No Sardi cares enough about matters of the soul to leave their life behind

for worship. You were there to hide.”

A lick of wind swept across her face, but it didn’t bring the familiar tang of ocean air. It held the acrid bite of blood. As a girl, this stretch of beach in front of Sarda City was where she chased after seagulls and built sand fortresses. Now trenches lashed like gaping wounds in the earth, and towering funeral pyres awaited fallen comrades. As her letters echoed, she’d longed to come home, but this place was no longer home. She gestured toward the desolation around them. “And you care about matters of the soul? How many have you slaughtered?”

One of her guards growled. “She has the typical Sardi airs. Let me put her in the prisoner quarters and make her wait on the men.”

Kassandra shivered. Only two fates awaited females taken during war, either a lifetime of menial labor or slaking the lust of soldiers. Every single one of these Myrdinians was an Alpha, and she was an Omega. They’d want to lay their hands on her, to be satisfied in a way only an Omega could provide.

Why hadn’t her brother, the king, crushed them? Sarda, her home city, was impenetrable, its walls vast and high. Yet the gates to the city stood open, and the Myrdinians sauntered about as if they ruled.

“No. I have plans for her.” He turned to a broad man with biceps the size of a pig’s hind leg and a scar from his cheek to his ear. “Gather the commanders near the boats in an hour.” He grabbed the end of the rope binding her wrists, and led her away like he would a horse. “And tell Greta to come to my tent.”

Kassandra’s knees almost buckled at the first step. Her sandals had long since fallen apart, and she’d walked barefoot for most of the two-day journey. Her feet felt like someone had wrapped them in thorns and let them dig and fester. But she wouldn’t limp. This rabble wouldn’t see her pain. Never show weakness.

The Myrdinian camp lay behind a wooden spiked barricade, its rough-hewn points aimed toward Sarda. The freshly cut wood emitted a whiff of pine as the Warlord led her through a small gap serving as an entrance. One main road bisected the camp and ran down to the sea, where ships with arched, intricately carved prows bobbed offshore. She gasped. Hundreds of vessels lay moored at the beach. Hundreds.

This wasn't the disorganized rebellion by a few city-states to the south that she'd heard about at the temple. This was a massive uprising by sea, something no one had ever dared try before.

He towed her farther into the heart of the camp. Tents ran in perpendicular rows, forming straight footpaths. Cooking smoke filled the air, pushing away the coppery stench of blood as men milled around their living quarters. The rhythmic clang of a hammer on armor pounded from somewhere to the right, like the bang of a drum. The Warlord was marching her into the Minotaur's labyrinth, without a string to show her the path for escape.

They reached a large tent with a taut, white animal skin stretched as a roof over wooden walls. The wind kicked up, making the tent shudder a welcome as she stepped inside.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust in the dim light, but slowly, the features of the room revealed themselves. A massive bed stretched low along most of the back wall. The heavy, smooth bedframe was piled with the shaggy skins of northern mountain sheep. She loved her sheep blankets when she lived in the palace, but such luxury wasn't allowed at the temple. Not even during the glacial winter months when ice coated the inner stone walls and floor of her bedroom.

A copper basin, large enough that two people could sit in it with room to spare, nestled along one side of the tent, and a table loaded with food and vessels of wine and water occupied the other. Two chairs rimmed a small table cluttered with several

books and a map stretched across it.

Books? Warrior Alphas didn't read. They were tools pointed at a fight and told what to do. Most likely, someone in this horde assisted him with his plans.

The Warlord took a knife from his belt and reached for her.

As she leaped back, pain shot through her feet. Crying out, she toppled sideways, but he caught her before she fell. For one long moment, he remained motionless, his arm wrapped around her waist, holding her close to him. He should smell like a horrid, disgusting blend of blood, manure, and sweat, but he didn't. He smelled like a cedar forest during a warm summer day, all rich and mysterious, and welcoming.

With a hiss, he stepped back. Gripping her wrists, he sawed through her bindings in one quick motion.

"Every inch of this camp is guarded. You can't take a single step without me knowing about it." It wasn't easy to discern the shade of his eyes under his helm, but they seemed to darken. "If you try to run, I'll catch you. It won't go well for you afterward."

Better not let him catch her then.

"You'll stay here. Accessible to me whenever I want you." He pointed toward the table. "Go get the water jug."

Her brows shot up. "The water jug?"

He growled, low and menacing, but instead of shying away, something low in her abdomen clenched.

“Do what I say.” In a flash, he picked her up, moving so quickly that she barely registered it until she was already in his arms. He dropped her into a chair, then snatched a copper jug from the table. “I said to drink.”

“No, you said to get the jug.”

He scowled and shoved the pitcher at her lips.

She reached for it, then snatched her hand back. “You poisoned it.”

He growled again, and her stomach reacted with the same funny little flip. What was wrong with her?

He put the jug to his own lips and took a long swallow. His throat flexed, and a drop slid from his mouth down the side of his neck. He was so powerful, even his neck looked strong. She’d met many Alphas, but he was easily the biggest, so tall he had to be close to seven feet.

He shoved the jug at her again. “You’re no longer a spoiled Sardi princess. The sooner you accept that, the better.”

The jug hung between them. Being ordered to take it made her want to do the exact opposite. Except sand coated her tongue, and her throat felt like day-old bread left in the sun. Scowling, she plucked it from him. “You dragged me from the temple to tell me I’m no longer a spoiled princess? Surely you could have sent a note.” She tipped the jug back and drank before saying, “I’m no threat to you. Release me.”

“A threat? No. The Sardi are no longer a threat. I’ve conquered Sarda City, and soon I’ll find the king and crush what remains of the Sardi army.”

She jolted, then shifted on the chair, trying to hide the impact of his words. Her

brother was still alive. But where was he? Why wasn't he here with his superior army, defending their home? When her father lived, he would never have let the seat of the Sardi empire, the jewel of Anatolia, be captured by Myrdinian rebels. "Then release me."

"I've conquered Anatolia, and now I intend to snuff out all the lies the Sardi have choked us with for the past half-century." He leaned against the table and crossed his arms. "First, I'll start with destroying the Blood Laws. And you will help me."

"The Blood Laws are sacred."

The Blood Laws maintained the strength of family lines. Through them, people were guided to their best matrimonial match. Sardi wed Sardi. Myrdinian wed Myrdinian. Maybe it rankled some that all marriages needed to be approved by the Sardi. But they knew best.

His lips twisted into a snarl. "They're lies used to keep Anatolia subservient to Sardi rule."

"And what do you expect me to do? Tell the people of Anatolia everything will be better with you in charge?" She huffed out a bitter laugh. "Have you been struck in the head by a sword too many times? I won't do that." She swallowed another long drink of water.

"No. Your role is simpler than that. I'll show all of Anatolia the Blood Laws are gone by proving it to them. You're here to carry my child. Sardi blood and Myrdinian blood will be intermingled."

She choked and bent over to cough so hard she gagged. This was so much worse than she'd expected, and she'd expected a lot. Not only was he planning to keep her at his side for months, maybe even years, but no Sardi would ever accept her as one of them

again. The Blood Laws were sacred and rigid. She'd be cast aside for polluting Sardi blood.

No. This couldn't happen. She needed to get out of there and find her brother. She clutched the jug until her knuckles turned white.

Think! She had to convince the Warlord this was a bad idea. "Don't you find it odd an Omega Sardi princess was promised to the goddess when my father could have wed me to a prominent leader? He could have forged a powerful alliance."

His lips tightened, and a scar on his upper lip became more visible. "You were hidden there. Not cast away."

She shook her head. "No. I've been there for four years." She tried to take another sip of water, but her hands shook so badly she lowered it to her lap. "I was sent to be a virgin priestess for the rest of my life because I'm defective." Her cheeks grew hot. "I don't go into heat, so I can't bear you a child." All of those things were true, but it wasn't why she was sent to the temple.

He sneered and walked toward the door. "Stop lying to me. Your survival depends on me and my moods."

Her cheeks grew hotter. Here she was, spilling her most private details before him, and he didn't believe her. "I'm twenty-eight. Why else wouldn't I have been married by now?"

He grunted, and his lips twisted. "We'll see, Princess." He spat the word like it was something foul on his tongue. "Sardi rule is over."

She shook her head. "Your lust for death will only bring about your end."

His gaze grew so cold she shivered. “You know nothing.”

“I know about your prophecy.” Her hands now steady, she raised the jug again. “Even tucked away in the temple, we heard things. You have a choice. Die young in battle, or live a long, life without glory. A fulfilled life. One with family.” She took a long drink of water and eyed him. “Considering we’re on a battlefield, I think it’s clear what choice you’ve made.”

The Warlord tilted his head slightly. “Prophecies are simply silly tales for fools. Sorry to disappoint you, but my death isn’t imminent, and I have no interest in having a mate.”

“Don’t ignore the strength of prophecy.” She didn’t dismiss prophecy the way he did. However, in this case, she hoped he was right, and the tales about him were simply fables because rumors about his prophecy weren’t the only tales told about him. They said he was unkillable. Blessed by the gods.

“We all die.” His lips twisted into a cruel smile. “In the meantime, I’ll free Anatolia of Sardi tyranny. And you’ll walk through every town in Anatolia, showing your bloodline now lies matched with mine.”

Any response shriveled up on her tongue.

“Someone is coming to help you bathe.” He pointed at the table and opened the door. “Eat.” The hot summer sun cast half of him in golden light, its rays glinting off the armor that covered him, but his face was in darkness, and she still didn’t know what he fully looked like before he turned and shut the door.

Sweat slicked his skin as he stood outside the main feasting tent. Heat still plumed from the sand despite dusk falling, making his commanders appear hazy.

He was tired of this battlefield. Tired of the relentless wind spitting sand like shards of glass. Tired of this bleak, monotone brown landscape. The Sardi were so proud of Sarda City, describing it as the epicenter of the best Anatolia could offer. All he saw was a desiccated, beige city that looked like it had leached all that was green and alive to feed its towering walls, leaving only dust behind.

Xander, his second in command, moved to his side, scratching the large scar along the side of his face. He whispered, “Ever since you issued the order to go find the Sardi princess, the men have been restless.”

Lodan nodded. He knew. He and his commanders had battled together for so long, his warriors were like an extension of himself. None would openly ask him about his decision, but they’d wonder why a Sardi princess mattered so much they’d delayed their pursuit of the Sardi king for her. These were the Myrdinians who’d marched beside him from the beginning. They deserved to know that this Omega was part of the plan.

Lodan stepped into the center and pivoted slowly, locking gazes with his commanders one by one. “What did we all vow when we boarded our ships and came here?”

Silence filled the beach, and the men shifted, looking at each other. Finally, Thoas

called out, “Defeat the Sardi. Eliminate the Blood Laws. Loyalty to you and to those we vow to protect.”

Lodan nodded. Normally, he never explained his actions, but in this case, they needed to understand. “The Sardi Princess is a wrinkle we didn’t expect. But this will work in our favor.”

Until the moment they found her letters, they hadn’t a clue a princess existed. Over the four days it took to fetch her from the temple, he and Xander had debated what to do about her. In the end, while Xander didn’t agree with Lodan’s plan, they both agreed she needed to be dealt with.

“This Omega is no prize of war for my pleasure. She is a tool to use as I see fit. With her under my rule, it shows the Sardi are not the elite. They aren’t special. She will be a symbol the Blood Laws are gone forever. And the Sardi will never try to put her on the throne. She will be dead to them.”

His men nodded.

“I vow the Sardi will be no more.” He closed his fist and pounded once on his chest.

He’d made this vow for the first time when he was fifteen, standing in the middle of his destroyed village. In the years since, others had joined him, and so, the rebellion grew. First, it was a small spark, then it became a seething fire. For too long the Sardi had strangled the people of these lands and prevented them from living in freedom.

“We will show the Sardi stranglehold over Anatolia is gone. No longer will they treat us like cattle, penning us into pastures and yoking us for the tasks they demand. Picking our mates like they’re breeding us.” He put his hand on the pommel of his sword. “Slaughtering us when we don’t obey.”

His men shouted again.

“The Blood Laws are the heart of Sardi control. They claim superiority simply because of their blood. They use these laws to hold power over us. They’ve made us fear them. Fear death if we don’t comply.” Rage swept through him, and he no longer saw the wasted land but his village before it was destroyed. “No more will we hide when the Sardi come to the village, poking around for unapproved matches. No longer will we hide our Omegas to prevent Sardi Alphas from taking them as mistresses.”

His hand fisted around the pommel. “Sarda City has fallen to Myrdinian swords. They’ve fallen to a race they believed to be the lowest of all. The race they told could never do anything but farm.” A ghost of a smile twitched his lips. “I think we’ve proven we can do far more than that.”

His men pounded their own chests and shouted a war cry.

He jerked his chin toward the mess tent. “Let’s feast.”

With another battle cry, his commanders turned towards the food.

Raucous shouts filled the space as the men settled at tables centered around a large fire, where the camp cook bent over a haunch of Sardi hog.

He settled into his seat, Xander sitting to his right. The cook’s assistant brought them large goblets of wine, his hand shaking as he gave Lodan a short bow, sloshing the wine everywhere before plunking the glasses on the table and dashing away.

He returned with plates of food, and Lodan gave him a nod. The lad bobbled and almost fell over, his face turning white.

Lodan ignored the wine and bit into a piece of meat. “Where did your scouts track the king?” he asked Xander.

“The king fled north toward Argos. And the Dorian lands.”

“Do you think he’ll ask the Dorians for aid?” This would flesh out where the Dorians’ loyalty lay. Reclusive, the Dorians preferred to remain in their villages clawed into the spines of the icy mountains. No one knew how many Dorians there were. If they entered the war and sided with the king, it might give the Sardi a huge army.

“I think he’ll ask the Argosians for aid. The Dorians,” —Xander shrugged— “no one has ever had much luck with them.” Not many braved the narrow mountain passes to seek them out, and even fewer returned.

Lodan stared into the red wine in his goblet, and his lips curled a fraction. “The king is desperate.”

Anatolia may lie at his feet, but his vengeance wouldn’t rest until King Harl lay dead. That was the second vow he’d made when he was fifteen, the one he’d never spoken aloud to another.

Lodan swallowed another bite of food. “Break camp in the morning. We go after the king.”

“What do you want us to do with Sarda City?”

He took a long moment and considered it. “Leave a small group behind. Have them get the Sardi prisoners working on repairing the city.”

“And what about your Sardi prisoner?” Xander frowned and stabbed the knife he

used to cut his meat into the table. “The Sardi will lick their wounds, but then they’ll look for ways to defeat us again. Until she has your child, they could try to put her on the throne as queen. It isn’t safe to leave her here, and it isn’t safe to bring her with us. You should eliminate her.”

Xander believed ending the line of succession was the only way to truly stamp out Sardi rule.

Lodan had killed many, but that was in battle. He drew the line at murder, even if she was related to the king.

“I’ll make sure they’ll never want her as their queen. While we pursue the king, we will stop at towns for supplies. I’ll display her at my side to every village. Every city. It will be clear she lies with me, and the Sardi will spurn her.” He sneered. “They will turn on their last hope for continued Sardi rule because of their damn Blood Laws. Pregnant or not, they will never accept her if they think I touched her.”

Xander remained still, staring at him. “She’s an Omega, and you’re an Alpha. I saw how you looked at her.”

Lodan frowned. Emptiness was all he’d felt for so long. Emptiness and anger. So, when fierce possessiveness swept through him at first sight of her, it was foreign. Disturbing.

He’d shoved it away as quickly as it had come, but apparently not quick enough. “She’s a Sardi.” Out of all the warriors at his side, Xander knew exactly how much Lodan hated the Sardi. The familiar punch of his anger surged through him. “I’ll never forget who she really is.” He spoke quietly, but men near him reacted to the scent of aggression spiking the air and turned toward him, their smiles slipping.

He waved his hand, and they returned to their food.

Xander leaned closer and gave one of his rare smiles. “You should toss her into the ocean, but I look forward to seeing a Sardi serve you.”

They had almost finished their plates when an old, whip-thin Beta female flounced into the empty chair at Lodan’s left, her silver hair pulled severely back from her brow into a knot at the back of her head. She grabbed his wine and took a long swig. “I did the chore for you.” She scowled. “That’s the last time I’m an Omega babysitter, though. I have better things to do.”

He sighed. Greta, his healer, traveled with him during all his campaigns. Even if her skill had saved many of his warriors, he didn’t enjoy sitting next to her at the table. “Good.” If he was rude enough, she’d go away.

She settled deeper into her chair as if intending to stay awhile. He sighed again.

“I bathed her and dressed her in old trousers and a shirt like you ordered.”

“Good,” he said again. Sardi women only wore draped dresses, and the men wore special tunics. They considered trousers worn by Myrdinians to be only fit for savages. Let her feel like a savage, too.

“It took me a long time to wash and fix her hair.” She eyed him. “That was incredibly troublesome, and I think you owe me something.”

He raised an eyebrow a fraction.

Greta waved her hand dismissively. “Well, we can talk about that later. Overall, she’s banged up but nothing that won’t heal in a couple of days with my salve.”

“Did she mention her feet were bothering her?” He’d seen her limping and how she tried to hide it.

Greta's brows shot up. "She didn't speak to me much. I don't think she liked the fact I told her to strip down in front of me, but eventually she caved and got in the tub. But yes, I noticed her feet are bad. She has one gash already festering but I treated it. It should be all right."

Xander grunted. "It'll keep her from trying to run, anyway."

Greta cackled. "I wouldn't be too sure about that."

The image of the Omega in his tent, with her tangled mat of golden hair and overly large blue eyes, flashed before him. When he'd threatened her about what he'd do if she tried to escape, her eyes had narrowed in defiance. She'd try to run the second she was able.

She wouldn't succeed.

By the time he got her pregnant, she'd be obedient. No more spouting prophecies at him and scolding him about bloodlust.

He knew the prophecy well, and he'd accepted long ago he'd die freeing Anatolia. Nothing mattered but killing the king. He would fully destroy the Sardi and give Anatolia back to its people. Happiness, a mate, and a long life weren't what he wanted. He would die to free Anatolia. He would die for his vengeance.

Greta leaned forward. "I want a word with you." She jerked her chin towards the door. "In private."

"Let's walk." Pushing back from the table, he left the feast, the Beta healer scurrying beside him, taking two steps to match one of his own.

Wind slapped him in the face outside the meal tent, pelting tiny beads of salt mist

from off the ocean. Whitecaps whipped up to the shore. A storm was rolling in.

A group of Omegas from the neighboring town of Tyrrhusca headed toward the feasting warriors, the females in flowing dresses displaying full breasts and lush hips. One male Omega brought up the rear, his arms slung around two females. A two-inch streak of dyed hair blazed brightly along the left temple of each Omega. Each color indicated what that Omega would allow or perform with an Alpha.

Having learned his warriors had a kinder approach to relationships with Omegas than the Sardi, the denizens of the night from a nearby brothel visited regularly since the fall of Sarda City.

An oval-faced Omega with light eyes and full, plump lips, halted when she caught sight of him. She swallowed and smiled tentatively, half in fear, half invitation. Her beauty was apparent even in the clouded moonlight. Gorgeous golden skin begging for an Alpha to explore. Lips made to suck. The scent of her arousal swirled on the breeze.

Nothing stirred inside him. He shook his head. "Not tonight."

A look of relief? Disappointment? She ducked her head, and the Omegas moved to the tent, where a loud roar welcomed them.

Greta, hands on hips, stared up at him. "How long has it been since you let an Omega handle your sword? The sap should be flowing to continue your conquering after a battle."

This was why he avoided talking to Greta. "Your tongue flaps more than it should. Perhaps you can perform your healing without it?"

She rolled her eyes. "We both know you don't hurt females. Besides, someone must

tell you the truth instead of what you want to hear.”

“What do you need to talk to me about? I have things to attend to.”

The slight smile on her face faded. “I’m with you because I believe in what you say. And what you say is that no one will force any more bloodlines. So tell me, do your rules apply to you?”

He halted, his eyes narrowing to slits. “What are you talking about?”

“You know I’m no fan of the Sardi, but you’re forcing yourself on that Omega, and when you saved me, you said you would make sure things like that never happened again.”

He rocked back on his heels and scrubbed his mouth with his hand. “I don’t force myself on females. She’s an Omega and I’m an Alpha. She’ll respond to me the way Omegas do. Especially when she goes into heat.”

“Hmm.”

Having a Sardi begging him to bed her would mean he’d won in more ways than on the battlefield. “I know what I’m doing.”

Greta laughed. “Oh really? You know what you’re doing? What you know about Omegas could fit on the point of a needle. You’ll need to spend a lot of time with her. Make her crave you. Do you really want to spend time with a Sardi?”

He didn’t like the way Greta peered up at him, and why was he even explaining himself to Greta? He didn’t owe anyone any explanation.

Except the old Beta was right. He’d sworn an oath to her, to everyone who fought

with him, that he'd change things. That anyone who joined his banner had his protection. "If that is what I need to do, I'll do it."

The waves pounded the shore like they were gulping at it as Lodan and the healer walked in silence.

"The Omega said she doesn't go into heat. Could that be true? She smelled like a normal Omega to me." Smelled much better than any Omega he'd ever met. Even after days of walking in the dust, her skin held the intoxicating scent of orange blossoms. He'd wanted to pull her to him, yet push her far, far away.

He growled. She was a Sardi. It was all deception and illusion. Like the flowers in the south that mimicked a rose with their scent but, if touched, caused an instant, agonizing death.

Greta paused. "You're sure you got the right Omega?"

"Of course. We intercepted a letter from a servant to the princess and it showed where she was being hidden. And she has the hair." The royal line all had hair like cornsilk, so blond it was almost white. "Why?"

"Some races, like the Dorians, only go into heat after they find their bondmate. They can't have children with someone who isn't their bondmate."

He snorted. "She's a Sardi, and we know the Sardi don't believe in bondmates. They breed all of us like cattle, even themselves. Their marriages create dynasties and more Sardi. None of them are bondmates, and they have plenty of children. So that can't be it."

"That's true." Greta paused and pulled on her earlobe. "She's old enough, but maybe she's delayed for some reason." She quirked a brow. "But you know all about

Omegas, right? You'll figure it out."

"You're dismissed."

She huffed but listened for once and left. This wrinkle inconvenienced him. Greta was right, he'd have to spend a lot of time with the Sardi princess, which was the last thing he wanted to do. Especially when every time he looked at her, something strange tugged in his chest.

Turning, he walked down the beach to consider how best to proceed.

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Warmth surrounded her, and Cassandra snuggled deeper into her cocoon of furs. A rich leather and cedar scent coated the skins, and she inhaled deeply and nestled farther into the pile of blankets.

Wait. That scent was ...

She sat up with a jerk. Exhausted after two days of poor sleep, she'd lain down on the Warlord's bed for a moment, and look what happened—she'd fallen asleep. Here. In the Warlord's bedroom where he was about to return any moment.

A gust of wind buffeted the tent, and the roof's fabric snapped like a whip. She kicked off the blankets and shimmied to the edge of the bed. With another vicious slap of the wind, a dull roar filled the tent as the sky unleashed a sudden onslaught of rain. She stood.

Pain clawed through her feet, and she tumbled sideways onto the ground, whimpering.

Her feet were a mess. After her bath, the healer applied a salve to them, bandaged them, and gave Cassandra some men's shoes for extra protection, but her feet were ripped apart. The healer told her to stay off them, but how would she escape if she couldn't walk?

She shifted, and her elbow cracked against something hard. "Damn it." She rubbed her arm. "What is this?"

After the irritating Beta helped her bathe and complained far too long about the state of Cassandra's hair—yes, it was Cassandra's fault the Warlord's guards hadn't let her brush her hair—she'd immediately checked the tent for weapons. Alas, nothing. Even the plates and jugs on the table were made of copper, so she couldn't smash them to form a knife of sorts. She'd missed this, though.

Kassandra scooted backward and dragged it out.

It was only a small crate with a few books inside. She slumped forward. "Nothing useful." Even if she got close enough and aimed for the Warlord's temple, the leather-wrapped tomes were small. Definitely not hefty enough to stun an Alpha, let alone kill one, and the Warlord probably had a really thick skull.

Stamped gold lettering on the front covers caught the lamp light and glittered. These were expensive books on par with the ones in the palace.

The library was not one of her favorite places as a child. Anything that kept her inside was torture back then. Only as a teen had she grown to like reading, because it let her escape, but why would the Warlord have nice books like these? And what happened to the palace books when the Myrdinians attacked? They were worth a small fortune, but no barbarian would appreciate the collection. Although Cassandra's father hadn't exactly spent time reading either. The only times she'd ever see him in the library was when he instructed her tutor on things she needed to learn.

One of their last interactions before he'd sent her away to the temple was to instruct her to learn about Argosian customs. The Argosians were close allies with the Sardi, and their city-state was the land of engineers and philosophers. At first, she'd been excited, thinking he would finally have her help around the palace, but she'd soon realized he was arranging a match between her and the Argos leader.

She'd been stunned.

A marriage with a non-Sardi declared her father didn't find her satisfactory, or worthy as a daughter. She was a Sardi, she was supposed to marry a Sardi. Sure, she'd rejected all the Sardi suitors to that point, but it wasn't her fault she hadn't responded to any of them. None seemed interested in her anyway. They all sat at the table and only spoke to her father, angling for their own self-interest.

At first, she'd been angry. Then ashamed. She'd always known her father found her deficient, but this was proof. This was announcing it to all of Anatolia.

When her father told her it was the Argos leader or the temple, she'd chosen the temple. She'd figured he'd relent and bring her back. He hadn't.

Then he'd died.

The gold title on the red leather book in her hand glinted in the low lamplight. She turned the spine. *Hunting the Wild Boar*. Myrdinians weren't readers, but if this Warlord actually did read, it wasn't surprising he wanted to read about hunting and killing.

She tossed it back in the crate and fished out the other. *The Poetry of Sappho*. This book, or maybe the entire crate, must have been misplaced. No Alpha, never mind the Warlord, read poetry.

A squall of wind and rain lashed through the tent, making the flame in the lamps jump as the door swung open. Cassandra dropped the book and scrambled to her feet.

He'd come.

The Warlord stepped through, ruffling his dark hair to send drops of rain cascading through the tent. Such a normal gesture, but he was a ruthless killer. He probably still had Sardi blood on his hands.

Her gaze flew down his arms. No blood. And he'd taken off his armor, so he'd washed up somewhere.

He ignored her and walked to the table. Even without his armor, he towered taller than any other Alphas she'd seen, with broad, strong shoulders. Loose black pants, in a common style she'd seen worn by visitors from the south, were paired with a fitted, simply woven white shirt, a slight vee at the neck revealing bronze skin and the taut muscles of his chest. The fabric was worth little, but on him, it looked royal somehow. Not like her brother, who wore silk and embroidered layers to give himself more grandeur, yet despite the expensive clothes, he still seemed ... small.

She didn't want to look at his face, she didn't want to know this Alpha, but her gaze dragged upward as if captured.

The small scar she'd noticed before bisected his upper lip at a slight angle. His lower lip lay a touch fuller. Combined with chiseled cheekbones and a strong jawline, his face could have been alluring, but his mouth was set as if he found the world distasteful. And anger and power vibrated through him.

If she'd crossed his path in normal circumstances, she would have avoided drawing his attention. Their gazes met. Held.

Her breath caught.

His eyes were hauntingly beautiful. Obscene. Like liquid gold, they burned under his strong brow. Framed by thick lashes, the molten color seemed to change in the low light of the tent. They belonged to a god, not to this Warlord.

Lazily, he grabbed the glass of wine he'd poured and walked toward her with the arrogance of a hunter, knowing he had his quarry. "You're watching me like you're eager to know me."

“I’m studying you for weaknesses.”

In one smooth motion, he dropped into one of the chairs in the center of the tent. “Then you’ll watch for a long time.” That bewitching gaze held hers. “Sit.” He pointed at the chair next to him.

Her mouth went dry, and all thought fled. Her hands smoothed over her oversized trousers. She trembled and wrapped her arms around herself. She didn’t want to tremble before him, but she couldn’t help it. What was he going to do tonight? Start rutting her?

“Do I need to repeat myself?” he asked with a low, seductive rumble. “I told you I like to be obeyed, Omega. Instantly.” His eyebrow rose a fraction, and the liquid golden eyes, previously light like honey, darkened ominously. Alpha aggression spiked in the tent. It was so raw, so strong, she gasped.

Her father had introduced her to Alpha warriors, but none exuded this intensity. Fear, real visceral fear, clawed up her throat and choked her. Unable to swallow, she edged to stand in front of the seat he’d pointed at, trying hard not to limp.

While he sat, their heads were closer to the same height. His gaze bore into hers, so she stared at his throat instead.

His knees fell open, and he sat back, patting his leg. As if he were relaxing at home by the fire. “Sit here instead.”

Her heart pounded, and it was like she couldn’t get enough air. Her nose wrinkled. “Not a chance.”

She expected another barked command. Instead, a humming started. Not exactly a purr, not exactly a growl. It slid against her chest, worming into her. The heavy tinge

of aggression in the air faded into his silky Alpha scent.

Heavens above ... his smell.

It was so rich. No other Alphas smelled like this—a touch of cedar, leather, and something mysteriously male and primal. It was the one she'd buried herself in while lying on the bed. Normally Alpha scent irritated her. Made her want to get away. This one didn't. Something shifted inside her, urging her to get closer.

She fisted her hands and remained where she stood.

He glanced down at her feet and frowned. "You can sit in the chair, or on me. Now. Your choice."

A whisper rose from the back of her mind— choose him. "Two pitiful choices. I'd prefer to sit as far from you as I can." She lowered into the chair.

A drop of rain lingered on the Warlord's neck. If she licked it off, she'd taste his skin mixed with a hint of rain.

He hadn't stopped humming, and it gently lapped through her. Her breath spilled slowly past her lips. In and out. Why in Hades was she thinking about his taste? "Stop making that sound," she blurted, instantly biting her lip.

His lips curled. "Since you dislike it, I'll keep doing it." He tilted his head slightly. "Would you care to play a little game?"

She sat up straight. "What?"

"We'll play chess. You win, I'll give you what you want, and stop humming. I win, you give me what I want."

She drew back, her gaze flicking to the bed. “No. I know what you want. And you’ll take what you want, game or no.”

His eyes seemed to flash, or maybe it was a trick of the lamplight. “Sardi Alpha’s take. Myrdinian’s do not. You’ll come to me. You will beg me to fill you and give you everything an Omega needs.” His voice lowered and became a purr. “Only when you, a Sardi Princess, beg for me to be inside you, will I take you.” One corner of his lips tilted upwards a fraction. “And you will beg.”

Kassandra froze. What was he playing at? “If you speak the truth, you’ll wait forever.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Fear still trickled through her, and she had absolutely no reason to trust what he said, but for some reason she ... did.

She’d never wanted an Alpha before, and she wasn’t about to start now. If he did keep his word, then she’d escape and still be available for a Sardi marriage when the Sardi finally destroyed this army and took back Anatolia.

She tossed her head. “Fine. Let’s play. And what I want when I win is for you to let me leave.”

He waved his hand, then put it back on his muscular thigh. “Fine. If you win, I’ll let you walk out of camp. If I win, you sit on my lap and touch me.”

She stared, her lips parting. “What? You want me to touch you?” Her gaze dropped to his chest. To the broad slope of his shoulders.

“Part of your new role here is to wait on me, which includes dressing and undressing me. You may as well get comfortable with it now. I imagine it will be the first time a Sardi has ever waited on another.”

She bit back a snort. What did he think she'd been doing for the last four years? The temple was a stone fortress in the side of a mountain, and she was the newest acolyte, meaning she got the worst jobs. Cooking, cleaning, weeding, and taking care of the barnyard. The only chores she liked were caring for the animals and working in the garden.

"I can't trust you to keep your word."

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. The temperature in the tent seemed to lower, and she shivered.

"The Sardi are the ones who can't be trusted."

She knew how to play chess, and although she hadn't done so in a while, she could definitely beat some Warlord.

He raised his drink to his lips, waiting for her answer.

She didn't quite believe he'd let her leave his tent and return to her city, but a small bubble of hope rose in her chest. "Fine." At the very least, she'd put him in his place.

He pulled one of the tables over between them, then retrieved the chessboard from a chest by the tent entrance.

As he set it up, he started humming again. The sound lapped against her, making her settle back in her chair, her muscles relaxing. "No humming while we play."

He pointed. "I've let you be white. You go first."

Kassandra sat back, staring at the board. She'd lost. Not simply lost, she'd been trounced by a Myrdinian. She gritted her teeth and bit back tears. All she'd had to do

was win one game, and she'd failed. Yet another thing she'd failed at. "I haven't slept in two days."

He drained the rest of his wine. "That must be the reason you lost."

The sides of the tent seemed to be closing in. She was really stuck here. With him. He was an Alpha, and she was his Omega prisoner. No matter what he said earlier about only taking her when she begged for it, she didn't believe him. He was going to push his advantage and take her however he wanted. That's what Alphas did.

One of her ladies-in-waiting, a Tyrrhuscan from the nearby city-state, had spoken to Cassandra about her arranged marriage. She hadn't liked her future mate, but it hadn't mattered; he was the one her parents set her to marry. She'd told Cassandra her Alpha hadn't let her get used to him, he'd just ... taken.

The Warlord stared at her from across the table, his golden eyes darkening. He spread his legs wider and jerked his chin toward his left thigh. "I don't have all night. Come."

She stood. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

She lowered sideways onto his lap, her legs tucked between his, trying to touch him as little as possible. His arm snaked around her waist. "Look at that, I didn't even have to command you twice."

She hissed and popped forward, trying to stand, but his grip tightened, and he settled her closer, right against his chest. His chest vibrated as he began humming again. It wasn't the purr an Alpha made for his mate, but it was soothing. The sound made her want to nuzzle against him and let his warm body heat her own.

No. No way. She kept herself stiff and unyielding.

“Look at me, Omega.”

Her gaze jerked up to fix on his. “Kassandra. Not Omega.”

He didn’t respond. As the humming continued, he took her hand. She froze, staring at how his massive hand, with its blunt fingernails, engulfed hers.

A tingle spread from the contact—little bubbles of pleasure growing and expanding into licks of heat along her limbs. He put her hand on his chest. “Touch me.”

She made a fist and bumped it on his chest. “There. I’ve sat on your lap, and I’ve touched you.”

His hand plunged into her hair, and he tilted her face to his. “Keep looking at me. Look at your Alpha.” His gaze roamed over her face. Releasing her hair, he trailed his fingers down her neck.

“You aren’t my Alpha.” Fire licked everywhere he touched. As his fingers followed the slope of her shoulder, they tickled over her shirt, and she had an urge to rip it away so they were skin on skin.

Her fingernails dug into his chest. No. She couldn’t feel this way. Not for him. Anyone but him.

A small, cruel smile pulled his lips up. “Your eyes are dilated. Your body knows I’m your Alpha.”

His fingers kept up their slow trail down her arm. Her blood heated, and Kassandra squirmed, trying to fight it. That made it worse. She was rubbing on Lodan’s thigh, bringing delicious friction between her legs.

“You’ll be dressing and undressing me every day. And I like to sleep naked.”

She squeaked and shot back as far as she could with his arm still around her waist. “I don’t want to see you naked.”

He whispered the tips of his fingers over her neck again, and her head fell back, giving him better access. What was she doing?

“Have you ever seen a naked Alpha, Omega?”

“I don’t answer to Omega.”

He growled. “You answer to whatever I call you.”

“You want me to touch you, then call me by my name.”

His brows shot up, and his hand stilled. “No. You’re my prisoner. You get no requests. No negotiation.” The backs of his knuckles caressed her cheek like a lover’s would. But he was not her lover. “Every single thing that happens between us, will be because you want it. Remember that Omega.” His gaze burned. “I’m not forcing myself on you. That moment when you—a Sardi—lower yourself to plead for my cock, will be worth waiting for.”

“I won’t beg. I’ll never beg.” Even to her ears, her voice sounded tremulous.

His hand returned to her hair, and he bent her neck to the side. He leaned forward. Lips tickled the shell of her ear. “When you do, you’ll know I’m your Alpha.” His mouth brushed against the thudding pulse below her jaw, and she jerked. There was a hint of his warm tongue, then he bit. Hard.

Her cry broke over the rain thundering on the tent.

That wanton, strangled sound couldn't be coming from her. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and her fingernails dug in.

How did that feel so good? The heat of his desire filled the air and pressed around her in waves, making her head dizzy. His hand dropped from her hair to her back, pulling her into him.

His teeth moved down the column of her throat and bit again. Maybe even harder.

Sardi didn't mark the neck. It was disgusting, debased behavior for the lower classes. To bruise an Omega like this was ... filthy.

She wanted more. A primal need surged through her, and she clutched at him. She whispered, "Yes."

He stilled. They were so close now she could feel his heart hammering in his chest. His humming became a ragged growl. It traced up her spine like an electric current, making her insides clench tight with a jolt of pure lust. Her back arched, and she leaned into him, parting her legs.

His hand slipped from her back to between her thighs. His lips trailed along her neck as his fingers stroked ... there. She'd touched herself before, found fleeting glimpses of pleasure, but this was completely different. He teased over her. Despite the trousers she still wore, his fingers seared with heat. When one of his fingers played with exactly the right spot, she cried out.

Kassandra's hips rose greedily. She rocked, riding his hand, his fingers. The fabric between them was a barrier, but she didn't want him to stop so she could remove it.

Faster. She needed more.

He gave her more.

Every muscle tensed, she barely breathed as all her focus was on what he was doing. Waves of pleasure built, she was on the edge?—

He stopped. “That’s enough for today, Omega.” His hand withdrew, and the humming stopped.

Her sex throbbed for release. “What?” An unintelligent response, but it was all she could muster.

One side of his mouth curled. “Did you want more?”

The tent crackled overhead with an angry burst of wind, reminding her of where she was.

She was with the Warlord who’d just slaughtered his way through Anatolia. What the hell just happened? With a jerk, she sprang off his lap. “No. Of course not. I despise you.”

He sat there, regarding her with a cool, amused expression. She’d love to slap him, only he’d probably like it. “Good,” he said. “Remember that when I’m buried inside you and you’re breathless from how well I’ve pleased you. We will always be enemies.”

Teeth gritted in frustration, skin damp with a sheen of sweat, she hobbled to the bed, grabbed a sleeping skin, and turned her back to him. Her blood was on fire. She wanted to whine with the aching need between her legs. Aphrodite-above it was intense. She wanted release, but it was also more than that. Omega need, Omega want, clawed at her.

No. She shook her head, trying to force it to clear. No.

With a flourish, she tossed the blanket on the floor far from his bed and lay down. It was small, but so was she, and it was more than she'd had at the temple.

She rubbed her thighs together. It wasn't enough. Her hand drifted down, but she pulled it back with a huff. If she pleased herself, he'd know. He'd hear.

No way. She wasn't giving him that satisfaction. This had to be how Omegas always reacted when they were alone around Alphas. She'd never been alone with one before, only in chaperoned parties and dinners. Her reaction wasn't because of him. That humming, his prime Alpha power filling the room, the first time being touched like that, it had simply overwhelmed her. She needed rest, that was all. Next time, he wouldn't get to her.

She clenched her hands into fists. Next time, she'd beat him at chess and escape.

As she drifted off to sleep, his scent floated over her and kept her rubbing her thighs together, seeking a release that wouldn't come.

Lodan lay on the bed listening to the Omega's breathing as it evened out and gentled into sleep. He hissed out a breath. The vanilla-tinged air of her arousal still wafted through the tent, and with every inhale, his lust only seemed to strengthen. He wouldn't be falling asleep anytime soon. Although that was no change—he never slept much.

Despite the darkness, he could make out the smudge of one of his marks on her neck. Biting her like that was a major mistake. It was supposed to show she would be his, to mock her because he knew the Sardi didn't do love bites. Instead, when he'd touched her, it was like putting a flame to old, dry wood. She'd blazed. Sure, he'd sensed her reluctance to yield completely, but she'd cried out, the column of her throat vibrating under his mouth, and flung herself around his neck. Suddenly his arms were full of writhing Omega. Not because his bite repulsed her, as he'd expected, but because she liked his mouth.

The tent, the storm, everything evaporated. It was only her. Her skin tasted like some kind of exotic dessert. Rich and creamy with a hint of salt. His control almost slipped. A dark rush of want, of need, came from a place inside him he wasn't aware existed.

He could never lose control. Their interactions were for one reason and one reason only, to get her with child as proof the Blood Laws had fallen.

Many believed the Sardi lies about lineage determining profession, and that only matches approved by the Sardi would produce children. While his march across Anatolia proved that Myrdinians could be much more than farmers—his men were

the finest warriors to ever set foot on Anatolian soil—he wanted more. By bedding her, he’d prove any union could conceive, whether crafted by the Sardi or not. It would show the Blood Laws meant nothing.

But he hadn’t expected need to punch through him to take her and make her fully his. He’d never wanted an Omega like this. Never.

Stopping when he had, when she was just about to shatter on his hand, had taken every scrap of his legendary control. Even so, it had sliced through him. But it had to be done. He wanted her begging for him. Using those perfect, soft lips to demand he service her. Demand a Myrdinian become her Alpha.

He would be her Alpha, but she wasn’t his Omega. Not in the real way. He needed to remember that.

Lodan released a long breath. He needed to stick to the plan. His plan was sound. His plan would work.

Except she never acted the way he expected.

She argued with him, for one. Few people dared do that, but it wasn’t only her speaking back to him that surprised him. It was his response. Instead of irritation at her disobedience, he’d gotten aroused. And his arousal wasn’t going away. Her need, her desire, called to him. It clawed at him, his own desire dancing on the edge of pain because, as an Alpha, it was his job to tend to her.

He reached into his trousers and fisted himself. He pumped once but stopped. No. Not here. Not tonight.

He groaned and swung his legs off the bed. The lamplight was low, but he could still make her out in her sad little nest on the ground. She seemed a lot smaller when she

wasn't glaring at him as if she wanted him to die instantly at her feet. She'd tucked herself into a small ball and had a corner of the sleeping skin balled up as a makeshift pillow, her golden hair spilling over her arm. It was almost as if she knew how to sleep on the ground.

He frowned. That couldn't be possible. She was a Sardi. A princess. Tomorrow, she'd complain and demand to sleep in his bed. Not that that would ever happen. She'd have to get used to making her own nest, she wasn't joining his.

Kassandra.

A pretty name, but he'd never call her by her name. She was Omega. Always Omega.

He stood, still fully dressed. He'd spoken the truth to the Omega, he did normally sleep naked, but there would be a time and a place when she'd undress him and see him fully. She hadn't answered his question about if she'd ever seen an Alpha naked, but he was fairly certain she hadn't.

Not that it mattered to him if she'd lain with others or not, but it was surprising. Sardi men were famous for their lust. When they saw an Omega they wanted, they took. They believed any Omega should consider it an honor to lie with a Sardi, so they didn't ask permission.

He curled his hands into fists. Perhaps they allowed Sardi females a choice they didn't allow others. That would be like them.

He stalked out of the tent and into the rain. It had a bite to it, a chill of northern air. He inhaled deeply, letting her scent wash away. The chill also helped his throbbing cock.

Two of his warriors stood guarding the tent, and he nodded at them. "Keep watch.

Her feet are badly injured so I doubt she'll make a run for it, but keep an eye out anyway."

They nodded back and clasped a closed fist to their chests.

He walked several paces west to Xander's tent and entered.

A long table spread in the center, with their largest and most detailed map tacked into place on top of it. Xander stood next to it, and a scout named Caspian was across from him.

Caspian was one of their best trackers, and he'd been pursuing the Sardi king north. "What did you find?" Lodan asked.

"The king followed a narrow game trail east." Rain dripped from Caspian's armor, pooling on the tent floor. "I found traces of a camp and then evidence he joined with about thirty to forty others."

Lodan frowned. "So, he's on horseback with a Sardi battalion and moving fast."

Xander nodded. "They'll head toward Argos and the Dorians."

"Where he could get a larger army of support." Lodan strode to the table. Slapping his palms down, he leaned over it. "Why the Dorians though? They've never dealt with anyone in southern Anatolia, not even the Sardi."

Xander pointed at a town to the east. "Maybe his goal is Argos, not the Dorians. The Argosians may aid him. They always sucked up to the Sardi."

Lodan nodded and trailed his finger up the road north from Sarda City. "We'll go north to Argos, too. It's about time we paid them a little visit and reminded them the

Sardi aren't in power any longer. With all our men, we'll move too slowly to beat the king there, but if we get there quickly, they'll think twice about aiding him. Or joining him in battle again."

"Do you want me to keep tracking?" Caspian asked.

Lodan shook his head. "No. You can go rest. You'll join us tomorrow when we head north."

Caspian nodded and left the tent.

Lodan turned toward Xander. "Let's travel as light as possible. Pick our best warriors, and we leave at dawn. Make sure those left behind are ready to join us fast if we need them." He studied the large swath of the Dorian forest pictured on the map as squiggles of trees. A vast area. An unknown number of people. An untold potential army of warriors.

He'd make sure they didn't join the Sardi. Whatever it took.

Xander nodded. "I'll take care of it." But Xander didn't leave the tent. He cleared his throat and leaned against the table. "How did your evening go with your prisoner?"

Lodan pictured the Omega sitting at the edge of her chair, biting her lower lip when she realized he was close to checkmate. "We played chess. I won. Surprised the hell out of her that a dumb farmer could beat a Sardi."

Xander laughed. "I bet." His smile faded as quickly as it had come. "You're playing chess, though? Is that how you woo Omegas?"

Lodan shrugged. "I've never wooed one before, and I'm certainly not wooing her. I was proving a point." While he'd enjoyed his little bet with her, he'd also wanted to

get her comfortable with his presence so she wasn't afraid of him. He wanted her to obey him, not fear him. When her fear tinged the air, it made him uneasy in an unfamiliar way—as if his shirt was too small and pinching him.

Playing chess worked. She'd gotten annoyed instead, her lips pinching together and two spots of red coloring her cheeks. "Have you ever wondered what it would have been like if we'd grown up in Myrdinia? If you might have found a bondmate?" They'd both been fifteen, right on the cusp of becoming full Alphas, when the Sardi destroyed their village. Neither had spent much time with Omegas.

Xander stared at him. "You never want to talk about Myrdinia."

Lodan walked to the side table and poured two glasses of wine. He handed one to Xander, and they settled into the chairs facing the map table. Xander was right, he always pushed thoughts about the past away as quickly as they came and stopped any talk immediately.

He couldn't stop his dreams of Myrdinia, though. They came almost every night.

"Most likely we would find our bondmates among the Omegas we grew up with," Xander said. "My father said it was like one day a lightning bolt hit him, and he saw my mom anew. Although for me"—he shrugged—"I doubt it would have been like that. Not many male Omegas in Myrdinia."

Lodan took a long sip. "My parents truly believed the gods brought bondmates together. We feasted to them when my sister found hers." Pain lanced through his chest at the thought of his family, and he took another long swallow of wine. Myrdinians were one of the only holdouts to the ancient belief that an Alpha and Omega had one true match—their bondmate. They didn't believe in the forced alliances the Sardi pushed, where Alphas and Omegas might still form a bond, but it wasn't a true bondmate bond.

His father always told him the bond was sacred. It wasn't to be trifled with, and pursuing anything but the real thing wasn't worth it. He said the Sardi would always be weaker because they didn't believe in bondmates.

"Do you believe the gods will give you a mate?" Xander asked.

He huffed out a cold laugh. "The gods abandoned us when we were fifteen. They care nothing about our happiness." He certainly wouldn't have a mate. A bond.

Xander sank back into his chair. "It seems that way." A line formed between his eyebrows, the way it always did when he was thinking hard about something.

"What? You disagree?"

Xander turned red, and Lodan leaned forward. Xander looked ... embarrassed. Lodan had known Xander since boyhood, and he'd never seen him turn red like this.

"The male Omega, you know, the one who's come to visit a few nights these past weeks, is joining us as we move north. I was just thinking, maybe the gods are finally smiling at me a little. He's clever, and he made me laugh. I—" Xander scrubbed his face, then put his glass down on the table. "Maybe I've had too much wine tonight." Xander barely ever drank.

When the Omegas started visiting camp, Xander ordered all the men not to touch the male Omega, or he'd chop their hands off. Now it made sense why.

"One of us should grab some happiness while we can. That door closed for me ages ago, but you," —Lodan lifted his goblet— "I'll raise a glass to yours."

As the rain pounded on the tent, they discussed their strategy over the next couple of days. When Xander yawned for the second time in ten minutes, Lodan stood. "All

right, I'll see you in the morning." He nodded at Xander, then swept out of the tent.

Maybe now he could sleep. Or maybe not.

Despite dismissing the idea of bondmates to Xander, he hadn't mentioned some of the other things his father said about the bondmate connection. About how intense it was. How his father said the first time touching your bondmate was like the first time ever touching an Omega. That the hunger was insatiable, yet the time with her also satisfied a deep place that had always been empty before. He said an Alpha needed it. That it gave him strength. Purpose.

His father said as a single Alpha he'd enjoyed relationships with a few Omegas. But at some point, he'd realized he wanted more. Needed more. Desire for any others dried up like the fields during a drought. It was as if the gods were preparing him for his mate. Making sure he was ready. And two years later he'd met Lodan's mother.

Lodan jerked to a halt in front of his tent, the rain slashing at his face. He remembered Greta's comments about how Lodan hadn't bedded anyone in a long time. It had been a year at least.

But he was at war. That was the reason. The gods weren't preparing him for anything other than winning.

The gentle scent of the Omega in his tent whispered at him, squeezing past the tent flap and filling the air even through the rain. He grew hard instantly, his body demanding her. Wanting her.

No. He'd control this.

If there truly were gods, they wouldn't have given him a Sardi as his mate.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:00 pm

5

The open-topped wagon lurched forward, and Cassandra almost fell off the crate she perched on. The warriors were efficient. They'd taken down camp, including the Warlord's tent, right before dawn, and now, as a murky light rose above the horizon, they were leaving. The light couldn't push away the gloom of the continuing rain lying heavy over the beach like a dark, wet blanket. This might be the last time she ever saw her home, and the gray mist and scarred landscape seemed like a fitting match to her mood.

She shivered.

Rain lashed sideways, finding openings in the oiled cloak wrapped around her, and she turned back into the cart. Two other Omegas, a male and a female, were with her, sitting on a heap of linens together. They leaned against each other and smiled. Were they prisoners too?

As the other Omegas arranged a waxed canvas over their heads to keep out the rain, she noticed both had chunks of hair missing at the left temple. Maybe it was some new style. They cocooned themselves in the rain protection, their faces close together as they whispered. She recognized the slight accent of the Tyrrhuscans, the group of people west of Sarda City.

Kassandra looked away.

The intimacy of friends, or siblings, sitting that close to share cover ... she drooped further. If her brother was here, he'd sit and arrange his own comfort with no care for

hers. And he wouldn't want her sitting so close to him.

If her brother knew about what happened last night, he'd never let her near him again. Not that he had ever wanted her nearby before. When her father died mere months after she'd moved into the temple, her brother hadn't allowed her to return for his coronation. While they'd never been close—he was ten years her senior, and his mother was from their father's first marriage—she still should have been there. Her brother was the tenth generation of the House of Podarce to take the throne of Anatolia. They were the house who'd united Anatolia, discovered the bloodlines, and set the Blood Laws. They were the reason the realm prospered. She should have been there to help celebrate his new reign.

Then again, her brother hadn't considered her his real sister. He always told her his mother was the true queen, and hers was simply someone who'd bewitched her father in his later years when he was a lonely widow. Considering she'd never gotten the chance to meet her mother, who'd died in childbirth, Cassandra never had anything to say in return.

If he knew about her sitting on the Warlord's lap and her reaction to him, he'd make sure she was shunned forever.

She needed to forget that ever happened. Focus on escape, but she couldn't stop thinking about the Warlord touching her.

His hands had roamed her body and caressed her in intimate places, and she'd melted against him, barely protesting. How could she have let that happen? Those hands had the blood of her people on them, yet the moment they slid against her skin, everything else faded away. He wasn't the Warlord destroying her people anymore, he'd become an Alpha.

Never her Alpha, though, no matter what he said.

Needing to think about something else, she peered past the slats in the sides of the wagon to see the horses. Definitely Sardi bred.

All Sardi horses stood at least seventeen hands high, meaning if a large Alpha used his hands to measure how tall the horse stood from its hoof to its withers—the highest point of its shoulder—it would take seventeen of them. That was why their horses were famous. Alphas, with their bulk, couldn't sit on small horses, and workhorses, while large, weren't nimble enough for travel or battle.

A coal-black stallion with four white socks was tethered to the back of a nearby caravan, his back laden with packages. His ears were flat against his head. Possibly, he hated the rain, or more likely, his treatment as a common mule.

She knew that stallion.

All royal horses were black, and those born with four white legs, like socks or stockings, were highly prized. Her father kept those for himself because the white legs contrasted with the black and made for an arresting sight when the horse was in motion. The year Cassandra had been sent away, a foal with four white socks had been born. Unless another had been born in the past few years, it had to be the same foal she'd named Drinker of the Wind, or Zephyr, for short.

It was difficult to tame a Sardi mount. They either allowed you to ride them, or they didn't. And some of them, usually stallions, chose one person, the only person they allowed on their back. Ever. If their owner died, they went feral.

These barbarians had Zephyr carrying packages.

She grimaced and shook her head. As she scanned the procession of warriors, carts, and caravans near her, she saw that not one Sardi horse was being ridden; they only transported goods. What a waste.

She had to avoid the horses. Let the Sardi think she couldn't ride, then if she escaped—no, when she escaped—she could steal a horse, and they wouldn't expect it.

Another wave of misery rolled over her. How was she going to get out of here? The Warlord was right, guards watched her every move. While she may no longer have bindings around her hands, she remained tied in place.

She turned to view the wall of her old city one last time as they threaded up the beach. Its golden bricks gleamed once before the gray fog swallowed it.

“Are you joining the Myrdinians, too?” The male Omega's voice rose over the clatter of the wheels. “I'm Cian and this is Briseis.”

She turned to find the male and female Omega staring at her. “I'm Cassandra, and ... I guess you could say that.” No need to point out she was a prisoner right away.

“Anything to get away from the Sardi, right?” Cian smiled. He was fair-haired and lean with broad shoulders. It was a face her painting teacher would have wanted to paint. While his smooth skin spoke of youth, there was a weariness in his dark gaze, as if he'd seen what the world offered and already tired of it. It made him arresting—almost startling.

“Oh.” They were desperate to get away from the Sardi?

Briseis, however, did not have a weary gaze. She tossed her coppery hair, and her lips, shiny and pink even without the enhancement of beetroot, pursed. “I'm going to settle down with one Alpha right away. No more Blood Laws telling me I'm not the bonding kind.”

Cian laughed. “We both know which Alpha you want, and you need to move on.

Mostly because he's scary, but even worse, he turned you down last night when you looked almost beautiful. Now, you're a fright, and your hair is a wet mop. You don't have a chance."

Briseis squealed with mock outrage and slapped Cian's arm. "I'm always gorgeous."

"Your ego knows no limits." He smiled again at Cassandra. "It's my duty to bring her back to earth. She needs many improvements, and it's my lot in life to point them out to her. Especially if she wants to catch a decent Alpha."

Briseis snorted. A rather loud honk from such a delicate face. "Well, you aren't doing much better wooing the one you want."

Cian sighed and fell against the wall behind him. "He's not interested, that's why. I was wrong about there being a connection. But also, unlike you, my life goal isn't to tie myself to some Alpha."

"Can you say you were wrong again? Much louder this time so I can fix it in my memory forever?" Briseis tickled Cian along his rib cage, and the male Omega keeled over, kicking at her.

When their play subsided, Cian's smile vanished, and he turned and stared out into the rain. "Wherever we end up, when and if I choose, I will find an Alpha who knows nothing about me or my past." His voice broke slightly. "That's why I'm not interested in any of the men here in camp. They know what I am."

"What you were ." Briseis rubbed the place on his left temple where the hair was missing. "The Myrdinians are aware it wasn't a life you chose."

Kassandra glanced at the shorn hair again and realized who they were.

They were Omegas of the night—prostitutes—who'd removed the dye marking them.

Prostitutes came discreetly for guests at the palace. It was something her father tried to shield her from, but the Betas who cleaned her room spoke about it freely. She'd only seen them from a distance but remembered the bright colors in their hair at the left temple.

Cian waved Briseis off. "Pah. That doesn't matter. Besides, Xander never spoke to me much."

"Maybe, but he never took his eyes off you. And no one paid for your companionship. I bet he blocked your admirers from doing anything with you."

"Now that, Briseis, is a bet you'd lose." He bumped her with his shoulder. "But I appreciate you trying to cheer me up. And I made a bit of coin, anyway. Quite a few drachmas, actually." He raised an eyebrow at Cassandra, then glanced at the guards riding on either side of the wagon. Leaning forward, he whispered, "I pretended I'd never played petteia before and then trounced them. They only ever want to arm wrestle, box, or play petteia, and heavens know I can't beat them in a physical game, so petteia it was."

Petteia was a two-person board game requiring strategy. Kind of like chess. Her face heated as she remembered playing chess last night. "Weren't you afraid of hanging out with them?" Had he voluntarily stuck around to spend time with Myrdinian soldiers?

"The Myrdinians?" Cian's mouth dropped open. "They're fierce, but most of them are fun. Now, a Sardi," —he shook his head— "I would never spend an extra second with one of them." He'd lost some of his breezy air and studied her keenly.

She frowned. No Sardi visited a prostitute. Sardi blood was too rare to take a chance

at impregnating some random Omega. Besides, one tenet of being a Sardi was to live above the base urges that inflicted the other classes. The prostitutes who came to the palace were only there for the guests.

“You hate the Sardi?”

“Oh yes.” He spoke the words so coldly, she swore the air temperature dropped several degrees.

She didn’t understand it. The Tyrrhuscans harvested salt as their main livelihood, but their numbers also contained a lot of artisans. Her father had ensured they had trade to sell their goods. What was so bad about that?

“What will you both do now?” Kassandra asked. The question tasted strange on her tongue because, according to the Blood Laws, one’s place in society was set for life. Except ... why would a bloodline tell a child they’d grow up to be a prostitute? That seemed wrong. Also, like Briseis said, Omegas typically wanted to find one Alpha to settle with.

Only an Omega could initiate a bond through inviting the Alpha when she was ready, and deep down, all Omegas felt a drive for that connection. A hollowness without it. Even Kassandra felt it, yet she’d never met an Alpha she desired.

Until last night.

She pushed thoughts of the Warlord aside again and focused on the two Omegas across from her. Omegas longed for that connection, yet Cian and Briseis had to live a life without that possibility.

“What are we going to do?” Cian repeated. “Oh, we’re eager for the new rule. The same as you, right?” He still scrutinized her in a way that made her squirm. As if he

suspected she was not, in fact, interested in the Myrdinian rule. “We’ll ride out all the turmoil and try to find our place. At least now we’re free.” He leaned back again and adjusted the head covering his face further. A stream of water poured into his lap. He flicked it with a finger. “I think I want to do something on the water. I’ve always loved boats. Maybe I’ll fish.”

Briseis wrinkled her nose. “Ugh. You want to touch scales and smell all day?” She turned to Cassandra. “Not me. I sew and embroider well, so I’ll do that until I meet a rich Alpha. Or perhaps by then, the Warlord will need a mate at his side.” Across the wagon, Briseis’s pupils dilated, swallowing the pale grey of her eyes.

Kassandra almost fell off her crate again. “You want the Warlord?”

Cian pointed. “See! I told you you were crazy. Even Kassandra knows better. He’s dangerous.”

Briseis stuck out her dainty pink tongue at him. “He’s the sexiest Alpha I’ve ever seen. All that contained power and aggression.” She shivered exaggeratedly. “It must be something when he unleashes.”

“That would be when he chops off another head,” Kassandra said.

Cian laughed. “Exactly.” He rolled his eyes and jerked his thumb at Briseis. “This one has all sorts of romantic ideas.” Cian nudged the bag at their feet. “Speaking of, did you remember to bring all our strobile?”

Briseis tossed her head. “Of course. I also went into the cupboard and took some from storage. Are you planning on getting frisky tonight, then?”

“You never know so it’s better to be prepared. I don’t want to bond with anyone, I only want his c—” He cut himself off, his gaze cutting to Kassandra. “Attention. You

know how Alphas are. They can be so tempting.”

“What’s strobile?” she asked.

Cian shot her an odd look. “It prevents you from asking an Alpha for the bond. You know how Alphas are just so ...” His hand flailed as if he were trying to pull words out of the air.

“Alluring,” Briseis said, filling in the rest of the sentence. “Everything they do is seductive. And when he knots you, sometimes you can get carried away by how amazing it feels. You might beg him to bind you to him forever because it’s just so delicious. But strobile prevents you from feeling the click and offering the bond. No fuss. No bonding. Both of you can go on your merry way.”

This was the first she’d ever heard about how the bond worked. “You think sex with an Alpha is delicious?”

“Of course,” Briseis said. “They’re magnetic, especially these Myrdinians. Many of them have never had an Omega. Ever. They’re extremely giving.” She laughed. “I didn’t see you in the tent, but based on those marks on your neck, you must have sampled some of them?”

Kassandra’s face burned for the second time. “Something like that.”

Cian nudged Briseis. “Stop teasing her. Not every Omega is as Alpha crazy as you are.” He turned to Kassandra. “She’s exaggerating, of course. All Alphas make us react, but certain ones really make you crazy. I’ve heard when you meet, you know, your Alpha, it’s even worse.”

“Are you talking about bondmates?”

The Sardi had perfected finding the right match for every Alpha and Omega. They chose all marriages carefully. Some people in the outer villages still believed in bondmates, like Cian was saying, but the Sardi knew better. A regular marriage bond was far better.

The concept of bondmates was utterly ridiculous. Truly bonded mates were weak. Distracted. That's why the Sardi supported an arranged bond through marriage instead. Since it wasn't a bondmate bond, it was good. It settled both parties. Made them stronger. More productive.

"Bondmates make an Alpha and an Omega weak," she said.

Cian fished a small pouch out of the bag and looked at the contents. "The Sardi say that, so I'm not sure it's true. It was once the only way an Alpha and an Omega married, so all those Alphas back then couldn't have felt it made them weak."

"Why would the Sardi lie?"

He laughed. "Why wouldn't they lie? But I wouldn't worry about bondmates. They're rare now. Maybe the Sardi bred it out of all of us." He studied her again in his searching way. "Where have you been living? I haven't seen you before."

"I've been living as a priestess of Suilani at the Temple in the Mountain."

"A temple priestess? That's rough."

Briseis sat up taller and looked down her nose. "That's where they send Omegas who are too undesirable to get a mate."

"Or the ones they don't want around," Cassandra said tightly.

When Briseis opened her mouth to reply, Cian elbowed her. “That’s enough.” He ducked out from their shared shelter into the rain and sat on Cassandra’s crate with her. “Put out your little hand. Here. Take some of the herb Briseis stole.” He tilted some dried tablets into her palm. “If you’re going to end your drought from being at the temple with some beefy warrior tonight, you’ll need this.”

“Will strobile still prevent the bond from clicking with anyone? Even a—” she swallowed “—strong Alpha?”

“It’s always worked for us.”

If she took strobile, and she did end up coupling with the Warlord—which she did not want to ever happen—she wouldn’t be bound to him forever. “Thank you. I appreciate it.” All she had was the pocket in her trousers, and she stuffed the tablets in before they got wet.

“You all right, Cian?” A deep voice boomed overhead, and she jumped. It was the Alpha from the gate yesterday, the one with the vicious scar trailing below his ear and down his neck, as if someone tried to cut his throat and stopped halfway.

“Weather could be better.” Cian’s lips parted into a broad smile, showing his white, straight teeth for the first time. “But I’m fine.”

“Tomorrow I’ll make sure they shift some things out of one of the covered wagons. There’s no need for you to be in the rain.”

“Don’t take any trouble.” Cian’s gaze was steady on the Alpha, his voice deeper and more melodious.

“It isn’t.”

The Alpha glanced at Cassandra. “Don’t talk to this one, she’s a Sardi prisoner.”

Kassandra’s stomach clenched. She wrapped her arms around herself and turned away, but not before she saw Cian’s expression turn stony and angry. She turned to the wall, giving them all her back.

“The Myrdinians are taking prisoners?”

“That isn’t your concern.”

“Yes, it is. You said the Myrdinians would treat the people of the peninsula differently. Taking an Omega as a prisoner is a Sardi thing.”

Kassandra jolted. That wasn’t what she’d expected him to say.

She peeked over her shoulder. Cian and the Alpha stared at each other, and Cian lifted his chin slightly.

The Alpha growled. “Watch yourself, Cian. Lodan granted permission for you to join us, but he can just as easily toss you out again.” With a kick of his heels, he steered his horse away.

Cian sighed. “Well, that settles it. If he was interested, he isn’t anymore.”

That was the Alpha Cian fancied? She supposed he was handsome in his own way. Not like the Warlord, though.

Wait, what? No. The Warlord wasn’t attractive. Last night wasn’t about attraction, it was what Cian described—some sort of Omega response.

Briseis huffed. “That was your own fault. What the hell were you thinking asking him

about a Sardi? Who cares about her?”

“It’s the principle. I thought the Myrdinians were all about freedom.” Catching Kassandra watching him, he met her gaze coolly and raised an eyebrow a fraction before turning away.

Kassandra closed her eyes and huddled under her cloak. It was going to be a long day.

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Xander reined in his horse and drew up next to Lodan. “The Sardi Omega is causing trouble.”

“She’s in a wagon.” When it still stormed this morning, he’d almost ordered a spot cleared for the Omega inside one of the covered caravans, but everyone else rode in the rain, so he’d put her in the open wagon, too. The image of the Omega sitting hunched over as gusts of rain pelted her, kept flitting through his mind. He didn’t care if she was wet and uncomfortable. “How many problems can she cause there?”

“The two Omegas you took under our aegis sit with her. The male, Cian, asked why we were taking prisoners.”

“So? Tell them her purpose.”

Xander made an angry chuff in his throat. “I ordered him not to talk to her, but she’s a Sardi—they’re devious—and I don’t like her with Cian.”

A sweep of droplets hit Lodan’s face and trickled down the back of his neck. “I’ll deal with it.”

He wheeled his mount around to find the Omega wagon. As he passed the large Sardi stallion, he swore it glared at him. Damn horse. It burned that he couldn’t get it to obey under saddle. His current horse was a good mount, but Sardi horses were faster. Maybe the Sardi only used that one for stud and had never broken him to saddle. They pursued bloodlines more than anything else, so it wouldn’t surprise him.

The Omega was barely visible in the back of the wagon. Across from her sat the male and female Omega who'd asked to join them. The female, the pretty Omega who'd issued him an invitation last night, pushed back the hood covering her face. She bowed her head, peering up at him under her lashes—inviting him with a display of submission.

This Omega would gladly partner with him.

The fire in his blood cooled.

He looked at the Sardi with her cloak drawn tightly around her head. “Omega, get up.” He gestured to his soldier driving the wagon to halt.

The Sardi turned slowly, her blue eyes wide.

He growled. “You’re riding with me.”

“I’m afraid of horses.”

He sighed. Of course she was. How useless.

If she feared horses, it meant someone else handled hers for her. Typical Sardi, letting others do the work. She probably had the temple priestesses wait on her while she hid out there.

The Omega was lying when she said she'd been at the temple for four years. The king would have hidden her when Lodan's troops appeared at his borders because no Sardi would ever be a priestess otherwise. His lip curled into a sneer. Sardi blood was too precious to waste in chastity.

After dismounting, he plucked her from the back of the caravan and tossed her up in

the saddle. In one motion, he slid behind her and urged his horse onward.

His goal was to make her receptive, and the more she was with him, the easier that would be. Back ramrod straight, she flinched forward anytime her back brushed against his chest. If she could sit on the horse's neck, she would.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her flush to him, sliding his hand up to her neck. It and her face were the only parts of naked skin available. She shied and tried to wiggle away.

"Get used to my touch, Omega." He deliberately trailed a finger along her throat. She shivered, and his groin tightened into a throbbing ache pinned between her and the saddle. A sheen of rain covered the pulse leaping in her neck, and her scent, not her Omega arousal like last night, but her sweet, orange blossom scent, was strong. He bent his head and inhaled deeper.

She was so small and delicate—a typical Sardi, only existing to look pretty. Completely useless. Certainly not a warrior. Even his horse scared her. If they were back in his old village, she'd lie helpless in the fields, complaining about her dirty hands after an hour of labor.

He stiffened. This was the second time he'd let thoughts of the past creep forward.

Anger clawed at him, and he fought it back.

All thoughts of his family and village were locked away in a deep void. Only when he fought did he release the icy control and let all the burning fury come rushing from that dark place.

As he stared down at the Omega's head, he pictured her growing up spoiled and coddled, riding about in coaches. Never thinking the world was anything but perfectly

attuned to her every desire.

On impulse, he picked up one of her hands. It wasn't soft. Sure, it was softer than his, but not what he expected. "What gives a princess callouses?"

"I did all the washing up at the temple. And the gardening." She turned her head away, her voice sullen as she tried to jerk her hand out of his.

He growled and tightened his grip around her wrist. "Leave it."

A brief battle ensued while she tugged, making his lips twitch. This tiny one actually thought she could wriggle free? His hand was easily double the size of hers.

After a long, drawn-out hiss, she gave up.

The rain bunched and gathered in her upturned palm then slipped down her wrist. He placed the reins on his pommel, and, keeping her hand pinned in one of his, with his other, he ran a finger as if tracing the outline of her hand, then trailed it up her wrist. Slowly, he pushed his finger into the cleft formed by the V-shaped well between her fingers. Raising her hand to his mouth, he repeated the action with his tongue, licking the rain off the delicate web. He repeated the action with each finger cleft.

She'd gone completely still, not even drawing breath. "Stop ... stop doing that."

He bit where her thumb sloped upward, and she shuddered. "I give the orders, Omega."

"Kassandra."

He grunted and dropped her hand, and she tucked it back inside her cloak immediately, like a turtle into its shell. As his horse picked its way back to the head

of the line, he tried to ignore how the Sardi's ass rubbed against him with each rocking step, and tried to focus on the road lined with sparse, scrubby trees as they ascended from the beach into the wild of the peninsula.

"It must have been humiliating to have to farm like a Myrdinian at the temple," he said.

"It was a small garden, and the longer I was outside, the less praying I had to do."

"Doing something you don't want to do is foreign to a Sardi."

She flinched and shuffled forward, so he grabbed her hip and tugged her back into place with a sharp jerk. Even through layers of sopping clothes bunched between them, she still slotted into his body, into the cage of his arms, like she was meant to be there.

No. She was just an Omega.

This time, he was the one who shifted, pushing her forward to gain a small distance between them. "You were unhappy being devoted to the goddess? I'd better watch out, the goddess will use this storm to strike you down and hit me instead." Not many spoke so flippantly of the gods, but like he'd told Xander, the gods abandoned him long ago, so what did he care about them?

"Your sins are worse than mine. I'm sure you'd be the intended target." She wriggled to scoot farther away but couldn't get anywhere. "Before you destroyed everything, the Sardi kept the peace in this land. Our rule helped balance the peninsula's food, wealth, and trade." She writhed again but ended up falling back against him. She struggled harder.

It didn't have the effect she wanted. Each time she floundered against him, he grew

harder. He flexed his arm and brought her closer. He pointed to some warriors riding to the right. “See those men? They’re Tyrrhuscans. When I freed their city, hundreds flocked to my banner. Two of their Omegas rode with you today. These people are not with me by force, Omega. They joined me because they believe in freedom and couldn’t wait to escape the Sardi yoke. If you think the Sardi helped them, then you’re a bigger fool than I thought.”

“The Tyrrhuscans rake salt and have crafting skills.” She struggled some more. A complete waste of effort because he wasn’t going to move his arm. “By directing their trade, the Sardi helped them achieve more wealth than they could have on their own.”

“And what if a Tyrrhuscan wanted to become an orator? Or a teacher?”

“They wouldn’t want that.” She tried to gain her freedom in a flurry of jerks, then stopped, panting slightly when she got nowhere. “Their blood leads them to the life they are intended for.”

Lodan sneered and flexed, restraining her further. “What kind of horse are we riding?”

“What kind of horse?” She sounded incredulous, like she thought he’d gone daft. “It’s a plow horse.”

“I’ve ridden this mount during every conquest. He’s agile and fast and charges fearlessly wherever I tell him to go. He isn’t pulling a plow. Should the lineage he was born into set his destiny?”

A long silence spread between them.

“Does he have a name?”

“No, he doesn’t need one, he’s just a horse.”

“A horse whose partnership saves your life during battle.”

Lodan frowned at his mount’s pale gray ears, flicking backward as if listening to them. “That’s Sardi nonsense. You believe your horses are superior.”

“No, we treat our horses as superior because the bond between horse and rider is sacred.”

He scoffed. “Not for you. You fear them.”

“I’m an unfit Omega. You should release me.”

“You fit in the only way that counts.” His voice deepened to a growl, and she stiffened. “Last night you clawed at me because you wanted us to fit so badly,” he whispered into her ear.

“That was only Alpha games.” The Omega was panting again, and her words came out breathy and quick.

He pulled her hood back and placed his lips over the raised purplish mark he’d left under her jaw. As he raked his teeth over it, she squeaked a small, tortured sound. His blood roared, demanding more.

One of the Alphas near them spun his head, his eyes filling with black and locking on her lips.

Lodan stared challengingly at his soldier. The warrior quickly looked away and reined his horse in to disappear behind them into the procession.

He brought his hand to the Omega's throat, and his thumb brushed the raised mark. "You're soaked, the icy rain is creeping down your spine, yet you still respond." He swiped this thumb again. "All I did was touch you."

She shook her head in denial, but he inhaled her desire floating around him. She could lie to herself all she wanted, but her body spoke the truth. The Omega desired him. Eventually, she'd let him take her fully.

The gray gloom had deepened into twilight by the time their travel stopped, and the Warlord lifted her down from the horse. Cassandra took a step and winced. Her feet were better but still sore. He didn't spare her a glance before slipping into the darkness and barking orders as camp went up around a few large central fires. Two guards slid into place next to her, both frowning.

After sitting on a horse for so long, something she was out of practice doing, her lower back wasn't too happy, and she bent side to side to try to loosen it up.

Cian strolled around a wagon and walked up to her. "Have fun with the Warlord all day?" he said with a sneer.

Her face flushed with heat. "Leave me be."

His eyes narrowed. "Ordering me around? Can't say I expect much else from a Sardi."

Kassandra put her hands on her hips. "I thought you couldn't talk to me?"

"No Alpha tells me what to do anymore." He jerked his chin up, and his blue eyes turned stony. "I had enough of that from your people."

Kassandra marched to Cian until they stood within two feet of each other. "My people created a prosperous peninsula. For centuries."

“Oh yes. Prosperous through the enslavement of everyone else. Who kept the money they received from the trade routes? If it was shared at all, which was seldom, it was only to those the Sardi saw fit to reward for their hard work. And if you didn’t measure up—” Cian drew a finger across his throat. “Forget it.”

“No.” Cassandra shook her head vehemently. “There’s no way the Sardi killed people who contributed to the greater good of the peninsula. If anyone was ... ended ... like that, they must have been criminals.”

Cian laughed. “The Sardi really do a good job making themselves believe their own crap, don’t they? Is it a crime to want to choose your own Alpha? Or your own lovers?” Cian stared pointedly at her neck. “You’re not bonded to an Alpha, and you’re certainly old enough to be married. You had the freedom to go to the temple instead of being married off to someone you didn’t choose.”

Her lips tightened. “I’m not that old, I’m twenty-eight.” He was right though, most Sardi women performed their bonding ceremony when they were barely out of their teens. There was a reason her father had never seriously pushed her into marriage. She hadn’t lied when she told the Warlord she was defective—she was. Every Sardi who lived near the palace knew about it, which was why her father tried to arrange a marriage for her in Argos.

Her face burned with shame, and she was grateful for the darkness so Cian couldn’t see. “I’m not free anymore.”

He frowned and glanced away.

“I couldn’t leave the temple, even if I wanted to. The mountain passes are treacherous, and you have to know the correct route, or you’ll lose your way. I wasn’t there by choice.” She was only supposed to live at the temple for a year. Her father told her a year in silence would make her more grateful to a potential mate. After

he'd died, her entreaties to her brother to return home only got one short message in response—he'd told her she was where she should be.

Cian opened his mouth, then closed it, and they stared at each other for a long moment. Finally, he said, "Now you've got the Warlord after you." Cian's expression seemed more open, but maybe it was a trick of the rain. "Briseis is hopping mad."

Kassandra's brows rose. "What?"

He chuckled. "I'm serious. After he took you away, she got up and kicked a crate and hurt her toe. If she isn't the flower in the meadow everyone wants to pick, she's a fright. And I'd say that even if she stood right here next to me."

"Well, she doesn't need to worry about me, I'm a weed, but instead of being pulled, I'm being cultivated for a specific purpose."

The Warlord's words about defeating the Blood Laws by breeding her rang through her head.

She was a prize of war. Something he wanted to toy with.

She'd turned all those other Alphas away, not only because their smell didn't entice her, but because she wanted her Alpha, her mate for life, to be worthy. To love her. None of her father's selected Alphas wanted her for herself. They wanted the Sardi princess, who'd give them a huge dowry and a direct line to the king. Now, it was the same with the Warlord. He didn't want her. He wanted a Sardi princess he could trot out for his subjects whenever he chose.

She sighed. "Tell Briseis she can have him. If he leaves me alone and chooses her, I'll give her everything I own." She peered down at herself. "Which is only these clothes."

Cian's lips twitched. "Oh, she'd rather die than wear those pants. And that cloak is last year's cut."

Kassandra huffed. She ran a hand through her sopping hair and lingered at her left temple—the spot where prostitutes had to dye their hair. "What was your life like? How did you become ...?" She trailed off, unsure how to ask him about his past without offending him.

"How did I become a gentleman of the night?" He chuckled drily. "I always liked that name for us. Made me think I was some kind of powerful creature prowling around." He shrugged. "Typical story for those of us in the brothels—I got caught with an Alpha I didn't have permission to date. He wasn't going to be my mate or anything, but he was lovely, and I wanted him." Cian sighed. "When the Sardi caught me, I had two choices. Die, or become a prossy until they deemed me rehabilitated. Then I'd get to return to my merry life of gathering salt from dawn to dusk."

He studied her coldly, and she dropped her gaze. "They were mostly upset because they wanted me paired with an Alpha female," he said. "There aren't many male Omegas for the few Alpha females around, and they wanted us to breed to see if our male children would be Omegas."

Kassandra frowned. "They must not have known you wanted someone else."

Cian sneered. "Oh, come now. They knew. They didn't care. They wanted me for their breeding experiment, end of story." He turned toward camp. "Enough of this, I'm stretching my legs." And he walked off.

Kassandra slumped to the ground. Dully, she sat in the chilly air as the rain beat down in sheets and the wind gusted, making it difficult for those setting up the tents. Crouched over a hissing fire, the cook worked against the weather, turning several haunches of meat on a large spit. Since they hadn't broken their fast all day, the

aroma of the ox leg had her stomach gurgling, but thinking about eating made her nauseous.

Was Cian speaking the truth? His story played over and over in her head. It was such a cruel punishment.

She pictured the Betas at the palace who cooked and cleaned. They were Tyrrhuscans who lived in Sardi cities, their accents long gone. They were always friendly with her, but were they forced into their labor too? Had they secretly hated her?

A shadow blocked the light cast by the fire, and she peered up at the Warlord standing above her. With the fire at his back, his face was all shadow in the rapidly falling darkness, but she felt him studying her. He grabbed her arm to haul her to her feet, but she jerked free and stood by herself.

“Come, since you’re too foolish to get out of the rain.” He wrapped a hand around her arm, but it was gentle. He led her through the men sitting around the fire to a large burlap tent.

Smaller than the one he’d lived in at the beach, his tent still had enough room to stand and move comfortably in front of the massive bed. The thick pole in the center of the room pushed the roof’s fabric so high that even the Warlord could stand without brushing his head on it.

“Greta brought you dry clothes.” He pointed at the bundle on the bed. “More male garments, no more princess gowns for you.”

Ha, he thought that was a punishment? She hated dresses and would have worn only trousers if her father allowed it. One of the few things she’d liked about the temple was that she could wear what she wanted, even if they were shabby, outgrown discards from the Beta male gardener.

She let her face fall and her lip quiver and pinched the cloth of her pants as if it offended her. Would he buy her act?

It seemed to work. “When your feet are healed, you’ll help the cook with the evening meal if you aren’t attending me. Everyone has a job here, including you.” Without waiting for a reply, he turned and left.

Quickly, she pulled on the fresh clothes and let out a small groan. After sitting in the rain, dry clothes felt like heaven. She bent forward and wrung her hair out, then carefully hung her out-of-fashion cloak on one of the tent poles to dry and patted it thankfully. It had tried to keep her dry all day, but with conditions like these, it was impossible.

Whirling quickly, she scanned the tent and inspected for weapons. Nothing. Her shoulders drooped, and she sighed. She hadn’t expected otherwise, but she’d still hoped.

She sat on the bed, fingering the curling tips of her hair while considering kicking down the center pole and letting the tent crash to the ground. Maybe that would give her a few minutes to run free. And then what? Race for the forest in the rain? To go where?

No, she needed a better plan. And healed feet.

Despite being smaller, the tent still had his books and maps, and Kassandra walked over to the small table where they rested and unrolled the largest map. Anatolia lay spread out in great detail, with small notes detailing villages and cities. She scanned it and found Sarda City, where they’d started their journey. Judging by the sun, they’d gone north since leaving.

Thick lines indicated the main roads, with thin, brown lines, more like squiggles,

veering off to show lesser roads. Since they were an entire caravan, they must have taken the major road north.

She followed it with her finger. If they'd taken a sharp northwesterly route, they would curl into more of the Sardi lands, then eventually enter the Tyrrhuscan lands. Going that way ended with the sea.

That meant they probably were bearing northeast instead, headed toward the massive city-state of Argos, which spread all the way to the Dorian lands, dominating the entire north of the map, all craggy mountains and treacherous paths.

Argos was allied with the Sardi, so if they were taking the road near Argos, it could be a good place to escape.

She frowned. The Argos leader knew her, but may not be too motivated to help her. Four years ago, he'd come to her father's court expecting a marriage alliance with her, but she'd chosen the temple instead. What if he still wanted to marry her? She'd be in the same situation she faced now with an Alpha wanting her at his side, only the Argos leader was an odious, self-absorbed Alpha who smelled like rotten persimmons.

"Is it only Argos and the Dorians in this direction?" Her shoulders drooped. "Wait, what's this?" At first, it appeared to be a smudge, but when she leaned closer, she saw a small note at the tip of the Argos area—the city-state of Eretria.

Eretria.

Her father disliked Eretria, they were too small to offer much to the Sardi, and the leader rarely came to court, but she had met him once. He was an older, round man and he'd brought his bondmate, insisting she join him at dinner. Omegas were rarely allowed to attend a state dinner. Cassandra was only allowed to join for the predinner

activities in order to meet men her father wanted her to meet, and play the lute for their entertainment. Afterward, it was Alphas only until the men shifted to one of the parlors for more wine.

Finding Eretria would be her goal when she escaped.

The tent door flapped, and she jumped, quickly re-rolling the map. The Warlord shouldered inside, holding a heaping plate of food. He eyed her momentarily, his gaze drifting to the table behind her with his maps. “Sit.” He gestured to the small mat on the ground before the bed.

Her lips in a tight line, she slid onto the floor, sitting cross-legged. Being ordered around by him was getting old, fast.

He put the plate on the ground and sat facing her. “Before every bite you eat” —he pointed at the food—“you have to feed me a bite first.”

Kassandra stared at him. Her lip curled in disgust. “I’m not feeding you.” After he had forcibly held her against him all day, touching him again was a bad idea. She needed space if she didn’t want to react to him any longer. His smell, the way he’d touched her hand and neck, had teased her during their entire ride together, and she’d felt his length straining against her. As his cock stroked up and down movements along her back, she didn’t notice any of the scenery, even though she’d wanted to travel all her life.

Her trip to the temple didn’t count. They’d kept the palace wagon windows tightly sealed, not wanting her to see the route in and out of the mountains. And her trip back she’d been too frightened about meeting the Warlord to notice much of anything.

Her first chance to really see Anatolia and it was his fault she hadn’t gotten to enjoy it.

All she'd focused on was where his body touched hers. It was like the heat of him burned into her.

"Alphas feed Omegas. Not the other way around." Her voice cracked, and she wanted to cringe.

He chuffed. "No. Alphas feed Omegas they're pursuing as a mate. You're only a Sardi and I won't be courting you." With one finger, he pushed the plate toward her. "Your role is to serve me in many ways." He stared at her for a long moment. "Get used to it."

She turned her head away.

He lifted the plate off the ground and stood up. "Then you don't eat."

As he walked back out, she gritted her teeth and choked out, "Fine!" Tears stung her eyes. Her nausea had dissipated as the aroma of the spicy meat filled the tent, and now she was ravenous. A rush of fury and hatred burned her so hot she thought steam would sizzle off her. He was treating her like a servant.

She took a deep breath. Then another. Calm down. She'd play his sick little games until she escaped.

Head bowed and eyes trained on the food so she didn't have to look at him, she scooted closer between his legs. Since there were no utensils—probably on purpose—she grabbed a piece of meat with her fingers. As she turned and shoved the meat at his lips, he caught her wrist and slowly guided the food to his mouth. He took it and sucked the juice off her fingertips, swirling his tongue.

Her pulse skyrocketed as she whipped her hand back. Every time he touched her, her limbs went heavy, and her blood turned to sludge. It needed to stop.

Kassandra took a larger piece of meat for herself and chewed. Its flavor burst as the juices released—slightly seared and tinged with camp smoke. It was delicious. They'd had very little meat at the temple.

She fed the rest to him in silence.

When the plate was empty, she stood to escape his lap, but he grabbed her wrist and tugged her back down. He hummed his evocative, slow croon, pulling her farther into his lap. When she wiggled, it only seemed to help him wrap her around him, her thighs straddling his waist.

The vibration from his chest trickled deep inside her. "Stop that." The noise made her lose all focus. It made her forget who he was—and simply want.

A hand stroked up her spine, under her shirt. The lulling chords intensified, and the scent of his arousal filled her every inhale. It consumed her like a slow, obscuring fog.

Why did he smell like this? Out of all the Alphas, why him? It was intoxicating. She wanted to rub her body on his and let his aroma seep into her skin everywhere.

The gold eyes darkened, and his pupils dilated. She gasped, and her hands landed on his chest. This was her enemy, but her fingers curled to bring him closer, not push him away.

Wrapped around him, her nails biting into his shirt, the Omega leaned forward and licked his neck. She was like any other Omega, worse even, because she was a Sardi, but his body screamed otherwise.

Omegas threw themselves at him all the time, and they were perfect: submissive and docile. None of them would have dared to look up under their lashes, anger simmering as they fed him. They'd have been delighted to service him, in any way possible.

With this Omega, she needed to understand she wasn't a pampered royal. He wanted to break her. So why, when her lips tightened, and when she glared, did it spur his desire? He'd meant to be mocking when he sucked on her fingers, to show her he controlled every one of her actions, but he'd wanted her slender fingers to brush his lips. And he'd enjoyed each small motion where she rocked across his lap to reach his mouth.

The Omega made a tiny whimpering noise. He breathed her arousal in slowly, and deliberately teased her shirt upward until it slipped over her head but kept it looped around her arms. He pinned her like that, her arms above her head, as she writhed, but he wasn't sure if she was trying to get closer or get away.

Her eyes were fully dilated, the beautiful purple hue of her irises snuffed out by black. His gaze dropped to her bared breasts, and his breath hitched. Gorgeous.

He leaned forward, and she tilted her face upward.

Lodan growled a warning. “I won’t be kissing you.”

Something flickered across her face briefly and broke the spell of her lust, making her pause, the black in her eyes retracting. “Why would I want you to?” Now she definitely struggled to free herself and get off his lap.

“I’m glad that’s cleared up.”

He began humming again, and she trembled, her full breasts quivering.

Gripping her pinioned shirt in one hand, with his other, he thumbed over a nipple. As he watched, she bit her lip, fighting her response. His lips curled. Go ahead and battle, Omega.

There was no way she’d hold out. He pinched and rolled the beading peak, and her lips parted. Omega arousal flooded the air, saturating it with the potent perfume of vanilla.

Her gaze fixed on his neck, her nose lifting slightly as she sniffed. By now, his scent should be drugging her.

“You want me to release you?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

She pressed her hips, and the heat between her legs stroked up his length. Lodan fought back a curse. If she kept this up, he wouldn’t be able to keep going slow.

His hand switched to the other breast, teasing that pebbled tip. The Omega groaned,

her lids lowering slightly.

He dropped her shirt, freeing her.

She didn't spring away like he expected. They stared at each other, and she moved her hands up his chest to the nape of his neck, her fingers trailing up into his hair. They left tingling blazes in their wake as she tugged him closer.

Her hips made small, urgent rubs over his lap, demanding more. The hands in his hair were greedy, holding him in place as she squeezed her thighs more tightly around him.

He sucked in a breath. "Take my shirt off."

She obeyed without hesitation. That almost made him strum a short purr of happiness. It was the first time she'd done what he demanded without arguing.

After she tugged his shirt off, she hesitated, looking down at his nude torso. A flash of something crossed her face.

Too bad if she didn't like his scars, they were all inflicted by her people. "Touch me." It came out as a snarl.

She'd never seen a shirtless Alpha this close. Fighting marks etched everywhere, lighter-colored scars against his bronzed skin. A large one curled up his side, and she reached down and ran a fingertip up it. The world around her, including the tent and Lodan, rippled like a pond when a thrown pebble disturbed its surface. She inhaled sharply.

No, she couldn't have a vision. Not now. Not around him. She needed to hide it. The way she'd been hiding it her entire life. She struggled against it, but it was always useless—the visions came when they wanted, and she had no control over them.

The tent faded away.

She stood on black sand as night pressed heavy and dark, rapid flashes of lightning illuminating a slim wash of beach. Waves crashed hard against the shore, and trees she'd never seen before with tall, slim trunks and strange long fronds for foliage only at their apex, bent before the wind. An odd scent tinged the air, a mineral tang, like sulfur.

A few feet away, the Warlord crawled out of what remained of a boat, struggling to get free of the crashing waves. Inch by inch he dragged himself, his hands raking deep into the sand until he reached higher ground. Groaning, he collapsed, pressing a hand to his side. Another bright flare of light revealed a nasty gash along his ribs, exactly where the scar she'd touched lay.

This wasn't the same Warlord she knew. His dark hair was longer, and he seemed a

little leaner. His eyes closed, and his chest heaved as he gulped in air. She could practically feel the slash of the rain and the coarse grit of the sand herself.

Time behaved strangely in her visions. Sometimes, it seemed to slow, and other times it charged forward, giving her a glimpse of an entire day, maybe many days, in only a few moments. It passed quickly now, the storm fading and night turning to dawn, a pale pink rising from the horizon as the Warlord fought to stay conscious and survive. In her visions she could do nothing. She couldn't move away, she couldn't stop it, and she was utterly invisible—a specter held hostage by whatever glimpse of the future she was forced to witness.

Except, she didn't think this was the future. While the Warlord's expression was set in pain, he looked younger, as if he hadn't quite started to hate the world around him yet. Her stomach clenched, and anxiety punched through her. Even if this was the past, she didn't like seeing him injured. She wanted to fix it. To help.

She shook her head, trying to clear it. He was the Warlord. She didn't want to be anxious about him.

A whistling drew her attention away from him. An older, wizened man strode down the beach, using a walking stick to poke at seaweed. He had a lean face and the ropey kind of muscles that spoke of long days of hard work. He walked right by Cassandra, so close that if she were really there, she could reach out and touch him. One of his eyes was blue, and the other green.

He froze. “Another one? When will they realize it's called the Unreachable Isle because it's unreachable?”

The Warlord groaned and shifted.

The older man gasped, then hustled over, dropping down on the sand. “Well, this is

the first time someone's washed ashore still alive." He scanned the Warlord. "Well, mostly alive. We've got to get you off the beach before the gulls decide you're a free meal. What's your name?"

"Va—" the Warlord's lips tightened. "Lodan," he choked out. "My name's Lodan now."

The other man sighed. "The dragon god who broke down walls, huh? No one names themselves after the god of poetry or the god of literature. It's always one of the destructive gods." He put his arm around Lodan. "Well, you're a big brute, aren't you? Let's get you up, I can't carry you."

With the older man's help, the Warlord got his legs under him. "I didn't give myself that name."

"Save your breath, you're going to need it. We've got a little walk ahead of us."

"They told me I charge across the battlefield like a god on fire. Like the dragon god." His words slurred, and he staggered. "Perhaps in another life, I could have written poetry. In this one, I need to fight. I came because I need your help."

The other man snorted. "I'm done with that. But I will get you stitched up."

They staggered to a small home of bleached stone draped with drooping lavender wisteria and grape vines. A well-cultivated garden in the formal style popular in Sarda stretched off to the right, beyond a well-trodden path wending through fruit trees and flowers. Inside, books and scrolls covered every surface but the sitting area and kitchen, and Cassandra was fairly certain the rug on the floor was a genuine Arachne-made creation. They were priceless.

Who was this hermit?

Time flashed forward, the bright sunlight mingling with the darkness of night as days sped by, until slowing again to show Lodan, bare-chested except for a bandage wrapped around his abdomen, sitting across from the older man. He frowned and leaned back against his chair.

“The Sardi are a properly trained military, and I need your help to fight them. My men can fight, and they will fight, but we need real training. Real strategy.”

The older man shook his head. “Even if I thought you’d truly take the time to listen to me, I’m not interested in helping with wars in Anatolia.”

One of Lodan’s hands fisted. “It’s not about war. It’s about righting a wrong imposed on Anatolia for far too long.”

“I see.” But even Cassandra could tell the older man was dismissing Lodan.

Lodan growled, stood up, and paced to the window.

“I mentor people on how to think,” the older man said. “I don’t train armies or help men with their vengeance.”

Lodan turned. “Aren’t you famous for teaching justice and ethics as well?”

Kassandra frowned. Who was this teacher?

The older man’s brows lifted slightly. “And?”

“I seek justice. I seek fair treatment for all, not just for some. You believe in learning. I was forbidden from reading books that weren’t related to farming. The Sardi did everything they could to keep me, and my people, tightly contained. Controlled. They forced our Omegas to lie with them. Or marry those they didn’t love because they

wanted to align certain bloodlines. What justice is this? What ethics?"

The other man remained silent.

"You left the Sardi. You refused to teach them." Lodan swept his arm, then winced and held his side. "There must have been a reason for that."

"My reasons are my own." He waved Lodan off. "Now go rest." But based on the deep crease between his brows, Cassandra suspected he was thinking about what Lodan said.

Who was this man, and why had Lodan practically died finding him?

The scene faded to black, and with a whoosh of air, she was back in the tent.

She lay on her back, the Warlord peering down at her, his brow furrowed. "You all right? What happened?"

Why would she see something from his past? And something like that? She wanted to ask him who the older man was and also about his real name. The one he'd almost given on the beach, but she couldn't. Not without revealing she had visions.

"I'm fine." The last thing she wanted to do was tell him, her enemy, about having visions. It was bad enough when her own people rejected and ridiculed her, she didn't need to hear it from her enemies, too.

"You're not fine. Your eyes went vacant." The furrow in his brow deepened, and he reached toward her as if to stroke her face, but he paused, then let it fall back to his side. "I'll get Greta."

She struggled to sit up. "No, you don't need to get Greta." She shivered. Sometimes

after a vision she grew cold, as if it had sapped the warmth from inside her.

The Warlord growled. “Put your shirt back on.” He snatched it off the floor and handed it to her.

As she shrugged it on, he plucked one of the blankets off the bed and slung it around her shoulders. Then he shifted to sit with his back against the bed’s footboard, spreading his long legs along their mat on the floor. “Come here.”

He was acting strangely, and she eyed him.

“What did I say about obeying me?” He growled, seeming angry with her.

She shivered again, and he leaned forward to pluck her from the ground as if she weighed nothing. Then, he settled her against him.

Despite her shirt and the blanket, the warmth of his bare chest still seeped into her.

His scent also seeped into her, wrapping around her the same way his arms now wrapped around her, holding her close. This wasn’t playing fair. It was one thing for him to toy with her Omega instincts by teasing her with his touch, it was another to hold her like this. To let the brush of his skin caress her with every rise and fall of his chest.

She held herself stiff, not giving in to the desire to curl up on him and let his Alpha heat warm her.

“I’ve seen many faint from pain. You didn’t faint.” His voice rumbled, the vibration rolling from his chest through her.

“You have proof I’m a defective Omega. I told you I’m not a suitable partner for you,

and you've seen it for yourself." The words were bitter as she said them. It was one thing for everyone else to say she was unsuitable; it was another to say it herself. "You should let me go."

"Greta said your feet are healing well, so I know you don't have blood poisoning."

He'd asked about her feet? "Her salve works well."

He shifted her about so that her head was tucked under his chin. "I thought you might be faking to get out of touching me, but you weren't. Even a Sardi isn't that skilled a deceiver."

He rubbed her arm slowly.

Already she stopped shivering. "If our roles were reversed and you were my prisoner, your job would be to keep me warm. It's really the only thing Alpha's are good for. You run so hot."

He went still, and she realized she'd spoken aloud. She tensed, expecting him to bellow at her or toss her aside. Instead, he ran his fingers up her throat to her jaw. She shivered, but this time, it wasn't because she was cold. "I think you'd have other things you'd want me to do for you."

"No. Absolutely not." Maybe. "You don't need to take care of me. I told you, I'm fine."

"I'm not taking care of you, I want to know what happened. For five minutes you stared blankly, not even blinking. I couldn't wake you, and your heart rate was slow."

She shrugged. "I had an episode."

“Have you had one before?”

This really could be her chance to keep him away from her. She could use her visions to scare him away. It had scared away all the others.

Her father had introduced her to a few Sardi noblemen, all Alphas in their later years, who were widowed and already had heirs, in case any children with her were also tainted with “fits.” She’d rejected them, but they also hadn’t wanted her. Not really. They only wanted the prestige of marrying into the Podarce family.

“Yes, I’ve had fits my entire life.” She turned and locked gazes with him. For a moment, she faltered. While she didn’t want to be his prisoner, for some reason, she didn’t want him to see her as flawed. She lifted her chin. “I told you already. I was placed in the Sardi temple for a reason. I’ve lived there for the past four years.”

His gaze shuttered, as if he put a wall between them. He wasn’t looking at her with disgust, but it didn’t feel much better. “You aren’t telling the truth. You’re trying to pretend you’re addled somehow, so I’ll leave you alone.” He growled. “Typical Sardi, thinking you’re cleverer than everyone else and playing tricks. Your fate is sealed. It doesn’t matter what you say or do.”

His reaction was the same one she got when she told the truth about how she had visions. Disbelief. Name-calling. Anger. She was damned if she told the truth and damned if she didn’t.

The Warlord set her on the ground and got to his feet. “I have no more need of you tonight. Go to sleep.” He glanced at his bed. “Don’t make your nest in my bed.”

As if she wanted to sleep anywhere near him. “Don’t worry, I don’t like your bed.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my bed.”

She sniffed. “You’re an Alpha, what do you know?”

He frowned. “Tell me what’s wrong with it.”

“What does it matter? You said I’m never going to sleep in it.”

He glared at her for a long moment. With a shake of his head, he growled and stalked out of the tent.

Kassandra scrambled to her feet. For several long moments, she stood fixed in place. Everything was off kilter, as if she were the one on the boat in her vision, being tossed around in a storm. Nothing was the way it should be. Instead of a vision of the future, she’d had a vision of the past. His past. Instead of being repulsed by him, she kept touching him.

She dove for her discarded, damp trousers and found the strobile pills, a bit sodden but still all right. Without water, she swallowed one down. No more of this instant infatuation the moment he touched her. If these pills helped ensure an Omega didn’t beg for an Alpha’s bond, it had to help keep him at a distance, too. No Alpha had ever made her act like a hormone-driven fool before, and she wasn’t starting now.

She grabbed some sleeping skins off the bed and moved the rug they’d sat on for dinner to the side of the tent. She’d spoken the truth about his bed; it was big and looked comfortable, but something wasn’t quite right about it. Her fingers curled, clutching at her sleeping skin. Despite what she’d said, an urge to fix his bed, to arrange the blankets and pillows into a proper nest, needled at her. No. If she made a nest there, that meant she intended to sleep there, and that would never happen.

Lodan shrugged his shirt back on as he strode outside into the rain. He needed to talk to Xander to see if any scouts brought new reports, but he didn't head for Xander's tent. Instead he walked to Greta's. After Lodan's tent, hers was the largest since she needed room to help anyone who may need healing. The healer stood at her table of tinctures and herbs, moving some jars around.

"I need you to check on the Omega."

Greta tutted. "Oh, hello, Lodan. I'm doing excellent today, thanks." She turned around, a small brass jar in her hand.

He growled and crossed his arms.

"Don't go glaring at me. You come into my tent for help, the least you could do is say hello before barking orders at me."

"You look well, so I have no need to ask."

Greta shook her head. "Alphas." She turned back to her table and poured a viscous liquid, like molasses, into the jar she held. "Go on then, what is the problem with her now? I checked her feet this morning and they looked good. Did she tear them open again?"

He strode closer to join her at the table. "No. She had a fit of some kind. She was fine one moment and the next, her eyes went blank. Nothing I did woke her."

Greta paused mid-pour. “She fainted?”

“It was similar, but I don’t think so.” His first thought when she’d gone strange in his arms, was that she was faking it. She was a Sardi, and it would be just like a Sardi to fake illness to get out of touching him. “Could she fake something like that?”

Greta turned to him, raising a brow. “If you’re here , you don’t think she was faking it.”

“Her heart rate slowed. It was so sluggish I thought she’d died for a moment.” He wasn’t going to share his reaction with Greta. He was a warrior, someone who met death on the battlefield over and over, yet his own heart had almost stopped. She’d looked so vulnerable and small.

He gritted his teeth. It was only his Alpha instincts. Alphas took care of Omegas. It wasn’t about her.

“She couldn’t fake her heart rate. Also, for a Sardi, she isn’t good at deception. She wears her thoughts on her face.” He put his hand on the table. Gritty powder tickled his palm, and he snatched his hand back. Who knew what Greta ground up in here? “She wasn’t faking the fit, but she was hiding something afterward. I want to know what’s going on.”

“What were you doing when this happened?” Greta wrinkled her nose. “Or do I want to know?”

He glared at her. “She was touching me. Nothing strenuous.”

Greta threw her arms in the air. “Oh great. Not only will we have legends about Lodan the Unkillable, but Lodan the Untouchable. Touch him, and you fall to the ground in fits.”

“This doesn’t need to be spread around.” They were a war party, but the men liked to talk at night, and camp gossip spread fast. The men didn’t need another reason to discuss the Omega more than they already were. “If her feet are healed, she’ll help around camp. I’ll have her assist you and assist with meals. I want you to keep an eye on her and see if there’s something wrong with her.”

Greta rolled her eyes. “I get to be babysitter again?”

“You complain you need assistance all the time.”

“She’ll be petulant and sulking, and I’ll have to force her to do anything I ask.”

“If she acts that way, send her to the kitchen. After a few days helping with the cooking, she’ll leap at the chance to help you instead.” He paused for a long moment. “Is it possible the Sardi really did pack her off to a temple? She claims she’s lived there for four years.”

Greta’s brows shot up. “Four years?” She shook her head. “No. Not even if she does have some kind of sickness. The Sardi prize their blood too much not to marry off one of their Omega princesses.”

Lodan frowned. When the Omega said she’d lived in the temple for four years, he sensed she spoke the truth. However, like Greta, he found it impossible to believe. Cassandra was beautiful, and she was clever. It made her a pain in the ass, but also a desirable Omega.

A desirable Omega placed in the temple to the goddess of simplicity and chastity, sealing her fate to remain untouched for the rest of her life. None of it made sense. He was missing something, and he was going to figure out what it was.

Greta turned back to her table and continued organizing it. “How goes it with the

Omega otherwise?” Greta cackled. “With your way with words, you must have her swooning for you.”

He crossed his arms. “Things progress fine.” He opened his mouth, then closed it. Although if he didn’t ask Greta, who would he ask? He sighed. “She said my bed wasn’t right. Why would that be?”

Greta turned to him again. “I’m supposed to understand Omegas? They’re strange creatures.”

“She should want to sleep in my bed over the floor.”

Greta lifted a brow but didn’t say anything.

“I made the bed frame myself.”

“And you take it with us when we move camp.”

He shrugged. It was the only vanity he took as their leader, and it was only a bed.

Greta drummed her fingers on her table. “Have you had other Omegas in it? Omegas can sense things like that, and she won’t want to lie there.”

He shook his head. “No.” He thought again about what his father had said about his desire going dormant before he met Lodan’s mother. As Greta had pointed out, he hadn’t desired anyone for months before the Sardi princess.

Myrdinians believed Alphas and Omegas awoke to their natures as late teens, then spent a period of time enjoying themselves and exploring their instincts. For some, that meant pursuing carnal pleasure, for others, it was more of a slow awakening. But his father was the only one who’d ever spoken about desire fading being a signal an

Alpha might meet his bondmate.

It hadn't happened that way for his sister.

His older sister had always hated the harvest fetes and feasts, being a bit shy, but at eighteen, her attitude changed. She spent hours on her hair and clothing, then danced and chatted the night away with the other single Alphas and Omegas, seeking the conversations she'd spent most of her life avoiding.

He was ten years her junior, and he hadn't understood it much at the time, but his parents had told him one day he, too, would want to dance instead of stuff his face at the food table. He'd told them the only thing he looked forward to was getting old enough to drink his weight at the wine table.

He'd been fourteen when his sister bonded with Nikolaos. They'd known each other since childhood, but it wasn't until her twenty-fourth year that his sister saw Nikolaos anew.

According to Myrdinian lore, her heart had shifted. Myrdinians believed that at a time determined by the gods, all Alphas and Omegas changed. Their bodies, and their hearts, shifted. For some, like Nikolaos, fate chose to let them know their bondmate almost instantly. He'd loved Lodan's sister almost his entire life. At one of the dances, when his sister danced with another, Lodan saw Nikolaos crush a pewter mug with his bare hands, his expression tortured, but he never let her see. He waited for her, knowing one day, she'd see him the way he saw her.

And he'd been right.

Lodan's hands fisted, and a sharp pain twisted in his chest. He didn't think about his sister. Ever.

Greta turned to him, and he realized she'd been talking, and he hadn't caught a word. "If she isn't repulsed by another Omega's scent, she probably doesn't like your bed because she's a princess. She probably wants silk sheets and goose-down blankets."

"No." He paced across the room. "By that logic, she wouldn't be comfortable sleeping on the floor and she's slept fine there." Surprisingly so.

Nothing about this Omega added up. While he was certain she was the Sardi princess, so many things didn't make sense. "Keep watch over her and report back to me."

Greta waved a hand. "All right, but most likely, she's going to be a bother and I'll send her to the kitchens."

Lodan nodded. "It will do her good to work with Jason." His cook, Jason, was a grizzled old warrior famous for having a temper so vile he could make even the toughest Alpha bend to his will. His temper hadn't improved since Lodan assigned him to the role of cook after he'd lost an eye early in the war. Since he'd also lost half a foot in a previous battle, Lodan didn't want him to lose any more pieces of himself. Jason fought in older rebellions with Lodan's father, secret skirmishes against the Sardi going back years and years. Lodan valued his insight and his strategies, and he was part of every war council. He wanted him alive and well.

Jason would make sure the Omega worked hard.

Lodan strode from Greta's tent, ignoring her calls about offering her a proper goodbye. He turned his back on his own tent and headed for Xander's.

Kassandra wiped her brow and pulled a tray of barley bread from the fire. She set it next to the cheese, where the cook's assistant, Yiannis, would soon take it out to the main dining area by the fires for the men to eat.

A gust of icy wind tossed her hair across her face, and the fire guttered. The cooking quarters were only a wall and a bit of a roof and not inside a tent due to the fires. If it rained, like it had the first two days Kassandra worked in the kitchen, or it was windy, like tonight, the weather could be a challenge.

“What did I say about letting that fire go out?” the cook barked. He toiled over the larger fire, braising hunks of meat turning on a spit. No one touched the meat but him—or they risked a tongue-lashing. Although he was quick to use his tongue to flay someone for just about anything, and she seemed to be a favorite target.

Kassandra tossed a log onto the fire, then prodded it with a stick. While she knew how to build a fire, she hadn't tended many. Sarda City stayed mild almost all year, and if a night was chilly enough, servants always built the fires. In the temple, fires were considered a luxury, and Kassandra would have loved to work the one in the kitchens if only for the warmth, but she had to stay in the food preparation area.

“Fix it Sardi, especially since I need you to heat a few things for me.”

Kassandra turned, but she already recognized the voice. Greta.

She sighed. Fantastic, tonight she got to deal with both the cook and Greta. Over the

past week, she was with one or the other, helping them as camp wound down every evening, but she didn't normally have to work with both. Both were surly, both called her "Sardi," saying the word like it was some kind of curse, and both seemed to enjoy ordering her around, watching her as if waiting for her to argue or toss their orders back at them.

She squared her shoulders. It was better than waiting on the Warlord.

Apparently, her ploy about her visions worked. Ever since the night in his tent where she'd seen his past, he hadn't demanded she wait on him, or come to the tent to taunt her. She'd barely seen him at all. The man didn't seem to ever sleep. He didn't come to bed while she was awake, and he was gone before she rose.

She gritted her teeth. It was a good thing he wasn't around because the less she saw of him, the easier it would be for her to escape. Her feet were fully healed, which meant she walked easily again, and if she needed to, she could also run. However, even though the Warlord ignored her, he still had guards on her every minute. From working in the kitchens the past week, she understood the flow of the day and the switching of patrols, and the more she learned, the more likely she could find a weakness, and slip away.

Greta joined her at the fire. The older woman held two copper jars and a hunk of a plant. She thrust the plant at Kassandra. "Strip all the leaves and put them a pot with some wine."

The plant had dingy bluish-green leaves and wiry stems. "I know this plant," Kassandra said. "It was all over the hillside at the temple."

Greta nodded. "It's dittany. Good as an antidote for poisons if you know how to mix it properly."

Kassandra's brows shot up. "Has someone been poisoned?"

"No, but I saw some dittany on the road today and decided to add this to my stores just in case."

Poison. Maybe she could poison the Warlord.

Yet the moment the idea sprung into her head, something hot and tight twisted in her chest. The Warlord could have hurt her, and he hadn't. It wouldn't be right to hurt him.

No. Poison wasn't the answer. She would escape from him, but she wasn't going to damage anything other than his pride when she did it.

She plucked the last of the leaves from the stem and put them in the dark wine at the bottom of one of the copper jars. Greta swirled the mixture several times, then handed it to Kassandra. "Put this in the fire for heating. It needs a slow and gentle boil for the next half hour or so. Don't let it get too hot, you understand?"

Kassandra nodded.

"Every few minutes, you add one drop from this jar." She handed the second jar to Kassandra. "Only one drop. And keep swirling it to keep the ingredients dancing inside. I'll know if you don't do it right."

Kassandra's lips tightened, but she didn't say anything.

"Is she doing her work?" The deep voice rumbled behind her, and Kassandra jumped, almost dropping the jars into the fire.

The Warlord stepped around to her right, the light from the fire flickering over his

form, putting him half in shadow, half in a warm, reddish glow. He'd taken his armor off for the day, and wore a simple tunic, this one in crimson.

"She's slow," the cook said, turning the meat on the spit with a quick yank. "And the bread she made was too flat."

Kassandra glared at him. "It's not flat, I added honey to it, so it's a little more ... oblong than normal."

"You mean flat," the Warlord said.

The cook's eyes flashed, his expression murderous. "You altered one of my recipes?"

"I thought the men might like something a little sweeter for a change. You serve the same thing every day." The camp food was excellent, but it was always the same. The cook probably only knew a few recipes.

The Warlord tilted his head slightly, but as always, his expression was unreadable. He didn't appear angry, though.

"Let me try one." Greta walked to the pile of bread on the table with the cheese and wine. She picked up one of the smaller rolls. All right, that particular bread was flat and a bit misshapen on one side—not the best example of her work. Greta tore off a hunk and popped it in her mouth.

The Warlord strode over and also tore a piece off. His gaze bored into Kassandra's. A tingle spread down her spine, as if he'd caressed her. Her heart rate kicked up, her heart fluttering in her chest.

"Why would you care if the men have something sweet?" he asked.

She glanced at the cook. He would yell at her later, no matter what she said now. “I know what it’s like to eat the same thing every day. I thought they might like a little variety.” She shrugged. “I won’t alter it again.”

“It’s good,” Greta said. “The men will like it.” She pointed at the fire. “Now get to work on that dittany.”

Kassandra turned her back on them and put the copper jar at the fire’s edge. The back of her neck still tingled, so she knew the Warlord remained near her. Her hand holding the second jar shook slightly.

She worked near the big, burly Alpha cook every evening, with his fearsome grimace and arms the size of her head, and her hands never shook once. Yet the moment he showed up, she was a mess. She clenched her teeth and reached down to pull the copper jar farther away from the fire.

Her fingertips touched the rim, and she yelped and snatched her hand back.

The Warlord was at her side, grabbing her hand in his. “Are the Sardi such fools they don’t know a fire is hot?” His thumb whispered over her fingertips.

“It’s your fault. You distracted me.”

His brows lifted a fraction. “Did I?”

Why had she said that? Now, he would start in on his whole ‘I’m your Alpha thing.’ She frowned. “I meant all that nonsense about the bread distracted me.”

“Hmm.” He rubbed her fingertips again. This was the second time he’d caressed her hands, and just like the time on the horse, with only his fingers feathering over hers, an ache unfurled low in her stomach.

She pulled her hand away. “I need to take care of this tincture for Greta.” This time, she used a stick to adjust the little copper jar.

“Greta left, yet you still follow her orders?”

“I respect healers.” She turned slightly so he wasn’t so much in her peripheral vision. “The temple of Suilani is part of the pilgrimage to the great temple at the Acropolis. If you’d bothered to come and kidnap me yourself, you would know our temple is difficult to get to, and most of those making the trek to see us come with injuries, or are half-starved because the journey took longer than expected. I worked with one of the high priestesses to help heal them.”

The copper pot boiled, and Cassandra carefully poured out one drop from the second jar. Steady. Steady. She didn’t want him to see how he made her tremble. The jar fizzed, white bubbles burbling up on the surface. “Our healers weren’t as knowledgeable as Greta, though.” She turned and met his gaze. “You’re lucky to have her.” Despite the healer calling her “Sardi” and barely acknowledging her when Cassandra worked at her side, she admired Greta’s skill. She seemed to know every plant and had multiple uses for each one.

“She’s useful,” the Warlord admitted, crossing his arms. He quirked a brow. “You’re upset I didn’t kidnap you myself?”

Her hand tightened around the jar she held. Gods above he looked so smug. She sniffed. “You’re the one who said you had a ‘big plan’ for me. If that is the case, why wouldn’t you get me yourself?”

“I do have a plan for you, but that doesn’t mean I thought you required my personal attention. I had better things to do.”

She shook her head, pouring another drop into the wine mixture. “Warring. Such a

noble cause.”

“If it were the Sardi warring, you’d have a different opinion.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. He had a point. “You must have spent your entire life warring. How did you find the time to perform all the legendary feats people say about you?” Despite trying to push it from her mind, she kept seeing the images of him washing ashore on the black beach. For days, she’d told herself she was not curious about him, yet here she was, the first time they were together all week, and she was asking about his history.

“What legends have you heard?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t heard any particular stories. Only that you’re Lodan the Unkillable.” That was mostly the truth. She knew he was called the Unkillable because he’d supposedly conquered death, but she didn’t know more than that.

From a few steps away, the cook sneered. “Typical Sardi, only listening to Sardi lies and not the real news spreading through Anatolia.”

She kept her head tilted downward as if the copper jar in front of her was the most interesting thing in the world. “And? What are the tales?”

“They aren’t tales.” The cook turned the meat with a vigorous twist. “They are the truth about how Lodan got an army behind him. How he gained his golden armor and the gods’ blessing. Men heard and flocked to fight at his side.”

The Warlord shifted his weight beside her but said nothing.

“Lodan is the only man who made it through the symplegades—the clashing rocks—to reach Ikaria, the Unreachable Isle, and lived to talk about it.” The

Unreachable Isle. That was what the man in the vision called his shore.

Lodan still didn't say anything, and the cook continued, "He battled the brutal south wind, his boat smashing to bits, his life almost snatched away by the gods, yet in the end, he conquered it, stepping onto the black shores to claim his destiny."

Her breath hitched. Black shores. She was right, she had seen the Warlord's past. "Stepping? Not crawling?"

"The Warlord does not crawl," the cook snarled.

"He might have done if he was injured." She dared glance at the Warlord to find him peering at her in his disconcerting way, the gold of his eyes seeming to glow in the firelight.

"He didn't crawl," the cook said. "He walked out of the waves, greeted Chiron and the great teacher agreed to tutor him."

Kassandra gasped. "Chiron, the sage? I thought he was dead?"

"He left Anatolia when he tired of teaching the Sardi," the Warlord said. "He said they never truly took in any of his teachings."

Chiron's lectures were so important they'd been transcribed into books. The entire collection sat in her father's library in the palace. Her brother's tutors used them often, but the Warlord was right, her brother hadn't paid them much attention. "He taught you?"

The Warlord nodded. "Yes. The most learned man in Anatolia taught a Myrdinian."

Kassandra narrowed her eyes. "He's the one who taught you to play chess, isn't he?"

The Warlord lifted one of his brows a fraction. “Yes.”

She shook her head. “I had no hope of winning against someone trained by Chiron.”

His lips twitched, and if he were any other man, she would think he hid a smile. “No, you didn’t, but you didn’t play half bad.”

She stilled. Whether he realized it or not, he’d given her a compliment. She looked down. The faint swell of music and a sole, beautiful, female voice floated through the air. During dinner the last few nights, some of the men took out lyres or other instruments and played a little, but this was the first time someone sang.

It had to be Briseis.

Most Omegas enjoyed performing for Alpha attention, but her stomach lurched at the thought of standing in front of everyone and playing a song. She would rather feed every single Alpha in camp by hand than stand in front of them to play.

Crowds were awful. All those eyes, watching. Waiting. Judging. Expecting her to have fits and fall to the ground.

Her father forced her to play the lute at dinner for suitors he felt were possible marriage candidates. It was one of the few times she saw him and one of the few times he encouraged her to mingle with guests instead of banning her to her wing of the palace. Up until those torturous concerts, she’d loved playing the lute.

She could barely look at one now without her stomach tying in knots.

The Warlord pointed down at the copper jar. “Better take care of Greta’s concoction. She won’t be happy if you ruin it.”

Kassandra jerked, she'd completely forgotten about her task. She added another drop.

“Don't burn yourself again, or I'll find something even more unpleasant for you to do. Something that doesn't involve fire.”

She huffed. “I told you, I was distracted.”

He came up behind her, snaking his arm around her waist and nestling her against him. His mouth moved to her ear, his lips tickling the outer shell. “Admit I affect you when I'm near.”

“No. I don't care about you at all.”

“Prove it. If you can read an entire poem all the way through without being distracted by what I do to you, I will grant you a request.”

She spluttered, her mind suddenly going blank. “That ... that's silly.”

He nuzzled her neck. “If I don't distract you, then you can win a request from me easily, can't you?”

She swallowed hard, her heart hammering. “Any request?”

“Any request.”

She'd lost at chess, but this was simply schooling her reactions. Since she hated him, how hard could it be? She took a deep breath. She had plenty of strobile, and she could prepare well. “All right.”

“I'll see you soon.” With that, he left.

She shivered, frozen in front of the blazing fire. But the buzzing in her blood wasn't fear. It was excitement.

His cock was already at half-mast when he entered the tent. After a week of staying away, he thought he'd proven to himself he could school his reactions around her, yet the first moment he spoke to her, he forgot all about keeping his distance and challenged her to more touching.

Of course, he would spend more time with her at some point, to continue his work of getting her to beg for him, but he wanted some time to make sure he could do it exactly according to his plan. He was the fiercest warrior and the best tactician in Anatolia. Perhaps his challenge for tonight had been hasty, but he could still control the outcome. He could defeat an Omega half his size.

She stood in the center of the tent. She must have bathed. Her hair was loose down her back, and her skin lacked the peppery scent of smoke. He strode to the side of his bed and bent to one of the cartons next to it. Pulling out his book of Sappho's poetry, he twisted and tossed it on the blankets.

"These are the rules." He pointed at the book. "You pick one poem to read. You can read fast or slow, but if you stop, I win." He could already picture her voice shaking as she fought not to give in to him. His cock fully hardened.

She walked to the bed and picked up the book. "All right."

He crossed his arms. "You will lie on my bed holding the book. Naked. Your legs will be open. If you move, other than shaking or trembling, I win."

Her mouth dropped open and her face flamed red. “No way.”

His cock throbbed. Naked and spread on his bed was exactly how he wanted her. While she lay on his bed, he could study her, learn every small touch that made her tremble. Find the places to make her lose.

He sucked in a deep breath. His desire for her was simply because he was an Alpha, and she was an Omega who hadn’t responded to him the way he wanted yet. Like a battle, he would conquer inch by inch, small move after small move, until he won. This was pure Alpha instinct. No Myrdinian lore about mates was at play. This was nothing more than the base, primal need between Alphas and Omegas, one he should have indulged ages ago.

“If I ask you a question or speak to you, you may stop reading to answer.” He crossed his arms. “But if you say the wrong word, or skip a line, I win. However,” he raised a brow, “I’ll be generous and allow you three errors before I win.”

She shook her head. “This is madness.” She eyed the book. “Besides, how would you know if I make a mistake?”

“I know every poem in there by heart.”

Her mouth fell open. “You do? Why?” Her face took on a bewildered expression. “You expect me to believe you read poetry?”

He shrugged. “I don’t care what you believe. I’m simply telling you I’ll know if you speak the verse wrong.”

She stared up at him strangely, her lips slightly parted as if offering them up for a kiss. A long silence spread between them. “When did you start reading poetry?”

“My father read poetry to us as children.”

An expression flashed across her face too quickly for him to decipher. “Your?—”

He growled, cutting her off. “Yes, that’s right, Myrdinian farmers can enjoy poetry. You Sardi barely wanted us to learn to read anything more than the labels on the seed bags, but we educated ourselves and did it thoroughly.”

Her gaze fell to the ground. “That wasn’t what I was going to say.”

After a long pause, he said, “Tell me what you were going to say.”

She remained staring at the ground. “I was surprised about your father spending time with you. In Sarda, Alpha males don’t raise the children, or want to spend time with them.”

Lodan studied her. “There are many things the Sardi do wrong.” Another long, awkward silence filled the tent. “You never saw your father?”

She shrugged. “He didn’t like looking at me because I look like my mother.” She toyed with the ends of her hair. “Other than my hair. I have his hair.”

“Why would he care that you favored your mother?”

“He married my mother later in life, after his first wife, the mother of the current king, died. By all accounts, he really loved my mother, and when she died in childbirth, he blamed me.”

She and King Harl were half-blood.

He hadn’t known that, although he knew there must be at least a ten-year age gap

between her and her brother. A twitching scraped between his shoulder blades, and he rolled his shoulders, trying to get it to stop. She was upset, and he could sense it. She may be his Omega, but she wasn't his mate to soothe. Opening a conversation with her was a mistake, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

She jerked her chin and shook herself. "Why are we talking about this? There is no need to know each other better."

"I couldn't agree more." Except, he still wanted to run a hand down her back and caress her until he was certain she was no longer sad, because she was sad. Somehow, he knew that. They weren't bonded, and he shouldn't know that for certain, but he did. "Let's return to our little wager."

Her gaze hardened. "I have my own rules."

"This isn't a negotiation." He waved his hand. "But go on."

"Rule number one, I keep my pants on."

"Nope. Naked."

She pointed at the bed. "I'm not going to lie there and let you touch me wherever you want."

He let a half-purr, half-growl rumble from his chest, the sound that made her eyelids heavy and her breath quicken. "Every time I've touched you, you've enjoyed it. Do you remember riding my hand the first night? Imagine what it would have felt like if you hadn't been wearing clothes."

Two spots formed in her cheeks, a deeper flush amid her already crimson face. "I was tired. It was only a silly Omega reaction."

“Will that be your excuse when you’re distracted and lose tonight?”

Her lips tightened. “That’s not going to happen. I’m going to win.” She straightened, meeting his gaze. “No touching in any intimate places.”

“I told you, this isn’t a negotiation.”

She lifted her chin. “If I reached down and cupped you, squeezed your—” she gulped “—squeezed your knot, you’d lose your mind. If you really think you distract me, then you play fair. No intimate places.”

For a moment, his throat was too dry for him to answer. All he could picture was her hand gripping him. Milking him. He would have her do that. Soon.

He bet he could get her to want him to touch her intimately regardless. “Fine. Naked, and no touching between your legs. Everywhere else is fair game.”

She licked her lips. “Fine. I’ll agree to that.” She pointed at the tent door. “When I win, you let me walk free.”

He sighed. “I expected no less. Very unoriginal. But since you’ve added rules, I’m adding something I want when I win.” He closed the distance between them. “You will tell me exactly how much I distract you. You’ll describe it to me.”

She huffed. “That’s easy. Not at all.”

“We’re ready to start then?”

A line formed between her brows, and she worried at her lower lip for a moment. Then she squared her shoulders and held the book to her chest. “I’m ready.”

13

What was wrong with her? Yes, this was a chance for her freedom, but she was offering herself naked to the Warlord.

This was bad news all around because her entire body already tingled. “If you’re going to see me naked, I don’t want to call you the Warlord all the time. I’m going to call you by name.”

“You can call me Alpha.” He raised a brow. “And you haven’t removed a stitch of clothing.”

“The clothes stay on until you agree. I call you Lodan, and you call me Cassandra.”

“Get undressed,” he demanded.

It was as much of a “yes” as she would get.

Her stomach lurched. What if she lost? Nope. No, no. She’d swallowed her strobile, and for most of her life, she’d sat beside Alphas without a twitch of reaction. All she had to do was channel that.

She picked up the book of poetry and thumbed through the pages. Quickly, she scanned each one. Damn, they were all long, none shorter than five pages. She sighed and picked one.

He still stood in the center of the tent, watching her.

She was topless in front of him before, this wasn't much different. Except it was. It was very different.

In one jerk, she yanked her tunic off and set it on the bed. She fumbled with the straps of her pants, her fingers not quite working properly. They loosened, and with a wiggle, she let them fall to the floor. Picking up the poetry book, she climbed onto the bed and lay with her head resting against the headboard. She propped the book up on her chest. "Let's get this over with."

The Warlord—Lodan—strode to the bed. His golden eyes blazed, and he looked every inch like the warrior he was, stalking his quarry on the battlefield. She shivered, and heat punched into her stomach.

He joined her on the bed, kneeling at her feet. His hands circled her ankles. "Part your legs." His gaze was like a palpable thing, bringing heat to her sex and making it throb. She shimmied her legs apart, but only a few inches.

He growled and spread her open. "This. This is how you remain. You move, I win." His words were almost a groan, and his breath was ragged.

She affected him.

For once, he wasn't unreadable.

His gaze rose from between her legs to meet hers. "Show me I don't distract you. Read."

She swallowed and read the first line, "'Dear lady, don't crush my heart with pains and sorrows.'" Then the second. He still hadn't touched her. That made it worse for some reason, and her voice shook, but she read on.

A feather-light touch landed at her ankle and trailed upward. It caressed the inside of her knee, then explored up her inner thigh. She lay bared before him, every twitch, every squeeze of her thigh muscles visible if he watched closely, and she bet he was watching very closely.

She should be horrified at being nude before him like this, or scared at being so vulnerable, but she wasn't. This was about winning a competition and her freedom. That was the only reason she felt comfortable naked before him. The only reason.

He kept his word though, and didn't touch her intimately. His mouth replaced his fingers, kissing along her inner thigh. Hadn't he said he wouldn't kiss her? This counted, didn't it?

Pure pleasure unfurled inside her, slowly spooling and gathering. Her body sang for more, but it didn't matter. More it would not get.

The bed shifted, so she knew he moved, but she kept her gaze glued to the book and read on. "'And what did I especially desire for myself in—'" Hot breath whispered across her most sensitive of places, and she gasped— "my ... my frenzied heart."

A purr rumbled from his chest. "There's your first error. You said 'my' twice."

Heat licked through her, pooling between her legs. She wanted to rub her legs together, but she kept them open. "You said no touching but you're touching."

He purred again. "I'm not touching. You said nothing about breathing on you."

She gripped the sides of the book so hard her knuckles whitened. "It was implied."

"Keep reading, or I win."

She glared at him, then went back to the book. “‘Rapidly they came.’” As she continued, his hands molded up her hips, then circled her waist. He shifted farther between her legs, his thighs brushing hers. The rough-spun linen of his trousers whispered across her leg. A tickling tease nearly making her gasp. A thumb flicked over the tip of her nipple, and her voice wavered, but she plowed on.

His hands were warm and a little rough, but the coarse skin only added a delicious friction to each caress.

A bead of sweat trailed down the back of her neck, and her legs quivered. Lodan shifted to prop himself over her, and lowered his head. One hand drifted back to her thigh, so tantalizingly close to where heat throbbed for release, but he obeyed her rule and didn’t move his hand upwards. “I like you quivering under me.”

She gulped and read on. “‘For even if she flees, soon she shall pursue. And if she refuses gifts, soon she shall give them. If she doesn’t love you, soon she shall love, even if she’s unwilling.’”

His lips circled her nipple, and he sucked. She whimpered, and the book jerked in her hands, almost hitting his head.

He sucked again, hard, then licked tenderly. Softly. “Error two,” he murmured. “You stopped reading. Technically, you lose, but I’ll give you one last chance.”

She was going to die. Her body was on fire, her legs trembling so hard she was afraid he’d think she was moving intentionally and tell her he’d won. She looked over his shoulder at the tent door. She could do this. She could win, even if her legs longed to wrap around his waist, and she wanted to bury her face in his neck and take in more of his Alpha scent.

“Keep reading, or do you forfeit?” One arm held him propped up over her, the other

still stretched down, with his hand circling her thigh. He stroked his thumb over the tender skin there, moving higher and higher, so close to her seam but not quite touching.

““Some say an army of horsemen, some of foot soldiers, some of ships, is the fairest thing on the black earth, but I say it is what one loves.””

Lodan continued to use his mouth on her breasts, intermixing it with rolling the tip between his teeth.

She turned the page. Only a few more verses to go. Her heart rate kicked up. She could do this. She could win.

Lodan shifted off her, rolling to his side.

““For whenever I look at you even briefly, I can no longer say a single thing, but my tongue is frozen in silence; instantly a delicate flame runs beneath my skin; with my eyes I see nothing; my ears make a whirring noise.””

She was almost there.

Lodan caressed the side of her face, then ran his hands through her hair. This wasn't erotic. This was intimate. The way a mate would touch her.

She gritted her teeth. One more verse. ““A cold sweat covers me—”” Lodan caressed her face again, sweeping his thumb over her lower lip. Then he bent and kissed her temple. ““Trembling ... trembling seizes my body ...””

He purred. Pressed so closely to her side, the vibration rumbled through her body. “You lose.”

She jerked up to a seated position, closing her legs. “No! That was the last line.”

He didn’t move from where he lay on the bed, looking every bit an Alpha who had exactly what he wanted. “It doesn’t matter. You said ‘trembling’ twice.” He plucked the book from where it had fallen into her lap and tossed it on the ground. In another motion, so quick she didn’t have time to prepare herself, he was on top of her, binding her wrists in one of his and pinning her arms above her head.

He was still fully clothed, but it didn’t matter. Her heart hammered in her chest so loudly he must hear it. His mouth was at her jaw, his lips drifting down to her throat. He shifted himself more fully over her, propping himself up on his forearms to keep his weight off her. “This is when you start telling me exactly how much I distract you.”

“I don’t think I can do that.” Was that her voice so high-pitched and breathless?

“It’s what I won. Do it.” He nibbled at her neck, and she whimpered.

The sooner she told him, the sooner this would be over. Although every inch of her wanted more. Even her hips pressed upward slightly, responding to the male on top of her as if inviting him closer. Much closer. “All right, I admit you make me nervous when you’re around, but I’m sure you make everyone nervous. You’re so big and scary looking.” She was rambling, but if he wanted to know how he distracted her, this was what he would get. She wasn’t a poet, and wasn’t about to write verses. “That’s what’s distracting.”

His mouth blazed a trail down her neck, his lips, his tongue, sucking at the tender column. She twisted, but with her hands bound and him pinning her to the mattress, she couldn’t move much. Also, she rotated toward him, not away.

He bit gently this time, unlike when he wanted to leave a mark. She moaned, her head

falling back.

He purred, and his lips grew hungrier.

The tension slipped away. She tipped her head to the side, giving him better access. “I hate your scent. It fills the air and makes me forget what I’m doing.”

He bit again, this time harder. “Keep going.” His breathing became more ragged.

“I can feel when you’re around. It’s awful.” It was arousing, but she was never going to admit that.

He stilled, his breath fanning against her throat. Without any warning, he bit down hard.

She cried out, her back arching. One of her legs hooked around the back of his knee, pulling him closer. He sucked at her skin, and she struggled to get her hands free, wanting to dig them deep into his back.

“Beg me to get inside you right now.” His hand tightened around her wrists. “For Hade’s sake, beg me, Princess.”

She jolted and crashed back down to earth. This was the Warlord, her enemy, on top of her. Someone who couldn’t even be bothered to call her by her name or kiss her. “No. I’ll never beg you.”

He released her and rolled to his side. Cassandra shot off the bed and snatched her clothes to her chest. She shoved her pants on and yanked her shirt over her head. Pointedly refusing to look at him, she pulled a few sleeping skins off his bed and arranged them on the floor. She fussed, creating a pillow of sorts. Anything to avoid looking at him.

“You lay on my bed for a while tonight.” His voice wasn’t as silkily rumble like it had been while his mouth was at her ear, whispering about entering her—it had returned to his deep, commanding tone. “You didn’t seem to dislike it. I think your complaints about it last week were nonsense.”

She glanced at it. “I’ve never seen a wooden headboard that nice, but it’s the blankets and how you have them piled all over the place.” She sniffed. “It’s not right.”

He grunted but didn’t say anything else. The sheets rustled, and she followed him out of the corner of her eye as he slid off the bed and poured himself some wine. He didn’t look at her, and she settled into her nest. Despite her body buzzing, sleep found her fast.

But another vision invaded her dream world.

The slight figure, so petite she could be a child, hummed to herself as she threaded through the underbrush, stopping every so often to pick a plant. Cassandra was an invisible, silent witness, floating above Greta’s right shoulder, moving with her as she walked.

A team of warriors surrounded the healer, the Myrdinian Alphas shifting impatiently each time the tiny form stooped and plucked plants from the ground. Here, the trees towered, no longer the short scrubby beach variety clinging low to the ground to battle the incessant wind off the ocean. The rain had softened into a perpetual misty drizzle, shifting into sheets of swirling fog. The canopy was obscured, and even when the trees thinned into a small clearing, it was difficult to see beyond the mossy expanse to the other side.

She hated having visions while asleep. It was bad enough that her visions came unbidden and unwanted, but when they came while she slept, it was like living through nightmares.

Kassandra's heart raced, and her skin grew clammy. She was seeing this for a reason, and her visions never showed her peaceful, pleasant times.

The warriors pointed and halted, one near Greta drawing a bow from his back. "Jason asked me to bring him some game," he whispered.

A roe deer, a large buck, stepped forward from behind a tree, his ears twitching and swiveling. The team was downwind, and the deer hadn't seen them yet. As the men fanned out, Greta shook her head in exasperation, but remained motionless where she stood by a large oak.

When the hunters became the hunted, it happened fast.

Soldiers dressed in black armor with a distinct, golden emblem on the chest, poured out of the woods. The deer shot off. Myrdinians shouted, drawing their swords and charging forward. There were two black armored warriors to every one of them.

Greta clutched the tree, frozen in place.

"Run!" Kassandra shouted, unseen and unheard.

Swords clashed. Blood sprayed, and Kassandra kept her gaze on Greta, not wanting to watch.

For what seemed like many long minutes, Greta crouched by the tree, immobile. Finally, she turned. She took a few tentative steps, then ran.

But Greta was older, and her steps weren't swift. A large figure, his armor shiny with blood, yelled and sprang after her. He was on her in half a second, raising his sword and slashing it into Greta's neck.

Kassandra shouted, bolting upright.

The Warlord leaped out of bed. “What is it?”

“Don’t let Greta go into the woods,” she shouted.

It was late; only one lantern remained lit in the tent, leaving the rest dark. The tent walls fluttered violently in the howling wind, and the skins clung to her arms and legs, strangling her. She thrashed, trying to kick them off her. “They’re all dead.” Panic clogged her throat, and the blankets tangled even worse.

Lodan knelt in front of her and peeled the blankets off her. “It was a dream.”

She shook her head, gasping for breath.

One of his large hands landed between her shoulder blades and rubbed. “You’re all right.”

Half blinded, seeing only sprays of blood, she grabbed onto Lodan and buried her face into his neck.

He didn’t respond for a long moment, then wrapped his arms around her. “You’re all right,” he repeated.

When had she last been held? “Don’t let Greta go into the woods,” she repeated into his neck.

He didn’t respond, only swept her into his arms and brought her to his bed.

He lay on his side, cradling her close, then shifted slightly, not putting his weight on her but tucking her under him a little. Protecting her. She clutched at him, resting her

head on his chest. Her heart still hammered, and all she could see was Greta, her eyes widening as she met her death.

Even though no one had ever listened before, she needed to tell Lodan, to make him understand. Yet, trying to explain meant telling him about the visions.

Greta's face flashed before her again.

She had to try. Her stomach clenched. "It wasn't a dream. I have visions, and they always come true."

14

“Visions?” He didn’t like how she lay in his arms, every muscle tensed and poised as if she were about to flee. Shifting, he put his hand on her back and rubbed it again. “What do you mean visions?”

She shivered. “Visions of the future. It’s always something bad, and tonight I saw soldiers attacking Greta and some of your men in the woods. None of them will survive.”

Lodan remained silent. Could this be a trap? Could she somehow have plans with her brother?

Kassandra was no oracle sitting in one of the special temples of the Acropolis, she was a Sardi princess. An Omega. But if this was a trap, what was the purpose? She was telling him to keep his men and Greta from the woods in order to keep them safe.

He couldn’t believe she knew the future. “You have these visions often?”

“It’s sporadic. I went years without any when I was in the temple. Then you started warring across Anatolia, and I had dreams about that every couple of weeks. Not true visions, but impressions in dreams.”

“You claim you saw me? If that’s true, why didn’t you hide when my men came to get you?”

She shook her head. “I never see anything about my own future. All my visions of

you were vague images of battling.” She paused. “I never really saw your face, only the gold armor.”

“Are those the only times you’ve seen me?”

She didn’t answer.

“Tell me.”

She grew even more tense in his arms. “When I touched the scar on your hip, I saw how you got it. It’s the only time I’ve ever had a vision of the past.”

It wasn’t a lie; he’d long ago learned how to detect when she lied, so she believed what she said, and she had come down with that odd fit while touching him. It couldn’t be visions. She had some kind of brain condition.

She sighed. “No one believes me, so I wouldn’t expect you to, either.”

“Even the great oracles speak in riddles. No one can truly know the future.”

Pulling back, she stared up at him with blue eyes that seemed overly large in her face. “You didn’t walk off your boat like the cook said earlier. You crawled. It was storming badly, and you lay in the sand all night until the older man came to rescue you.”

He shrugged. “The tale has been told many different ways.” Although her description was the accurate one.

She reached up as if to touch his face, then drew her hand back. “You had longer hair, and the man who came to help you had one green eye and one blue.”

He froze. Chiron did have one blue eye and one green, and that wasn't well known. She nestled back into his chest, and without realizing what he was doing, he let out a low purr that had nothing to do with seduction. She nuzzled him, and her body melted into his.

He kept purring until her breathing calmed, and he was certain she lay asleep. He should put her back in her own bed on the floor, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. When she was scared, she'd reached for him, and he hadn't minded it.

She liked all his touches, not just the ones for pleasure.

While reading the poem earlier, she'd almost won, steeling herself against the pleasure he knew he was bringing her. It wasn't until at the end, when he stroked her hair, that she finally broke for the third time. All from a caress, and not in one of the pleasurable places.

When she softened and finally let her guard down, he felt how starved she was for affection. Real affection, not Omega pleasure. He should only be focusing on feeding her lust, but he found he liked when she melted at a simple caress.

He was still awake as dawn broke, and faint light crept in through the tent flap, casting a faint pinkish glow into the room. Cassandra jerked awake, gasped, then scrambled away from him. He shut his eyes to pretend he was asleep. What would she do?

He opened one lid a fraction.

She tucked her knees under her and glanced at him, her cheeks pink.

Yes, Princess, you slept clutching me most of the night.

Instead of returning to her pile of blankets on the floor, she stared at his nude chest. He preferred sleeping completely naked but had kept his pants on since she arrived. At first, he considered walking naked so she'd get used to him, but despite her going toe-to-toe with him, he sensed her inexperience and decided to move slowly. It was why he hadn't pressed anything with her after the poem. She wasn't ready yet.

Slowly, her hand stretched out.

He bit back a purr. She wanted to touch him.

Her fingertips, so light he could barely feel them, whispered across his lower stomach. She let out a small, purring kind of sound.

His cock reacted immediately, and his pants became uncomfortably tight. She noticed, and her gaze flew up to his face. As if scalded, she snatched her hand away. Now, her cheeks flamed red.

He opened his eyes. "You like gawping at me."

"No. I find you deficient in appearance." Her blush deepened. Lie.

"Keep touching, Omega. I'll return the favor and study you." He stretched and placed his arms above his pillow.

She moved away. "I've been studied enough, thank you. And received the report about my flaws often enough that I don't need one from you."

"Your flaw is that you're a Sardi." He frowned. "What other flaws? Like that your hair is ridiculously long? Greta told me how much she had to work to take care of it. Why indulge in such nonsense? Cut it short."

An odd expression flashed across her face, and despite thinking she was easy to read, he didn't know what it meant.

Her eyes flashed. "My hair was a mess because your guards dragged me for two days with my hands bound. Normally it's not such a problem."

"What have you been told are your flaws, then?"

"Well, I was sent to the temple to learn silence. I barely spoke the last four years." Her lower lip stuck out a fraction. She did that when she was annoyed. Another one of her tells. "At the temple, they always said, 'solitude and silence are the best suppliances. Idle chatter leads to thoughts that don't matter.'" She chanted both sayings in a singsong way.

He almost laughed and bit it back. This Omega make him laugh? No. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Eyebrows raised, she nodded. "I agree."

"So, you have four years of bottled-up words." Lodan stood, and her pupils dilated slightly. She liked what she saw. "Great. Lucky me."

The Omega sniffed. "I don't want to talk to you."

Lodan began dressing for the day, strapping on his armor. "Conversation isn't what I want from you, anyway." He paused and gestured to the bed. "Do you want to present yourself and see what I mean?" It was only a barb to get under her skin, but he instantly thought about her naked on the bed. On all fours and arching her hips for him. His cock, now tormented with over a week of unreleased desire, hardened further.

“I think I’ll pass.” Her nose wrinkled. “I really don’t see the appeal of Alphas.”

Her pupils were still dilated as she watched him dress, giving lie to her words again. A lightness expanded in his chest, and he felt a strange urge to chuckle again. This conversation with the Omega was the most amusement he’d had in ages. “Give up your false protests. You slept in bed with me of your own choice. No games. No contest.”

“You were warm last night. That’s all. Like my own personal oven. That was a nice change. I haven’t been warm while I slept in a long time.” Her lips tightened as if she were upset she’d spoken her words aloud.

Suilani’s temple was high in the mountains, where the icy wind blew directly from the north all year. “They didn’t give you blankets at this temple?”

“The more uncomfortable the flesh, the better praying success,” she said in the same singsong voice.

“Whoever came up with these rhymes needs to meet my sword.”

He saw her lips twitch before she picked up the skins on the floor and folded them on the bed.

“I’ll send in Greta or a Beta to get you what you need this morning and then?—”

“Greta!” Cassandra jolted with alarm. “Don’t let her go into the forest today, Lodan.” She hurried over and grabbed his arm, eyes wide and frightened.

She’d used his name for the first time, even if he hadn’t given her permission. He liked it on her lips.

“Greta goes into the forest with a team for her protection all the time.” The princess was really caught up in this nightmare she’d had. “She’ll be fine.”

The Omega’s face fell and shuttered. It flashed a sort of disappointed acceptance, like a submission. He knew submission, but she wasn’t submitting to him. This was different. It was a weary acceptance.

He hated it.

Shaking her off, he exited the tent. Fog made everything fuzzy and murky, softening the outlines of the warriors breaking down camp. Approaching the tent next door, his brow furrowed. She couldn’t have visions, right?

“Xander,” he called out as he entered the neighboring tent. His commander was scowling over a map on a small table, his bed and clothing already rolled and ready to be packed.

“Damn roads are a mess. We have two wagons with broken axles?—”

“Did Greta go off this morning?”

He paused and looked up. “You know how she is. She informed me she thinks her favorite mushrooms grow here, and she needs to go collect them. I told her to be back in an hour or we’re leaving without her.”

“Where? Who went with her?”

Xander waved his hand haphazardly. “To the west, I think. She has Thoas and his guards protecting her.”

Thoas was one of his top commanders. He’d keep Greta safe.

The Omega's face from when she'd woken in the middle of the night flashed back to him. "You ever met a soothsayer? A real one?"

Xander looked at him with such puzzlement, Lodan almost laughed for the second time that morning.

"An oracle? No. Only those people who open up frogs and birds and talk about how the innards tell us the will of the gods and goddesses." He shrugged. "It never amounts to much."

His experiences were the same, but still, something felt different about Cassandra. "I'm going to go check on Greta. Keep the Omega under close watch until I return. We'll leave in an hour."

A chest sat at the foot of his commander's table. Crafted of dark rowan wood with dark metal rivets pounded along its front, it was so heavy it took two men to carry it. It was where Lodan kept his sword since he wasn't going to leave it within the Omega's reach. "Put the Sardi in a covered wagon today. The temperature is dropping, and the wind is picking up."

Xander's lips twisted into a sneer. "Make her walk. I cleared a space for the other two in one of them already, and I don't want Sardi taint near the good Omegas. It might upset them."

Lodan shot him a cool gaze and lifted his sword from the chest. The golden metal glinted as he put it in its leather scabbard and strapped it to his back.

Xander grumbled and rolled up the worn map. "All right. I'll figure it out."

"I'll return with Greta soon." Lodan stepped into the fog and strode toward the west.

Kassandra twisted her hair into a braid and knotted it at the nape of her neck the best she could without leather lacing to bind it. Xander strode up and grunted at her to get into a new wagon without sparing her a single glance.

Surprisingly, it was covered, and much larger than the wagon she'd traveled in during the past week. It also wasn't empty.

Cian and Briseis sat on a comfortable litter and chatted quietly. Over the past week, she and Cian spoke a few words in passing but otherwise hadn't spent time together since he'd moved to another wagon. As she sat, she scanned the camp, her fingers twisting together. Was her vision for this morning? Tomorrow? They usually occurred closely before the tragedy struck.

It was foggy in the dream, like it was now, and the light seemed similar. It had to be today. Her stomach churned, and she was grateful she hadn't eaten. She shouldn't care what happened to Lodan's people, they were her enemy. She should instead think about escaping during the turmoil of what was going to happen, but Greta, despite her grumbling, had been kind to her. She didn't deserve to die.

She heard the shouts first since the fog was too dense to see beyond the group of wagons near her.

Lodan appeared, the mist spitting him out and curling around him as he ran with a small bundle in his arms. Blood dripped down his arms.

“Xander, I need a tent. Now. And get Greta’s medical supplies.” His gaze locked with Cassandra’s. “You said you learned healing.”

Cian and Briseis pressed at her back, gasping as a few more warriors staggered after Lodan, all bleeding heavily.

They weren’t dead.

She knelt there frozen, unable to comprehend what she saw. For once, her vision hadn’t come true.

“Omega. Can you work on them?”

She shook her head to clear it. “I only know the basics.”

“That’s more than any of us know.”

Xander ran over, and Lodan gently passed Greta to him, rolling her into Xander’s arms with care.

Kassandra glanced to the right, to the thick forest, only a few steps away. She could run for it now while everyone was distracted.

“What happened?” Xander asked.

“Sardi soldiers in the woods. Two of them to every one of us. We left none standing but send out a team to search for more.” Lodan pivoted toward her. His gaze was piercing, as if he could tell she’d thought about escaping. “Let’s go.”

She hopped down off the wagon and followed Xander to a tent still waiting to be dismantled for the daily trek. Lodan barked orders to the wounded men, and they

stripped off armor to expose their wounds. Each one had nasty gashes, and one had an arrow in his thigh.

A couple of Betas rushed into the tent with blankets and some bed litters. They also brought a beautiful box inlaid with different colored wood. Xander lay Greta down, and Cassandra knelt at her side.

A massive gash lay along Greta's shoulder and down her chest, but the worst was the wound at her temple. It no longer bled, but mottled bruising already purpled the side of her face. A sword hadn't gone through her neck, but something struck her. "What happened?"

One of the injured soldiers said, "A soldier hit her with the butt end of his spear."

Carefully, Cassandra examined the matted blood. Head wounds were tricky—she could heal Greta to the best of her ability, and she still may die. "Are her injuries the worst? Or does someone else need me first?"

"The others can wait to be treated."

She glanced up at Lodan. He wanted a Beta treated before his Alphas? She didn't know any Alphas who valued a Beta life over his warriors. "I need water. Boil it first. Get soap. Also, bring strips of linen so I can bind their cuts." As she opened the healer's box, Lodan repeated her orders, making the Betas scurry away.

Kassandra shoved her sleeves up to her elbows, and when the water arrived, she soaped up and worked on Greta. She wasn't sure of all the herbs and pastes the healer had meticulously laid out in separate compartments inside her kit, but she recognized the bright yellow yarrow powder to stop bleeding. She spoke to a slight Beta female at her right, "Make that into a thick paste, like syrup. I'll need it."

When she demanded a small knife to cut away Greta's hair, Lodan didn't refuse—he handed her his own blade strapped at his waist. “I don't see that her skull is cracked,” she told him. “So that's good. But I don't know if she'll wake up or not.”

He nodded.

After she cleaned the wound, she struggled trying to wrap Greta's head, not wanting to jolt her. Lodan grabbed a side of the linen and helped shimmy it into position. Again he was gentle, far more gentle than she would expect from a Warlord.

She cleaned and bound the rest of Greta's wounds, then applied a white willow bark salve on the contusions. “I think that's the best I can do for now.” Cassandra got to her feet, her knees creaking from kneeling so long. “Who's next?” The one with the arrow in his thigh was pale and sweating, his skin taking on a green tinge. She pointed. “That one.” She studied the others and gave them a number in the order she'd treat them.

One of the Betas brought a chair in, and she seated the warrior in front of her. He was broad, but not as broad as Lodan. The arrow was in the side of his thigh, but not too deep. Painful, but it didn't look life-threatening, yet he seemed about to keel over. “Are you injured somewhere else?” Cassandra dabbed a fresh cloth around the arrow. Should she just yank it out?

“No.” He studied the tent wall, going an even more disturbing mixture of grayish green. His throat jumped as he swallowed.

“If you're going to throw up, let me know.”

That made him turn and glare. “I don't throw up.”

“Good.” She yanked the arrow out, and he turned pale as milk, but he didn't utter a

sound.

He closed his eyes. “I don’t like seeing my own blood. I have no issues when I slay someone else, but my own blood ...” He trailed off. “And tell me if you’re stitching me.” His hands clasped into fists. “I want to be prepared.”

She would need to use a needle on this to get it to stop bleeding, but she didn’t think she’d tell him. His breathing came in shallow pants, and his eyes were still closed. Despite herself, she almost smiled. A big Alpha warrior afraid of blood?

“What’s your name?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Lodan crossed his arms and scowled.

“Thoas.”

“Where are you from?”

His hands relaxed as Thoas started telling her about his home. Even when she pinched the sides of his wound together and began stitching with the fishing line Greta had in her kit. As she kept working on his wound, he spoke about Myrdinia. “At home, it’s warm sun most of the year. We have a rainy season in the winter, but it’s a warm rain. Not like this bullshit here.” His eyes flickered open, and he looked at her. “Sorry.”

She did smile this time. “I’ve heard worse.”

His skin was a normal color by the time she was done. “You’re all set.”

The warrior stood, looking at his thigh. “That went better than I expected.”

Fixing the rest of the warriors was a flurry of activity. Amazingly, none of them had serious wounds. Not like in her dream when blood sprayed across the mossy ground as these same warriors had their heads and limbs removed.

By the end, only Lodan remained, watching the slumbering Greta. Blood streamed down his forearm. “Did you get hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

She sighed. “Come here. Do you need to take your armor off?”

“If you’re trying to get me naked, all you have to do is ask.”

“I have no interest in seeing that.”

“Of course you do. You can’t take your eyes off me.”

He sat in the chair, and she kneeled beside him. His scent washed over her. Potent, like the feeling she got when she drank too much wine. She shook her head. Focus .

A slash ran up from his elbow, slicing the skin neatly in two. It was deep but not through to the bone. “This needs to be sewn.” She cleaned him like she had the others. “Do you want me to distract you from the needle?”

“No. I’ve had much worse than this.”

“I know. I saw your scars.”

He turned his head. “I’m sure they were unappealing to a princess.”

“They tell your story. That’s not unappealing.”

His head snapped around, and their gazes met. His expression softened. “Now that I know Thoas is afraid of blood. I’ll have to watch him in battle to make sure he doesn’t faint.”

Was Lodan teasing? Flustered, she studied his face. Too tough to tell. He only had one look—his I’m-going-to-take-your-head-off-now look.

“Your dream about the attack was correct,” he said. “How is that possible?”

Kassandra bit her lip and refocused on his arm. “I told you. I get premonitions. Usually, no one listens.” She waited for the disdain or the fear disguised as disgust.

“Tell me exactly what you saw.”

She stared at his arm as she stitched his skin back together. “In my vision, I saw Greta killed, then all your men. They were ambushed by a group all wearing black armor.” She swallowed. She knew that armor.

“I arrived from the west, so I saw the Sardi band creeping into the trees where Greta was,” he said. “I was able to yell a warning. If I hadn’t done that, the Sardi would have surprised my men, and your vision likely would have come true.” He studied her a long moment. “By telling me, many Sardi were killed, and many Myrdinians were saved.”

She shivered and looked away. “I saw soldiers in black and men dying. You all look the same when you’re consumed with bloodlust.” Only the Sardi wore black armor with the Sardi crest on the chest in gold. She knew who the men in black were, and she’d told him anyway.

She waited for the horror. For the guilt. But she felt ... nothing. She kept seeing Greta’s face as the sword hit her. She tilted her face up to his. “Why would someone

attack an elderly Beta? Isn't there supposed to be honor in battle? Warrior against warrior?"

"The Myrdinians believe in honor in battle." She waited for him to taunt her about how horrible the Sardi were, but he didn't. He didn't need to. She'd seen how they treated Greta for herself.

"You said you never see anything good," Lodan said. "Do you always see death?"

She finished his stitches. "Death or a disaster, like a fire, or a war."

He settled back in the chair. She still knelt in front of him. An Omega in front of an Alpha. She should have stood up, but she remained close to him.

He shifted on his seat. "Why were you really kept in that temple? Didn't any Alphas ask for your hand?"

She shook her head. "I didn't accept any of their offers when I lived in the palace, and none came for me after. They all knew about my visions." Their gazes met. Held. "No one would want me for a wife after that."

"I would think royal blood would be more important." He didn't say it with his normal, cruel, cold tone. "Isn't that all the Sardi care about?"

"I told you, I'm a bad choice. You shouldn't want me either." She turned back to her stitches, but they were complete. She fussed over them anyway, simply so she wouldn't have to meet his gaze again. "No one wants to take the chance their children might have fits."

A long silence filled the tent. "Is your new tactic to make me pity you so I'll release you?"

It was her turn to sneer. “As if I want your pity.”

“No. You want something else from me.”

Her cheeks burned, but she jerked her chin up to look him in the eye. “You muddle my head, that’s all. It’s Alpha games, not you, specifically.” But she’d met many Alphas before, and he was the only one she’d ever desired. She gritted her teeth. “I don’t have the slightest interest in anything you have to offer. I’d rather kiss an ogre.”

“We’re going up near the Dorian mountains. That can be arranged.”

Silence spread for a long moment. She patted his leg. “All set.”

He raised his arm and studied the stitches. “Don’t tell Greta, but I think you’re better at it than she is.” Another long pause and his gaze met hers. “You really saw me on the beach with Chiron.”

She maintained eye contact. “Yes.”

Before Cassandra realized what he was doing, he’d lifted her onto his lap. “Do you think you’ll see other parts of my past?”

No one had ever believed or asked about her abilities; they shrank back in fear or dismissed her. “I’ve never had a vision of the past before.”

“The Sardi knew about your abilities and didn’t believe you? Why? Why didn’t they want to learn the future from you like an oracle? Why banish you?”

Shame made her stomach tight and her face hot. “When I was fifteen, we had a large feast at the palace to honor my father’s birthday. Every Sardi noble was there, as well as many from lesser houses.”

Except, her brother and his troop of warriors were missing. It was the first time she'd ever seen her father angry at her brother. He'd been furious that her brother hadn't returned in time for the festival.

"I stood at the front of the feast next to my father." Her spine straightened. She relived this memory all the time because it was the precise moment when her entire life changed.

Late summer sun had warmed the air. A gentle breeze from the ocean wafted through the palace courtyard with the smell of lemons from the orchards beyond the wall.

She'd been excited for weeks, wearing a new purple dress and looking forward to feasting and dancing. "Mid-way through my father's speech, while he was thanking everyone for coming, I had a vision." She looked down at her lap. "Apparently I fell to the ground, and it looked like I was having a fit. Oracles don't act that way. The gods talk to them, and they recite their words. So, no one believed I truly saw the future. No one listened.

"When the rumors about me started, my father decided I should stay locked in the palace so no one would see me having a fit again. Then, when I declined all offers for my hand, he sent me to the temple."

Lodan's eyes narrowed a fraction, and Alpha aggression tinged the air. She leaned back, away from him. He was probably angry all his plans were ruined because he'd kidnapped a defective Omega. That should make her pleased—she didn't want him to want her—but instead, all she felt was the familiar burn of shame deep in her gut.

"You were kept out of sight?"

"After I came of age, I was allowed to come to dinner if there was an Alpha my father thought he could convince to marry me." She cringed as she remembered all

the eyes studying her, waiting to see if she'd fall to the ground again. "You talked about pitying me. The truth is, people will pity you when they learn you have the Sardi princess as your broodmare. It won't have the kind of impact you want." The words almost physically hurt coming out. "You want Anatolia gossiping about you and your conquests, not me."

His anger grew, his scent deepening. "Typical Sardi, you think people are always talking about you. No one cares about a Sardi princess. And Myrdinians don't gossip."

Her brows shot up. "You care enough to kidnap me. And everyone gossips."

"We don't."

"I suppose it is tough to picture—I mean, what would Myrdinians talk about?" She set her lips to mimic the way Lodan always scowled and deepened her voice. "'Oh gee, you really took that man's head off so well back there. I must know your technique.'"

His left brow twitched. "None of us says, 'Oh gee.'"

She ignored him. "I realize you've spent your life with a sword in your hand, hungering after blood, but do you know what it's like when you run a kingdom? Have a court? Battles are fought with tongues, and tongues can wag furiously."

"I'll cut them off."

She snorted. "I'm sure you will."

He studied her a long moment. "Do you think if you touch another scar of mine, you'll see my past again?"

“I hope not. I don’t want to know anything else about you.”

His fingers stroked up the back of her neck, tugging at the knot she’d put her hair in so it fell loose. “I like your hair better free. And even if it is a mess, I’m glad you never cut it short.”

She slapped at his hand. “Stop that.”

His eyes widened. For a moment, she swore his lips twitched, but there was no way he’d find her amusing. “I want it up. We already discussed my hair is a nuisance. If it was down, it would have gotten in the way today.”

His fingers curled around the nape of her neck. “You smacked me. I’m going to punish you for that.”

“I’m already living in hades. Do your worst.”

His other hand went to her lower back and pressed her against him. “I could spank you until you wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week.” As if to prove his point, he stretched his palm flat so she could feel how large it was. Her pulse shot up. Would he really spank her? “I could make you walk behind my horse, splattered in mud and shit.” He leaned forward, and his lips grazed the sensitive skin under her ear. She shivered.

His teeth nibbled over the mark he’d left last night. It seemed to contain all her nerve ends, and when he used the tip of his tongue to trace a small pattern, she gasped. How did that small, wet pressure feel so good?

With a tiny motion, she stretched her throat a fraction to give him better access. He took that as an open invitation and used the hand still at her nape to expose her throat further. Then his wicked mouth feasted. He sucked at her neck. Heat kicked in her

blood.

Tension built like a bow being drawn.

Her hands plunged into his hair, and she tightened her grip, urging his mouth to keep doing what it was doing. Hot desire pooled between her legs.

He groaned. “You want me to rut you right here.”

“I hate you. I don’t want you to rut me at all.” She rocked her hips and rubbed against him, trying for more friction. Trying to get closer. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and when his hand released her neck to trail down her spine, she rubbed her entire front along his chest, burbling her frustration that his armor kept her from his skin. If she was going to smell like him, he should smell like her.

Her mouth found his jaw, and she kissed it. She trailed her lips toward his.

He jerked his head away.

No kissing . Because she was simply his toy. His plaything. Not his mate. The heat flowing through her veins cooled, and she sat back.

His lips tightened. “We’ll finish this later.” At that, he stood, placing her on the ground before him.

Her cheeks burned. Yet again, she’d ended up on top of him, groping him. And she’d almost kissed him after he’d said he would never kiss her. As if she hadn’t humiliated herself enough talking about her visions, she was acting like some lovesick Omega, desperate for an Alpha’s affection.

She needed to talk to Cian because the strobile wasn’t working well enough. “No, we

won't." She waved toward Greta. "I'll need to sleep in here tonight." Away from you
.

"I tell you where you sleep." And he left the tent.

16

Lodan ran a hand through his hair. Shit. Every time he was around her, she drove him crazy. The way she argued with him. The way she told him how much she hated him yet grabbed him for more.

If he'd ever considered taking an Omega as his own, he'd always pictured a shy, pretty girl. One like him, speaking more with actions than words. With Cassandra, she'd never be shy. And she certainly wasn't quiet. If an Alpha got her under him, he'd feel like a king.

He swore, and the guards outside the tent glanced at him.

Xander rode out of the forest back into camp, mud flying from his horse. He reined to a stop and dismounted. "We found their camp, but no one was there, only a few supplies. We took them and their horses."

Lodan nodded. "Good."

"Their shields bore the mark of the imperial army. These weren't random soldiers."

"Deserters, probably, after the king fled."

"With that many skilled warriors, Thoas and his band may not have survived," Xander said. "If you hadn't joined them and foiled the attack ..." He shook his head.

Xander didn't need to finish his sentence. Lodan already knew. If he hadn't listened

to Cassandra, a group of his best men and Greta would be dead. Thoas was a great commander, and he and his men would have fought valiantly, but a surprise attack in a dense forest when they were dramatically outnumbered? Fatal for almost anyone.

“How did our scouts miss the camp?”

“It’s this damn fog. I patrolled late last night and didn’t hear or see anything either. How did you know they were there?”

He paused for a long moment. “The Omega warned me.”

Xander put his hand on the hilt of his sword. “She speaks with spies? How?”

“No. She had a vision. And she warned me, she warned us, against her own people.” He frowned and rubbed his mouth. She’d been vague about whether she’d recognized that the men she’d warned him about were her fellow kinsmen. If she knew, would she still have helped?

Xander’s arm fell back against his side. “A soothsayer? Really? Are you sure she wasn’t trying to get you to enter the forest so her people could kill you?”

The drizzle switched to rain, beating steadily along his face and dripping into his eyes. “She’s had no contact with the Sardi to coordinate something like that.”

Xander stared at the healer’s tent. “Could we use these visions? You can make her tell us where her brother is.”

His jaw clenched. Anger punched through him, but he forced himself to relax. What did he care if Xander wanted to use her? Wasn’t that what he was doing? “She said she has no control over when the vision comes or what she sees.”

“And you believe her?”

He didn't bother answering the question. “Keep our patrols close to camp until the fog clears. And when Greta gets better, she does no more foraging.”

“You can tell her that order yourself. I don't dare.” Xander wiped his brow. “Will she survive?”

Lodan sighed. “We'll have to wait to see. Set camp back up, we'll spend the day here and see if Greta improves.”

Xander growled. “That's another day the king and his party escape farther into the mountains. And possibly forge an alliance with the Dorians.”

“I'm aware. We'll give her a day to recover, maybe two.”

The two Tyrrhuscan Omegas descended from their caravan, wrapping their cloaks around their faces. The male swept his gaze over Xander while the female caught Lodan's eye and smiled. He ignored her. She laughed at something the male said, then they turned and walked toward one of the cooking fires smoking in the distance.

Xander jerked his chin toward them. “Those two have the choice of any Alpha here.”

“I suppose.”

Xander's shoulders sagged, and his gaze fell to the ground. “I'm the last one he'd choose.”

Lodan's brows rose. “You've had no luck?”

“I'm too scarred and too ruined for an Omega,” Xander said. “I don't know how to

talk about anything other than war. Not the kind of thing an Omega would like to hear.”

For the past fifteen years he and Xander had focused on battle. When there had been time for Omegas, as far as Lodan knew, Xander had never partaken. Before their conversation last week, he’d never even discussed being interested in one. “We used to have conversations about things other than war.” Back when their village wasn’t a heap of ash. Before they’d lost everything that mattered.

Xander grunted.

“Scars tell your story. That’s not unappealing.” After he said it, he realized he was repeating what Cassandra told him earlier. Yet he didn’t want her to know his story.

He rubbed his hand over his mouth, touching the scar on his upper lip. Seeing the part of his past when he met Chiron was one thing, but she didn’t need to touch any more of his scars and see other parts of his past. Especially not how he’d gotten this one.

Xander sighed. “You think that’s a great way to start a conversation? ‘Oh hey, Cian, let me tell you how I got this scar cleaving a man in two.’”

“Maybe you can put a better spin on it than that.” He clapped Xander on the back. “You have winning attributes. I don’t know what they are, but you must have some.”

Xander smiled. It was the first time he’d seen his friend smile in years.

“That’s his name? Cian?” Lodan asked.

Xander glanced at him. “Yes. The male Omega.”

Lodan nodded. “I’m sure you’ll think of something to talk to him about.”

Xander rubbed his mouth. “Maybe I’ll look at your poetry book. There must be something in there an Omega would find interesting.”

Instantly Lodan thought of Cassandra, reading the poem while naked. “Put some extra bedding in Greta’s tent for the Omega.” He’d let her stay with Greta. For a little bit, anyway.

Xander cocked a brow, then nodded. “Yeah, I’d change my mind about bedding her, too. It’s bad enough she’s a Sardi, but she has visions, too.” Xander shook his head. “Now we know why a Sardi princess was locked away in a temple.”

Lodan scowled. While he didn’t want her to see his memories, her visions had nothing to do with his reason for keeping her away. She was his enemy, his prisoner, but she’d saved his men. It changed things, but he wasn’t sure what that meant yet. Until he did, he didn’t mind having a little space to think. And since his ability to think flew away in the breeze the moment he touched her, the time apart would help him mull all this over.

“Have her fill in for Greta as healer and let her walk around camp. No more kitchen duty. She’ll be at my side when I’m not busy. Keep the guards on her, but give her a little more freedom.”

Xander scowled. “We need a healer, but does she need more freedom to do it?”

Lodan didn’t answer. How did he explain that hearing Cassandra discuss being locked up in the palace, then in that horrible temple, made him want to slaughter someone? On her behalf.

She’d been locked up most of her life, let her have a bit more freedom in his camp.

They spoke of a few more camp matters, then parted, Xander leaving to take care of

his horse and Lodan moving deeper into camp to tell everyone to set things back up while Greta recovered.

Thoas sat near one of the fires, wrapping his thigh in linen. When he noticed Lodan, he stood and put a fist to his chest in salute.

Lodan nodded. "The leg alright? You need to rest?"

"It's fine." Thoas's gaze drifted to the tent behind Lodan. "If you want me to take it easy, I can take over guard duty on the Omega."

Lodan clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ticked. The Omega smiled at Thoas when she'd treated him. "No need. Go help the cook prepare rations."

Thoas grimaced. No one liked helping the cook, but Thoas didn't argue. He nodded and limped away.

Kassandra had worked in the kitchens every night the past week and hadn't complained once. Jason had complained, of course, but not anymore than he did about anyone helping him.

As he approached the cooking fire, he spotted Xander talking to the male Omega, but as he got closer, they walked away together, not even noticing him. The female Omega remained, and she pouted up at Lodan. "I'm all alone now."

He glared at her. Was he supposed to respond to that?

She tossed her hair. It was shoulder-length and shiny, not tumbling down her back like Kassandra's. Despite his comments to Kassandra about cutting her hair, he liked long hair. He liked wrapping hers around his fingers to hold her head in place while he bit her neck and made her shudder.

“Do you remember my name?”

“Did I know it?”

She sniffed. “It’s Briseis. Can I walk with you? I have some ideas for how you can make camp more tolerable. An Omega’s touch and all.”

He waved his hand. “Fine.”

She rubbed against him, her breast brushing his bicep. A plume of her arousal floated in the air. His cock, so eager earlier, didn’t so much as twitch. “We need to increase the entertainment at the evening meal. We’ve been doing a little music, but we could really perform something nice. I mean, you won the war, so let’s celebrate.”

They’d won, but the war wouldn’t be over until the king was dead and Lodan had taken his revenge. Then he would truly celebrate.

She glanced around her. Men had already started putting the tents back into place. “Are we staying here for the day?”

“Yes.”

She clapped her hands together and looked up at him, smiling. “Tonight is the perfect night for it. May I set up a celebration performance?”

He shrugged. “Set up whatever you’d like.” Would Cassandra enjoy a diversion? Was this what Omegas really thought about? He glanced over his shoulder. Wrapped by fog, the tent where she tended Greta had faded into a soft blur.

“I’m quite the accomplished musician. I’ve composed a few songs, and my voice is lovely.” She squeezed his arm. “I’d like to sing for you, especially .”

“The men will like a night to feast and enjoy themselves.” He gave her a nod, extricated himself, and walked away.

“Sit with me tonight,” she called after him.

He ignored her and kept walking.

The tent flap slapped open, and Kassandra jolted. Cian entered, spreading his arms wide. “I need gossip time. Since Briseis is busy seducing the Warlord, you’ll have to do.” He dropped into the chair still set up next to Greta and let out a long, noisy sigh. “I’m in love, and everyone needs to know it. Even you.”

She shot to her feet from where she sat beside Greta’s litter on the ground. “Briseis is doing what with the Warlord ? ”

“That’s not the important thing I just said.” He wagged his index finger in the air. “Besides, you told her you didn’t want him, and he was fair game.” His left brow lifted. “Isn’t that true?”

Her breath came in shallow pants, and her hands fisted. “Where are they? What are they doing?”

Cian eyed her. “My, my, someone has become a possessive little thing. You know, unless you’ve marked him as yours, she can take a shot at him.” He settled back in his chair. “But fear not, her seduction won’t come until later when she sings for him. That’s why she’s busy, she’s practicing. Tonight, the Warlord will fall at her feet with desire the moment he hears her. Or at least that’s what she expects because that’s what normally happens. So, if you did change your mind about the Warlord, you have until tonight to claim him, otherwise you’re out of luck.”

Her mouth fell open, but she shook her head and closed it, letting her hands relax. It was best if Lodan focused his attention elsewhere. Right? “That’s good. I mean, let

him be with her.” Except the thought of Briseis in Lodan’s bed made her want to claw the other Omega’s face off. Actually ... no ... she would claw his face off. Or maybe more delicate parts.

She shook her head again. “He’s my enemy, and I’m his prisoner. Let Briseis keep him away from me.”

“He probably has a different Omega every night,” Cian said. “That’s the way Alphas are.”

Kassandra frowned. “They are? Even bonded ones?”

Cian laughed. “Have you been living under a rock? Especially the bonded ones. The minute they get their Omega pregnant, they come looking for me. Or” —he shrugged— “you know, a prossy like me.”

She lifted her chin. “Like you? You mean a free Omega who will soon be one of the best fishermen in Anatolia?”

His face softened, and he smiled. It was the first time he’d smiled without it seeming mocking. “You’re right. That’s who I am now.” He stared at her for a long moment. “You know, we should dress you in something other than this tragedy you’re wearing. You could take a page out of Briseis’s book and flirt with Alphas every night. You’d be as popular as she is.”

She sighed and slumped back onto the floor beside Greta, who still slept. “I’m a prisoner, you know I can’t do that. Besides, it feels foreign to interact with Alphas like that. Growing up, I was told to wait for my husband like a proper Omega. They told me being with an Alpha was a special thing.” She scoffed. “I’m not sure I believe that anymore, though. I should bed one and get it over with.”

“Absolutely. If you’re going to be surrounded by the most virile, dashing Alphas in all of Anatolia, darling, you may as well enjoy it.”

Her face heated, and she stared at the ground. “Is it enjoyable, though? Really?” She knew an Alpha would knot her, and she’d always thought that seemed painful. But when Lodan touched her, all she could think about was getting more. Much more.

No matter what he said or did, though, she would never beg him. Never.

“If he does it right, it’s the best feeling in the world. It’s what we’re made for. What we need. Once you experience it, you won’t be able to go without it.” He smiled again. “And all these Myrdinians know how to handle their swords, if you’ll excuse the fairly obvious pun. Well, so I hear.” He pouted. “I haven’t enjoyed their company yet, but Briseis tells me all about it.”

She wanted to ask him more—like, would she know what to do?—but she was too embarrassed. Instead, she changed the topic. “What if I want to bed someone I hate? I won’t get attached to him, will I?”

Cian leaned forward, his eyes glowing. He rubbed his palms together. “Ooh, hate sex. Some of my best sex was with this Alpha I absolutely detested. You’ll be fine, just don’t ask him to bite you. Take your strobile.”

She sat back down and played with the edge of Greta’s blanket, weaving it between her fingers. “Oh, I’m definitely taking that. I think I need a heavier dose though. I get carried away even when he does something small like touch my hand. It’s ridiculous. I don’t want to feel this way.”

Cian tilted his head. “Strobile prevents bonding, it doesn’t really suppress lust. You’re attracted to him. What are you waiting for?”

“We’re enemies. We’re—” She shook her head and looked at her lap. “I’m probably being stupid, but I guess I’ve always clung to the idea of my Alpha loving me.”

“He’s not your Alpha, he’s an Alpha. There’s a huge difference.” Cian’s brow furrowed. “You think he’s your Alpha?”

She shook her head. “No. No way. Absolutely not.”

Studying her another long moment, Cian still seemed worried about something. But then he sank back in his chair, his expression smoothing. “Now, enough about you. How about you ask me who I’m in love with and what I’m going to do about it?”

She smiled. “I already know. Xander.”

Cian fell back in his chair and slung his arm over the back. “He courted me properly today. He asked me to take a turn around the camp with him. Even said it just like that, ‘take a turn with me,’ like he’s out of some old romantic novel.”

No one would ever court her, especially not if she was stuck in this camp. “That sounds wonderful. What happened?”

Cian smiled wider. “I thought you’d never ask. I got a proper kiss. The kind that makes you swoon, you know? The kind that promises all sorts of delicious things. All involving just how good they are with their mouth.”

She didn’t tell him she’d never kissed anyone, and she wasn’t about to anytime soon either, considering the Warlord told her he’d never kiss her. “I’m glad. Last week you didn’t think he was interested.”

“Oh, I felt his interest today. And I think I could have lit up in flames at the way he looked at me. Have you ever had an Alpha look at you where you knew, without a

doubt, he wanted you? Like he'd die if he didn't have you?"

"I can't say I have." Definitely not.

Cian shuddered. "I can't wait to get Xander looking at me like that tonight. I want to stroke those arms of his. They're the biggest I've ever seen. I hope all of him is as big."

"I'm happy for you. I'll be here tending Greta, or I'll be told to stay in a tent somewhere. You'll have to tell me how it goes."

"It would be much more entertaining for me if you came to the feast and fought Briseis for the Warlord." His lips pursed. "You're a Sardi and an Omega, you must be trained in singing, too. We could have a sing-off."

She laughed. "If you want to keep your hearing, you won't ask me to sing. My tutor told me I was the worst he'd ever heard, and he'd roamed the countryside for years."

Cian tapped his finger on his chin. "Hmm. Do you play anything?"

She shrugged. "The lute, but I haven't played much over the past four years. Cian, seriously, I can't join the Myrdinians for dinner, I'm not allowed around camp." Besides, a stone lodged in her stomach at the idea of standing in camp and playing for everyone. All those eyes watching her. Judging. "I don't like playing for others."

He stood. "We'll see about that. I'll come for you at dinner." And he strode out.

Kassandra huffed out a breath and returned her attention to Greta. She thought the Beta's lids may have flickered for a moment, but she still breathed deep and steady as if sleeping, so perhaps she'd imagined it. "Why did you decide to hang around in camp with all these barbarians?" she murmured.

She frowned. Barbarians didn't seem like the right word any longer. They were definitely warriors, and focused on slashing things, but they weren't mindless marauders. Lodan was educated by Chiron, for Olympus's sake. He was a Myrdinian, one of the men selected to tend the land, yet the greatest mind in the country agreed to teach him.

It didn't fit with what she had believed—that Myrdinians only wanted to work the land and that it was all they were good for. It simply didn't make sense.

She got up and paced. What had he said about his horse? That he was bred to be a plow horse, yet he'd proven himself to be a fearless battle steed.

She halted and wrapped her arms around herself. All her life, she'd wanted to be seen as someone other than an Omega who had visions. Or an Omega who was only destined to bear the children for some Alpha of her father's choosing.

She'd demanded her brother's tutors teach her. With little else to do because her brother rarely went for his lessons, they had, but they'd told her over and over it was a waste of time to teach her anything. She was an Omega, and soon, all she'd need to know was how to care for her Alpha's children.

She'd fought against a destiny chosen for her, and so had Lodan.

If he wasn't a mindless killer slaughtering her people, what was he? She stared blankly at the side of the tent. "Who is he really?"

18

Lodan walked into the camp for dinner. Night settled heavily with no moon to add any light, but the rain had cleared, leaving a cool breeze in its wake. A few of his other top commanders, including Thoas and Caspian, sat at the same table with Xander, reporting on the day's activities.

A small stage squatted near the largest fire, dining tables ringed tightly around it. A couple of empty wine casks filled with cut branches added some decoration. Definitely an Omega touch. Earlier, he told Jason to put out more wine than normal, and a relaxed mood filled the space. It almost felt like he was back in Myrdinia at one of the harvest feasts.

He took the empty seat at Xander's table.

"Any change with Greta?" Xander asked.

He shook his head.

Xander gave him a long look. "Have you decided how long we'll camp here?"

"The scouts reported the Sardi reached the edge of the Dorian woods yesterday. At this point, if the Dorian choose to take a meeting with them, we can't stop it." He could have taken a smaller band of men and ridden hard, most likely reaching the Dorians first. However, the Sardi hadn't stopped in Argos on their way to the mountains, which meant he had a chance to get to Argos first and prevent them from rallying to the Sardi side. He'd chosen to aim for Argos because Argos had always

worked closely with the Sardi, and it was much more likely the Argosians would join the king, than the Dorians. Hopefully, the Dorians would remain neutral and ignore the king's pleas. "We're certain the king bypassed Argos?"

Caspian nodded. "They didn't stop in the city, but they did camp nearby, so allies in Argos could have visited them. Most likely they received provisions. Maybe arms."

Lodan nodded. It seemed like the Argosians weren't going to rally to the king's banner right away, but it could be they didn't want to reveal where their loyalties lay yet. The Argosians always worked hand in hand with the Sardi, but they were also known to be opportunistic. Most likely, they were waiting to see which way Anatolia would finally fall, then they'd burst forward, pretending to be loyal followers.

The Argos people were slippery like snakes and had earned the nickname the asp people. "We'll stay here another day, then we go to Argos. We can get supplies and have a little chat with their leader." He narrowed his eyes. "I'd like to see how he acts when he must receive me."

Xander's lips turned downward a fraction, indicating his displeasure, but he didn't say anything. Lodan knew Xander wanted to continue to pursue the Sardi, feeling any delay was another day where they might bring Dorian warriors to their cause.

Lodan didn't need to explain himself further but added, "We've lost the race to get to the Dorians first. If Argos refuses to help the king, then the Dorians are the king's last chance, and they've never been friendly to any in the lower peninsula. He's desperate, and he's scrambling. We make sure Argos is cut off, and then we don't have to fight on two fronts. We can focus completely on the north." He reached and took the wineglass in front of him. "A few weeks and the war is ours."

"I'll drink to that," Caspian said, raising his glass.

They all took a deep drink from their wine.

Thoas leaned forward. “Is it true the Sardi sees the future?”

Lodan glared at Xander—the only person he’d told about Cassandra seeing the battle in the woods. “Who mentioned that?”

Thoas shrugged. “It’s all over camp that you came to the woods because the Sardi told you we were in danger.”

He held Xander’s gaze. “All over camp.”

Xander leaned back and rubbed his mouth. “Eh ... it got winkled out of me.” His gaze swept past Lodan to where Cian stood talking to the female Omega by the stage.

What had she said her name was? Bristle? “Really?”

“I was stuck. It was the first thing that popped into my head to talk about. You know, not war related.”

“Not the weather? Or horses? Or maybe how you make swords in your spare time? None of these things came up?”

Xander rubbed his face. “Not so much, no.”

“It’s true then? She saved us.”

He didn’t like the way Thoas looked when he spoke of Cassandra. He certainly didn’t seem to mind that she saw the future.

He glowered at him, and Thoas scrambled off his seat. He snatched his glass, wine

sloshing over the rim. “I’m getting low, better trot off and nab some more.” Giving Lodan a brief nod, he left.

The cook’s assistant brought them more wine and Lodan took a long drink. The slight scent of orange blossom drifted over him, and he turned, searching the camp. But he already knew what that scent meant.

Kassandra was here.

On the other side of the eating area, she stood with her two guards flanking her. The entire camp seemed to draw breath, the din quieting momentarily, and heads turning her way.

Without realizing what he was doing, he strode toward her.

Her hair had slipped from the bundle she’d put it in at the back of her head, and a few strands framed her face. She crossed her arms, and her gaze flicked past him over the camp where most of the warriors gathered for dinner. Her eyes widened. Shifting her weight, she wrapped her arms more tightly around herself, as if trying to make herself smaller, and she sidled sideways a step, putting him between her and the view of the men sitting at their tables.

With a nod, he dismissed her guards.

“I came to tell you Greta woke up. It was only for a moment, but she drank a little water, and she knew who I was. That’s promising. I thought you’d like to know.”

“Good.” That was welcome news. He took a step closer to her, leaving them only inches apart. A small charge thrummed through him. “You’re learning how to please your Alpha.”

Her eyes blazed. “I was being considerate because I know you care about her, not to please you. This is the last time I do that.” She spun on her heel, and started to march away.

He snagged her hand and pulled her back. “You’ll join me for dinner. Here.”

Her lips tightened. “I’m not interested.” Those lips were driving him crazy. Later, he would whisper his thumb across them and watch how she parted them for him.

“You think it’s an invitation?” He threaded her fingers in his. “Come.”

She grimaced but didn’t argue for once as he led her toward the tables. Walking back through the crowd, she shrank against him, brushing along his side. Her head was down, and she didn’t look around at anyone.

He didn’t return to his original table; he took a more private one near a smaller cooking fire. Two oxen thigh bones lay near the coals, and he murmured a brief salute to the gods and tossed the bones into the flames. When a Beta brought over wine, he poured the first glass onto the ground and repeated his prayer. He may not believe in the gods any longer, but it didn’t stop him from asking for the god’s blessings for his men.

He lifted a brow at Cassandra. “You’re the priestess, do you have anything to add?”

“No. The gods favor you enough.”

He bit back a smile.

A Beta delivered two plates laden with food. “I’ll give you a choice. You can kneel here, in front of everyone, and feed me. Or you can undress me in the tent. All of me. Slowly. And you fix the bed.”

“Even if I fix it, it will still have you in it.”

He reached out and cupped her cheek. His thumb skated across her lips. Apparently, he couldn't control himself enough to wait until later to touch them. “That's right, and you like it that way.” He changed his mind—she wouldn't be sleeping in Greta's tent tonight. He wanted her with him.

She picked up one of the plates and stood, her cheeks flushed scarlet. “I'd rather kneel here and feed you.”

Shit.

He stood. “You took too long to decide, and my offer is rescinded. Sit by my side. You will undress me later.”

“You're such a lout. No gentleman?—”

“You don't want a gentleman.” His hand slid to her hair, and he tilted her face up to his. Her lips parted the way he'd pictured. Her perfect, pink lips. Biting back a groan, he ignored them, and dipped to her neck. He bit her and she squeaked, her hands flying up to his chest, but she didn't push him away. When he sucked, she let out a soft sigh that had his cock go so hard he thought it would break out of his trousers. “You need more of my marks,” he murmured against her neck. “I know how much you hate them on you.”

She clawed his shoulders and pulled him closer. “Yes. I hate it.”

Music swelled across the camp, and he lifted his head. Cassandra drew back, her pupils too large and her chest heaving. She took a long, shaky breath and picked up her plate. “It's time to eat.”

She refused to look at him.

She could battle him all she wanted, but tonight, in his tent, he'd have her shattering in pleasure. Tonight, she would finally give in.

His blood heated. He couldn't wait. With a jolt, he frowned. He was eager to spend more time with her. Eager for a Sardi.

He turned to his plate. A hunk of bread sat next to a square of cheese, and he picked it up. Tearing off a small bite, he brought it to her lips.

Her eyes widened. "You told me you wouldn't feed me."

He froze. Yes, he'd said that. Because an Alpha feeding an Omega was a signal he was courting her. "I want you to eat so you have plenty of strength for later."

Her cheeks turned pink, but to his surprise, she allowed him to feed her without another word.

"Putting honey in the bread was a good idea. It's become popular."

Her face reddened further, and she looked down. A Sardi uncomfortable with praise?

Soft music rolled through the camp.

A few warriors sat on the stage playing one of the old melodies on lyres and an aulos. The female Omega stepped up onto the stage to join them. Tossing her hair back, she sang.

He recognized the song, but it had been a long time since he'd heard the words. The Omega glanced toward him as she sang, and when she did, she caressed her throat, or

lay her hand on her chest.

He ignored her invitation.

He and Kassandra ate in silence as one song slipped into the next. The Omega on stage fingered her throat again and pointedly stared at him. Next to him, Kassandra let out a hiss. “If you want to flirt with Briseis, let me return to the tent.”

His brows shot up, and he turned to her. Her hands gripped her plate so hard her knuckles were white.

She refused to look at him. “If you want another Omega, you don’t need me, do you? Let me go.”

“What are you going on about?”

She jerked her chin toward the stage. “You and Briseis.”

He almost laughed. She thought he wanted the singing Omega? “Am I your Alpha?”

A furrow deepened between her brows. “I’m your prisoner and you have a duty by me . You can’t break plans with your prisoner to go dally with another.”

He couldn’t stop it—he smiled. “You don’t want me near other Omegas because you’re possessive of me. Admit it.”

“No!” She spluttered, her mouth opening and closing a few times. “I don’t want you if you’re bedding others.”

“Because you want me for yourself.”

She pushed her plate away. “Cian told me how all you Alphas are.”

He frowned. “What did Cian say?”

She waved her hand toward the stage. “He told me that Alphas will pursue any willing Omega, and Briseis is clearly very willing tonight.”

He studied her a long moment. “What Cian said can be true for single Alphas.” He raised a brow. “And for single Omegas. In Myrdinia, both enjoyed having fun before settling down.”

She looked at the ground. “He said even bonded Alphas act that way. He said he coupled with many bonded Alphas.”

He scoffed. “Sardi don’t understand true Alpha and Omega pairings. They put partners together like they do breeding stock in their barnyards. The bondings across Anatolia have become feeble. Weak. Untrue.”

He cupped her chin and tilted her face to his. “In Myrdinia, we only bond when we find our bondmate. When that happens, none walk Anatolia more loyal than a Myrdinian Alpha. He will willingly give his life for his mate. He would walk to the ends of the earth simply to hear her laugh. And he never looks at anyone but her because, for him, she is the fairest.”

She studied him. “That’s not what Cian said.”

He stroked his thumb along her jaw. “Cian hasn’t ever been with a Myrdinian, and neither have you.”

Her chest rose and fell rapidly. “I’ve never seen the kind of bond you describe.”

“My mother and father were bondmates, so I saw it every day. One of the things I fight for, is the freedom for all to have that.”

Her expression clouded. “If you carry out your plan with me, neither of us will have that. You and I aren’t bondmates.”

A roaring filled his ears, and something inside clawed against her words. But she spoke the truth. His true bondmate wouldn’t be a Sardi.

He locked his gaze on hers. “We may not be bondmates, but I’m your Alpha. I need you on my cock as much as you need to be there. Only you.”

The camp faded away around him until it was just the two of them, inches apart.

“Considering you know poetry by heart, I would think you’d come up with something a little more lyrical than you need me on your cock.” She smiled slightly. The first time she’d ever smiled at him. It hit him as hard as her pretty mouth saying the word cock did.

“Do you want me to recite poetry to you?”

She opened her mouth to respond, but the table creaked as someone flopped down to join them. Lodan drew back.

It was Cian, holding a lute. He gestured with it at Cassandra. “I told you. It’s your turn.” Cian nodded at the stage. “Go ahead.”

Color drained from her face. “I’m rusty. And no one wants to hear me. Or see me.” She pointed at the stage. “I’m sure Briseis has more songs.”

From behind Cian, a soft voice said. “Yes, I have plenty. Perhaps I could sing one of

the tunes for Liberalia. I think our leader would particularly enjoy one of those.” Liberalia was a festival celebrating drinking and fertility. Processions featuring a phallus swept through the streets, and all the songs and dances were extremely sexual.

Kassandra put her hand on Lodan’s arm. Other than when she healed him or thought him asleep, it was the first time she’d voluntarily touched him. “Maybe you should sing the song for the Tonan festival,” she told Briseis.

Briseis stepped out from behind Cian, her face flushed red.

Cian clapped his hands. “Oh! A challenge.”

“Why is that a challenge?” Lodan asked. Music hadn’t been a part of his life for a long time. The Tonan festival was a special celebration of the arts performed every four years—he didn’t remember anything particular about a song.

“The Tonan songs are impossible,” Cian said. “Only the most accomplished lute players can play fast enough and get the fingering right. Most singers can’t hit the highest notes.”

Briseis tossed her head. “If I practiced, I could sing it easily.”

Cian snorted.

She glared at him, then pointed at Kassandra. “It’s not like you can play it.”

Kassandra shrank back. “I can play it, but I don’t like playing in front of people.”

Briseis sniffed. “We’re supposed to believe you can play that song, but you choose not to?” She sneered. “You’re a Sardi, if you could really play it, you’d want the

admiration.”

Lodan snarled, and both Kassandra and Briseis jumped. Briseis turned to him, her brows shooting up. “Are you upset with me for speaking the truth? The Sardi always want us to look up at them from our lowly positions.”

He’d said similar things to Kassandra, but no one else would speak to her that way. “She’s choosing not to play. End of conversation.”

Briseis smoothed her hand down her hip, then ducked her head slightly, arching her neck in silent Omega invitation. “You’d rather spend time with a liar and an enemy when you have much better options?”

Kassandra let out a sound somewhere between a hiss and a snarl, launching to her feet. “Get out of here.”

Briseis’s head snapped up. “I live within the camp freely. I can do what I choose. No Sardi tells me what to do anymore, especially not one who has fits.” Her eyes narrowed. “No wonder you were locked away in a temple.”

Lodan stood. “Enough. She told you to leave. Leave.” He spoke quietly, but the entire camp fell silent, sensing the rage wafting from him.

The Omega seemed to realize she’d said too much. Her mouth snapped shut, and she took a step back. Giving him a stiff bob of a bow, she marched away.

Pale-faced, Cian picked the lute back up off the table. “I apologize for my rude companion.” He leaned toward Kassandra. “Do you really not want to play?” He glanced at Lodan. “Or is he forbidding it and making you go cook food and smell like charcoal again?” His nose wrinkled.

Another Omega who wasn't scared of him and didn't feel he had to hold his tongue around him either. Apparently, he and Xander had similar tastes. "Everyone helps in camp." Lodan raised a brow. "Don't you have chores assigned?"

"Pah, they're more suggestions, really." He snapped his fingers. "But I did help hold a horse earlier today so Xander could unload it."

"You must be exhausted."

Cian grinned. His gaze flicked from Cassandra to Lodan, then down to where Cassandra still had her hand on Lodan's arm. He put the lute back on the table, saying quietly, "Play for him. He should see you play." He shot Cassandra a knowing look that Lodan didn't understand.

"Why?" Lodan asked.

But Cian walked away.

"What is he talking about?" he asked Cassandra.

She picked up the lute. "I haven't played in a long time." She tuned it, the notes thrumming as the tables around them quieted, the men turning to listen. Her fingers were deft on the strings, and she tilted her head slightly as if she needed to hear each note better.

"Do you know the Tonan song?" she asked, not stopping her strumming.

"I remember going to the Tonan festival when I was twelve, but I don't remember the music." He'd paid more attention to the tables of food.

She nodded, her gaze fixed on the lute. "The Tonan song is about the time when

humans fought the gods for Anatolia and prevailed because of the cleverness of a young warrior.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Kassandra drew in a deep breath. “It’s been a while, but I’ll try it. As long as it’s for you and not in front of camp.”

He didn’t call her attention to the fact that half the camp had already turned to watch her.

She rolled her shoulders and settled the lute more firmly in her lap. With a small inhale, she began.

The music started slow, a quiet murmur, but rapidly gained speed. Her fingers flew over the strings, the notes bold and gaining strength as the song progressed. Lodan couldn’t look away. The firelight cast her features in a warm glow, and her hair curled down her neck. She plucked each note with surety, faster and faster.

She may not be on stage, but the entire camp listened to her. Not a single man moved.

The song rose and fell in waves, as if describing the phase of battle. A great push, a retreat, another surge. Faster and faster.

Kassandra never faltered.

A dreamy quality washed over him, transporting him far away. He remembered walking through Myrdinia, the sun warm on his back as music played through the streets. People laughing. Dancing.

All the years of fighting were to restore the sense of real home across Anatolia, but

he'd long forgotten what that even looked like.

Lodan glanced around. Many of his men stared at Cassandra like they'd never seen an Omega before. A few stood, the glasses in their hands forgotten, their wine dripping onto the ground.

As Cassandra strummed her last note, her head finally rose, and she locked gazes with Lodan. Desire punched through him so strongly he couldn't catch his breath.

She was magnificent, and he had to have her.

Kassandra couldn't look away from him. His eyes burned, the expression so intense she gasped. This, this, was what Cian meant when he described how an Alpha could look at you like he'd die if he didn't have you.

Gently, he plucked the lute from her and placed it on the table. Then, before she understood what he was doing, he swept her up into his arms. The entire camp stared, but for the first time, she didn't shrink back, because Lodan held her, and if he held her, she was safe. "I don't have the patience to enjoy the rest of the feast," he said.

She put her hand on his chest. "Eager to order me around some more in your tent?"

His heart kicked beneath her hand, beating faster. "Always."

Lodan might be able to school his expression so she couldn't read him, but he couldn't control his heart. She leaned forward and pressed her lips on his neck, keeping her hand on his chest.

His heart kicked again, and he stumbled, almost dropping her. Swearing violently, he walked faster.

She affected him.

Of course she knew he desired her as an Alpha desires an Omega, but this was the first time it felt like Lodan wasn't in complete control of what was happening between them. A funny sensation fluttered in her stomach.

In what seemed like mere seconds, he shouldered through the entry flap into his tent. Slowly, he lowered her to the ground, his hands lingering at her waist as if he didn't want to let her go. "I want you to fix the bed."

Her heart thumped in her chest, and she shivered. The atmosphere was different tonight. It didn't feel like she was battling against him, it felt like they were walking together down a path. The problem was, she wasn't certain where that path would lead. Probably nowhere good.

"The bed?"

"Yes. You said it's wrong. Make it right."

"It's your bed, not mine?—"

He growled and pointed. "It's your bed tonight. Fix it."

If he was truly her Alpha, he'd want her to make their bed because it's what an Omega did for her Alpha. It was a part of the ritual for starting a new life together—an Omega set up the nest, then the two of them would keep it the way the Omega wished. But Lodan wasn't her Alpha.

Yet he looked so serious, as if her preparing the bed really mattered to him.

Her fingers itched every time she looked at it, wanting to set it to rights. "All right, but I'm doing it because this bed needs help."

Breathing deeply, she grabbed one of the blankets folded near the footboard and fluffed it into its proper place. How did he sleep in this bed? It wasn't right at all. One of the Betas, most likely Carl, always pulled one thin blanket tight across the bed, leaving the rest folded at the feet. And the pillows were all in a heap. There was

nothing comfortable about that.

Kassandra unfolded the blanket at the foot and laid it out properly, soft and inviting, not taut like a drum. Next, she added a few more blankets from the stack of skins folded on top of a pallet in the corner. She wanted fluffy blankets cocooning her and Lodan.

Good. This was better. Tilting her head, she studied her nest. She moved a few pillows and drew the blankets up so they'd wrap around her when she slept.

No. Not her nest.

She had no nest other than the pitiful one she created on the floor to sleep in.

"That looks better."

She jumped and whirled around. Lodan stood close, filling up the extra space in the tent. It struck her anew just how big he really was.

All of him would be that big.

"I'm not sure your approval means much. You probably sleep on rocks under the stars."

"I've slept on the hard ground many times, so I can appreciate a soft bed, especially when I'm not alone in it," he said with a shrug.

He grabbed her waist, pulling her close as his mouth landed on her neck. His body dwarfed hers. Caged her. His Alpha scent strengthened, seeping into her like a drug, and she curled closer to him.

His fingers tightened along her back.

These were the hands of the Warlord. Someone who killed easily. Ruthlessly. They were gentle when they caressed her, but what would they be like if she was under him, letting him take her the way only an Alpha could?

She trembled, and he stilled, drawing back.

His eyes were solidly black, but he took a long breath, and some gold returned, threading through in brilliant flecks. “All the other times you should have been afraid, you weren’t. Why are you fearful now?”

She glanced at the bed. “Are you going to hurt me?”

He didn’t speak for a long moment, and when he did, his voice was different. Softer. “What did I tell you I wanted from you?”

She bit at her lip, and his gaze dropped to her mouth. The fingers on her waist flexed, but otherwise, he didn’t move. “You said you want me to bear your child.”

“Yes. What else?”

She glanced at the bed again and shook her head.

He let out a small purring sound. “I said I wanted to hear you beg me to fill you.”

She nodded.

“Only when you’re under me, so crazed with desire for me and no other, will I finally give you what you want. When that happens,” —his hand lifted and he cupped her chin, tilting her head farther up to meet his gaze— “you’ll be ready for me. You

understand?”

Her heart still galloped in her chest.

“It will bring me no—” he paused as if searching for the right word “—no pleasure to have you in pain. But when I knot you for the first time, it will be intense.”

She shivered again, but it wasn’t fear prickling over her body this time. Soon, the Warlord was going to seal himself inside her, taking the first step toward making the two of them a pair in more ways than she wanted. “Intense?”

“For both of us.”

She swallowed. “You’ve done this before, though.”

His gaze didn’t leave hers, but his expression flickered. Softened. “It’s never been like this.”

Her heart thumped painfully in her chest as if it had suddenly grown a few sizes larger. He ran a hand through her hair, then untied the binding at her neck to let it tumble down her back. “You’ve made my bed yours now.” His head dipped, and his breath fanned against her neck. “Tell me who you want in your nest with you.”

She looked at the perfect blankets. They rippled in invitation for her and Lodan to lay down. Making her first nest for her mate was supposed to be something sacred between a bonded Omega and her Alpha. She shook her head. “It’s not a nest. I made the bed more comfortable.”

Was that disappointment that crossed his face? “Fine. Then who have you made this bed for?”

“You,” she whispered.

“Good. Now take my clothes off.”

She swallowed hard.

He stretched his long arms over his head, revealing a slim stretch of taut stomach muscles. He raised a brow at her as if issuing a challenge. “And do it slowly, as if it’s your most treasured task, because it should be.”

“My most treasured task should be undressing you? Are you daft?”

“You know you want to see all of me. I’m surprised you didn’t try to sneak more of a peek this morning when you thought I was asleep.”

Her gaze remained on his stomach, on the hint of muscles along his ribs visible through the fabric of his shirt. “I wasn’t interested then, and I’m not now.” She grabbed the hem of his simple linen shirt and slipped it up and over his skin. She drew it slowly up his chest, and because he was so tall, he had to help her as she slipped it over his head.

His torso with all its scars was visible, and he pointed to one along his ribs. “Touch one. I want to make sure you’re going to stay here in the present.”

She traced it with a fingertip. Nothing happened. No visions. No blurred surroundings as her consciousness changed. Underneath her finger, his chest hitched.

Placing her hand on his chest again, she stroked down his ribs to his hipbone, and he let out a ragged breath, unable to hide his physical reaction to her. His heart rate escalated every time her fingers brushed his skin. She continued exploring him, keeping one hand over his heart, the other stroking over his skin as if it had a life of

its own, running along the hard planes of his muscles.

“See, you can’t stop caressing me.”

“I’m looking for the best spot to bury a knife.”

She froze. She’d just threatened the Warlord.

Then his head tipped back, and he laughed.

Her mouth dropped open. His laugh was low and smoky, rolling over her and making her smile. Before she knew what she was doing, she reached up and touched his face. He turned into her hand and whispered his lips over her fingertips, kissing them.

Heat burned deep in her stomach, flowing through her limbs, making her feel pliable. Supple. Ready to have an Alpha inside her. She stared at his broad shoulders. When he was on top of her, entering her, they’d span above her. Her breath hitched, and a blaze of lust punched through her.

Lowering her hands, she unlaced his trousers. One motion, and they pooled on the floor.

She gasped. He hadn’t been wearing anything underneath, and was already hard. Far larger than she’d pictured, his cock was the length of her forearm and thick, with a bead of moisture leaking from the tip. Her throat suddenly dry, she struggled to swallow.

He wiped the drop with his thumb and brought it to her lips. Without a thought, she licked it up.

Liquid heat churned, turning into a blast of fire charging through her veins. With one

hand, she gripped his length, stroking from tip to base. The base thickened slightly where his knot would come, and she squeezed gently.

He groaned and ripped her shirt off in one motion. His mouth landed below her ear, found the sensitive hollow below her jaw, and he sucked. Bit. She barely felt him untie her pants, only realizing she was naked when the cool air moved along her bare bottom.

He picked her up and spread her on the bed. For one moment, he stared at her, and his eyes turned solid black again. He growled and slid over her, covering her body with his. It was exactly as she'd imagined, him dwarfing her, his shoulders wide and solid above her. Propping himself up on one forearm, he nipped along the column of her neck down to her shoulder, his free hand landing on her breast.

With the hard pad of his thumb, he rubbed her nipple, trailing his fingers over the side in a featherlight tickle.

They were already hypersensitive, the tips flushed and at attention. "More. More, Lodan." She arched her back, pushing her breast into his hand.

The heady scent of cedar and leather emanating from him was like a fog she inhaled with every breath. More warmth uncurled in her stomach, and a delicious ache formed between her thighs.

With two fingers, he plucked at one peak, and she let out a small cry. His mouth became hungrier along her neck, kissing, biting. He rolled her nipple gently, yet with each pass, he increased the pressure until she writhed beneath him. Then he began anew with the other.

Her legs parted, and he shifted, moving more fully between them. Using his thighs, he pushed her knees even farther apart.

Her breath came in short gasps. When his hand left her breast, she moaned and arched, wanting more, but his hand dipped along her stomach, and then lower to her sex. The heat of his desire filled the air and pressed around her in waves, making her head muzzy.

“Keep looking at me. Look at your Alpha.” He trailed his fingers over the ache between her legs, running them through the wetness there.

“You aren’t my Alpha.” Fire licked on her skin everywhere his fingertips touched.

He growled and her insides fluttered. “Look how you react to me. Your body disagrees.”

His fingers trailed over her clit, and she grabbed his shoulders, her fingernails biting in deep. Delicious friction built between her legs, and she needed more.

He growled again, and the vibration traced up her spine like lightning, her insides clenching tight with a jolt of pure lust. Her back arched, and she leaned into him, parting her legs even more in invitation.

His fingers slid through her slick folds. No matter how many times she recited in her head that he wasn’t her Alpha, her body welcomed him. Ached for him. He dipped into her wet heat, probed, then sank one finger inside her.

It curled.

With a moan, barely coherent, she murmured, “Yes. Oh yes.”

Slowly, he pumped his finger in and out. When it delved deep she winced, her channel clenching. But his thumb circled over her clit, and pleasure seared through her. As he settled more fully over her, he wedged two fingers inside, continuing to

tease her with his thumb. Cassandra's hips rose greedily. She rocked, riding his hand, his fingers.

Faster. She needed more.

Every muscle tensed, she barely breathed as all her focus was on what he was doing. Waves of pleasure built; she was on the edge ...

He stopped. "You know what I want to hear." The words were more guttural sound than speech.

Their gazes locked. This was madness. The world was tipped on its side, and she was floating in some kind of dream. Her entire body throbbed, wanting him. Only him.

Alpha. Alpha. Mine.

He toyed with her clit and tore another cry from her lips. She lurched forward and bit his neck under his ear. He made a pleased kind of sound, and she liked it. She licked at his neck, tasting creamy skin with a hint of salt.

He made the sound again, and this time, it lasted longer.

A purr. A real Alpha purr. He purred again, and she ran her hands into his hair, tugging him closer.

Tonight, he would be an Alpha she was letting into her bed, like Cian said. It didn't matter that he was the only one she'd ever wanted like this. It didn't matter that a primal part of herself screamed for more. Demanded more.

His fingers moved again, and she forgot to think at all. His cedar scent was deepening, filling the tent, and she rubbed against him, liking the way he smelled on

her skin. He made another pleased noise and rocked his finger back and forth.

She keened, tilting her hips.

“You want more. You need more.”

“I won’t beg.” She scratched hard down his back, probably drawing blood.

His mouth trailed down her neck, down her chest and stomach, seeking lower still. Hot breath fanned her sex.

She whimpered. Even his breath— his breath —made her throb, desperate for release.

He lowered his head.

His tongue laved exactly the right place, and she cried out. His hands gripped her thighs, keeping her still when her hips bucked. Flying close to the edge, ready to shatter under him, ready to?—

But he gentled his attentions, licking lazily and circling the tip of his tongue with the lightest of pressure.

“You taste incredible.” His voice rumbled against her inner thigh. Deeper. Guttural.

She whined and tried to press closer, but he kept her in place. Again, he pushed her close, only to back away when she needed more. Sweat slicked her skin, coating her with a fiery heat. All she saw was him, his golden eyes flooded with black, blazing as he pleased her. “You want me inside you. You need me inside you.”

“Yes.” She ached deep between her legs. If he stopped, she might combust.

“I’m your Alpha.”

She nodded, and another wave of lust washed over her. “I won’t beg.” She ran her hands through his hair. “But I will ask.” She swallowed hard. “Bed me, Lodan.”

He let out a strangled kind of groan, lowered himself to her, and sucked.

She exploded. Pinpricks of color flashed across her vision. She clawed at him. The pleasure edged with a ferocity that didn’t quite satisfy her. It wasn’t enough.

He sucked gently, drawing out her climax until she gasped and whimpered. When he stopped, he covered her with his body again, his face near hers. Fisting her hair, he tilted her head up. “Look at me. Don’t stop looking at me.”

More fully on top of her, he aligned his hips above hers. His heat was at her entrance, and he rubbed against the seam of her, where she waited, wet and ready.

A small trill of alarm shot through her. Wasn’t she supposed to get on her hands and knees? She’d expected he’d be behind her, where it would be less intimate. Where there would be less temptation to tilt her head and welcome him to claim her.

But his hips pinned hers to the bed—he was going to take her like this. His gaze remained on hers, pure black, as he sank the tip of his cock inside her.

She whimpered. It was too much. Not the stretch. The stretch was surprising but not painful. It was him. The feel of being entwined with him.

Sweat slicked his skin as he edged deeper. Slowly, but steadily. He was molding her to him. Making her body his in the way only an Alpha could.

Her blood sang. The Omega side of her, long latent, stretched, and crooned. She

arched her back and released a small Omega purr.

He froze, his own purr halting in his chest. Then he fell forward, covering her fully, and thrust.

Kassandra clawed at him. Too much. Too big. Her inner muscles quivered at the intrusion, rebelled at being filled like this.

He pushed himself all the way to the root.

The pressure was intense. She squirmed, trying to move backward. Away.

He grunted and rocked his hips, working to get as deep as possible. An Alpha's instinct to chase. To take her fully.

His lips landed along her jaw, and he brushed them there, then down her neck. No nipping. No sucking. A soft, soothing touch. He stopped moving. His breathing was ragged, the muscles beneath her hands rock solid as he held himself taut over her. He paused, held himself still, and purred again. "Let me in."

She whimpered. "You are in."

His fingers stroked over her temple and wove in her hair. He turned her head to face him and licked along her throat. "You're mine, you understand?" He growled the last word, and his fingers tightened in her hair. "Feel how we fit perfectly."

Kassandra's chest heaved. The pressure was lessening, until all she was left with was the exquisite feel of him inside her. Owning every inch of space. She'd let him claim her pleasure. Her body already adapted, clenching around him. Letting him in to fully take her. "I feel it. I feel you." The words ripped out of her as if spoken from a deep place inside her.

Lodan began to move.

Long, slow strokes. Each glide fanned heat through her. Each motion softened her more, so it seemed like she cupped him every time he withdrew, as if reluctant to have his length leave her.

When his cock hit one particular spot, she moaned. He focused his attention there, thrusting harder and faster. More. She writhed beneath him, her hips tilting to give him better access. She moaned again and again, the closest she'd gotten to begging.

So, this was what an Alpha could do. Goddess above, it was amazing.

She was winding upward, faster and faster. Her entire body tightened. He growled, and thrust deep. Crying out, she flew over the edge again. She clenched, milking him, trying to draw him deeper.

Something inside her relaxed fully. A submittal she hadn't known was hers to give. One she didn't want to give, but she was too busy thrashing, too swamped by the waves of pleasure coursing through her. She couldn't fight anymore.

He let out a pleased groan and thrust harder. "Yes. Yes, Cassandra."

Kassandra.

Her name. Not Omega. Not Princess.

A warmth threaded through the pleasure. An additional connection he twined between them.

If she'd thought him deep before, now he got deeper with every stroke. He shifted. Each time he bottomed out, he rubbed against her clit, bringing back the friction.

Cries she didn't recognize tore out of her throat, and she circled her hips.

His strokes increased. Harder. Faster. Good, she wanted more.

He stopped withdrawing as fully, and a swelling throbbed at her entrance. His knot was starting to catch. Panic shot through her, and she clawed at his biceps.

He pinned her hips to the bed and pressed, rocking back and forth. She squirmed and keened. He growled and worked harder.

Kassandra whimpered. It was too much. Too full.

"Look at me. Look at me when I knot you."

Her gaze flew to his.

It was so intimate ... too intimate. She didn't want him looking at her like this. For him to burrow further, own her body in every way an Alpha could. For him to demand her very soul.

He wrapped his arms tightly around her and, holding her still, plunged one last time and remained seated, letting his knot come.

Kassandra cried out, her back arching. Burning pressure made her feel every twitch, every small push as he sealed them together. The intensity was everything he said it would be, but it also felt ... good.

She squirmed, but held within his massive arms, there was nowhere to go. All she could do was gulp in huge breaths. She quivered, her muscles tense.

He throbbed, warm and full inside her.

He'd fully knotted them together.

One large pulse, and his release filled her.

Her head fell back. Oh yes! This was perfect. All pain was gone. The pressure wasn't unwelcome, it was perfect. His seed was warm, and it felt good. Really good.

Give her more.

His knot pulsed rhythmically, and she moaned. Each pulse rubbed against the spot inside her exactly where she needed. When he released again, she tilted her hips for it. Needing it. Wanting it deep.

She wrapped her legs around him.

He already held her, but she clutched at him as if she couldn't get close enough. How had she lived her entire life without this?

He rocked his hips, and she lost all control. Her hips snapped, and she flew upward into another climax.

This time it rolled on and on, minute after minute, bliss swamping bliss. He kept dipping his hips, sweeping their pleasure along like they rode one long wave, his gaze locked on hers.

It was supposed to be like this. They were supposed to be one like this.

She grabbed him tighter, and he broke their eye contact, nuzzling her neck where it sloped to meet her shoulder. The sudden urge to offer herself, to give him her bond, slashed through her. If she invited him to bond with her, she'd be his forever, bondmates or not.

She whimpered, and her body, her traitorous body, clenched around him. Trying to prove she should be melded to him forever.

No. He was the Warlord. Her enemy.

She buried her head in his chest, moving away from his lips. Something tugged deep in her chest and gave a small sob, but she ignored it. Instead, she let him take her to the edge again.

He remained hard inside her, his knot lasting longer than it ever had before. So long they were still locked together as Cassandra drifted off to sleep, her face nestled against his chest. Knottings lasted longer to aid with conception or for bonding. With this one lingering so long, it was as if his body was telling him not to end this until he bonded her to him.

His response to her was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. Every moment inside her was perfect. She was perfect. From the way she gasped in his ear to the way she shuddered in release, all he wanted was to keep her wrapped around him until he knew every noise of pleasure she'd make. Until he tasted every inch of her skin.

He rolled to his side to take his weight off her. Even in sleep, she remained clutching him as if afraid he'd leave her. For someone so fierce, she looked small and vulnerable right now. He trailed his fingers through her silky hair, and she cooed, nestling closer to him.

His breath hitched. Being with her was supposed to be about breeding. About sex, and only sex. Even though he was still hard inside her, wanting her again, feelings were stirring in his chest that had nothing to do with lust. Something deeper, something foreign, lurked there, too.

Thank the gods above she hadn't invited him to bite her because he wasn't sure he would have been able to resist. He'd lost control of himself for a moment, priming her neck, asking for the bond, but at least she hadn't understood what he was doing,

and she hadn't invited him.

The foreign feeling in his chest twisted in a sharp, angry lash.

Kassandra frowned and rubbed her cheek over his chest as if trying to comfort him in her sleep. The same odd feeling in his chest expanded, warming him all over.

Everything felt off-kilter, like the time in battle his helmet had been hit hard by the butt end of a sword. The world had gone shaky, leaving him untethered. He felt like that now, like something knocked him off course, something he wasn't sure how to deal with.

He didn't want to leave this bed. Newly mated pairs might stay in bed together for weeks, not even wanting to leave for food. At least, that's what he remembered from the few mating ceremonies he'd attended in his village as a young teen. At the thought of spending weeks in bed with her, his groin tightened further.

He gritted his teeth. They weren't a newly mated pair, and he couldn't indulge in fantasy.

He finally softened enough to slip free of her, and he got up and tugged on his trousers. When he glanced back at her, his cock leaped to attention again. He'd just had her, yet he wanted her again.

Even worse was the clawing inside to return to bed because she needed him to hold her. She needed her Alpha to provide reassurance. Affection.

She craved affection like a warrior craved his first battle. While he could claim her pleasure, showing her how good he could make her feel, it was the other touches, the intimate ones, that affected her more. She liked being held. She liked it when he stroked her hair or her back. His Alpha side relished it, just like it went crazy when

she finally said aloud how much she wanted him.

Focus.

He wanted to satisfy her, but he couldn't give her more than that. He needed to keep some distance between them.

He growled and strode out of the tent toward the armory. Xander exited a tent nearby, one Lodan thought might be the tent the male Omega was staying in. Xander's hair was mussed and he had a pleased kind of expression on his face Lodan hadn't seen in a long time.

Xander's brows shot up. "I didn't think I'd see you tonight." He glanced toward Lodan's tent. "Not that I meant to, but I did hear the Omega making some pretty happy sounds."

"Kassandra." Her scent clung to his skin, filling the air around him. Need clawed through him to return to her. To hold her again. "No more Omega. We'll call her by name."

Xander ran his hand over his hair, trying to tidy it. "Right. Kassandra."

Lodan jerked his chin toward the tent Xander had exited. "Are you having a good night?"

"Yes. But—" Xander frowned and looked away. "Pah. Never mind."

"What is it?"

Xander took a long moment to answer. "You know the chat we had last week? The one about bondmates?"

Lodan nodded.

“I’ve thought about it often.” He sighed. “We’ve been battling the Sardi for half our lifetime. During that time, I’ve only thought about the next battle, the next hurdle to freeing Anatolia. But we’re Myrdinian Alphas, deep down, we’re built for family.”

The foreign feeling in his chest warmed. “You think so?”

Xander raised his head. “Yes. We fight because of what was taken from us, but deep down, we’re built to take care of our land, to cherish our family, and to build, not destroy.”

Lodan stared at him a long moment. “We’ve always known we fight for vengeance. For what’s right.”

Xander’s gaze flicked back to the tent he’d exited. “And after? Do you think we can return to our old life? I don’t think I even remember what that’s like.”

“I rarely think beyond our next battle.” Lodan rubbed his cheek. “At first because it seemed impossible there would ever be a last battle, and afterward ...” He shrugged. “If the prophecy is real, my life will be cut short. If it isn’t, I’ll have Cassandra at my side. She isn’t my bondmate, and we won’t be settling down to live a quiet life. We’ll have to show Anatolia the Blood Laws are gone. We aren’t a true family.”

Another hard wrench inside his chest.

Not that he believed the prophecy, but if it was true, all he wanted, all he’d ever wanted, was to finally kill the king, and defeat the Blood Laws. If he died after those things happened, then that was his destiny, and he accepted it.

That was his choice.

Xander studied him. “You still mean to use the Sardi like that?”

The wrench was replaced by a stabbing between his shoulder blades. “That’s why I took her.” Except the idea of walking her through Anatolia’s cities, displaying the Sardi at his side, the Sardi who would carry his child, made his dinner lurch in his stomach.

“Do you think we’ve become so hardened by war we can’t recognize our bondmate?” Xander asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“My instincts are telling me Cian is the one.” Xander ruffled his hair, messing up what he’d just fixed. “But something is ... wrong. The deeper connection isn’t coming.” He went still and stared at Lodan, his expression turning solemn. “Maybe you’re right and the gods have forsaken us. Maybe the prophecy reads true for us all. We can only have glory in battle, or love. Not both.” He glanced back at his tent. “Never both.”

Lodan went numb, all the warmth from lying with Cassandra fading. “I think you might be right.” His body had craved a bond with Cassandra, but he knew that could never happen. His duty was to his warriors, who put their lives on the line to bury the Sardi rule once and for all. His duty was to save Anatolia from its oppression. Bonding with Cassandra and creating a real relationship, would never be the choice he’d make. “With Greta awake, we leave for Argos at dawn tomorrow. Let’s pick up the pace.”

Xander’s expression hardened. “Yes. It’s time to catch a king.”

The king. Cassandra’s brother. Every time he looked at her, he needed to remember that there was no one he hated more than the king. No one who had taken more from

him. The Sardi had to be fully destroyed.

“Yes. It’s time to focus on what really matters.”

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Kassandra stretched and rolled onto her back. Goosebumps rose along her arms, and she made a small murmur of annoyance, then shifted, seeking Lodan's warmth. Her eyes flew open.

No Lodan.

Sitting up, she pushed her hair out of her face. She was on his bed, the sleeping skins she'd nicely put together now a tangle, but he wasn't in bed, and he wasn't in the tent. A small pang throbbed in her chest.

She shook her head. No, it didn't matter if he was here or not. Why would he spend the night with her simply because he'd been inside her? They weren't mates. Him leaving her alone shouldn't make her feel cold inside.

She squared her shoulders and slid out of bed. The Beta Carl entered the tent, his hand over his eyes. "Are you decent? I'm here to bring your bath. Just the small tub, I'm afraid. We haven't much time before we get moving. We're going to push hard today."

Kassandra wrapped one of the blankets around her. "Yes, I'm decent. How's Greta? I need to look in on her." She should have stayed with Greta last night instead of ... instead of enjoying unbelievable pleasure.

Carl turned and shouted, and another Beta, whose name she didn't remember, entered carrying a small copper tub about knee height and two feet in diameter. A third

brought a large urn of hot water and dumped it in. Steam rose into a fine mist.

“She’s sitting up and eating. Her speech is a little slow, but her memory seems fine. If you get washed and dressed quickly, you may have enough time to check in with her before the wagons leave.”

Still wrapped in her blanket, she walked to the copper tub.

Carl’s face turned red, and he handed her a small, fist-sized pewter container. “Greta said you might need this.”

Kassandra opened it. The scent of yarrow with a hint of mint floated into the air from the container of cream. It was a mixture to help with muscle strain. Like the kind she might have sustained during a vigorous mating.

Maybe she was a little tender, but otherwise, she felt fine. Better than fine. Like she’d been given something she hadn’t realized she needed. “Did you see Lo—the Warlord?”

Carl nodded. “Yes. I had to wake him a few minutes ago because the Commander needed him.” Carl’s face turned red again. “I never have to wake him. He never sleeps.”

Warmth spread in her chest—he hadn’t left her voluntarily. “How did he seem?” How pathetic was she, asking Carl about Lodan like some love-addled teenager.

Carl shot her a quick smile. “He put his shirt on backward, and he lingered. I think he wanted to wake you to say goodbye but decided not to.”

She ducked her head, hiding her smile. “Thanks, Carl.”

The tent swooshed as he exited, and as quickly as possible, she washed, then used the cream along her legs and hips, where smudges of purple bruising showed. Carl had left her simple linen trousers and a shirt, and she tugged them on.

Outside, most of the camp had already been disassembled, and no trace of the setup for last night's feast remained. Clouds hung low in the sky, keeping the landscape a dull gray except for the spikes of dark pines.

Greta's tent was still up, though, and she walked inside. Greta sat in a chair, her hair freshly washed and tied back at the nape of her neck, revealing the nasty slice along her temple and the bruises on her face, which had darkened further, but her eyes were clear, and she looked stronger as she studied Cassandra. "You didn't do a bad job healing me, girl."

Girl, not Sardi. At least, that was something. She remembered how Lodan said her name for the first time last night, too. A small smile tugged at her lips. "I recognized most of the tinctures and creams in your kit. You're well stocked."

They eyed each other a long moment, then Greta smiled slyly. "Did you need to use the cream I sent you? Did you decide to bed him?"

Kassandra's face heated. "That's none of your business."

Greta cackled. "In a camp like this, everyone knows everything about everyone. Remember that. But I'll let you think you can keep your secrets."

Over the next hour, Cassandra helped get Greta comfortable in a caravan then helped break down the healer's tent. While she did, a few of the warriors approached her, praising her playing and asking if she'd play again. It was the first time she wasn't immediately met with glares and grim expressions. Even her guards seemed more relaxed.

Shouts rang through the air, demanding it was time to move, and Cassandra headed toward her caravan. Lodan rounded the corner, and both of them froze. The rest of camp faded away, and even with the dwindling smoke and scent of horses filling the air, she still smelled his distinct scent.

They stared, and Cassandra had to remember to breathe.

An arm slung around her shoulder, and she jolted. It ripped her away from whatever weird moment she and Lodan were having. “My, my, don’t we have a lot to talk about,” Cian said, drawing her closer and guiding her toward their caravan.

When she looked back, Lodan was gone.

Cian helped her up and guided her to the crate in the back. Briseis already sat inside, her lips thinly pressed together. She glared at Cassandra. “He only wants you because he wants to show he’s mastered a Sardi. He should come take a real Omega.”

Kassandra’s fingers turned to claws, but she didn’t say anything. Briseis might be right.

Cian laughed. “Don’t be such a salty herring, darling. An Alpha doesn’t sweep an Omega into his arms and march her into his bed like that if he’s only trying to master her.” He put a hand to his heart. “That was one of the most romantic things I’ve ever seen.”

Briseis snorted. “Alpha lust, that’s all.”

Again, Cassandra agreed with her.

Cian sidled closer and asked under his breath, “How did it go? A good Alpha dick can be downright hypnotic.” His words made her picture Lodan naked. And the

pleasure when he pushed inside her. The sense of being complete. Between her legs throbbed, wanting more. Wanting him.

She rubbed her thighs together. Dick hypnosis indeed. “I can understand why.”

“No bonding, right?” He glanced at her neck. “The strobile worked?”

She nodded, and a mixture of feelings churned in her stomach. The one that kept rising to the surface was discontent. Cassandra glanced at Briseis, who turned her head to look out the back window. “No bonding, and also, no romance between us. It’s just lust, like Briseis said.”

“If you’d seen his face while you played, you’d think differently. He looked almost like a real person and not a scary warlord.”

She bristled. “He’s not that scary.” Cian grinned at her. “What?”

“You like him.”

She shook her head. “Absolutely not. It’s like you said, he’s an Alpha to play with.”

He studied her, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Yes I said that, but I’m not sure that’s really you.”

Briseis harrumphed. “Of course, it’s her. The Sardi love toying with others.”

Cian rolled his eyes. “When did you ever meet a Sardi Omega?”

Briseis whirled back to face them, her mouth open. She paused a moment and closed it.

“Exactly,” Cian said. “We keep saying ‘Sardi’ this and ‘Sardi’ that, but we mean many of the Alpha Sardis.” He tilted his head. “Maybe not all the Sardi are the same.”

Now it was Kassandra’s turn for her mouth to hang open.

“I mean, she’s wrong about a lot of things, but she’s nothing like any of the other Sardi I’ve met,” Cian said.

“You mean that?” Kassandra asked.

He nodded. “And I think the Myrdinians are beginning to feel the same way. Even the grizzly old cook paid you a compliment when you weren’t around to hear it.”

“He did? What did he say?”

“He said no one who played a song that prettily could be rotten on the inside.”

A warm flush washed over her. She could count on one hand the number of times she’d ever received a compliment. “I’m beginning to rethink a lot of things, too.”

It was true. All the things she’d been told growing up in the palace didn’t seem to make any sense, while some of the things—a lot of the things—Lodan said did.

She kept thinking about Chiron and how he agreed to tutor Lodan after he’d sworn he’d never take another pupil again. Chiron wouldn’t have done that if he hadn’t believed in Lodan.

Lodan was an intelligent scholar who loved poetry and a formidable warrior. Both of those things strayed far from what he was supposed to be according to Sardi creed.

Maybe it was impossible to predetermine someone's destiny. Maybe the Sardi Blood Laws were wrong.

The road had widened and they'd passed through a few small villages by dusk. She'd overheard some of the men mention they would reach Argos tomorrow.

Argos.

Lodan hadn't kept maps in his tent after catching her looking at his on the second night, but she'd figured out they were headed to the northeast and Argos. Had they remained loyal to the Sardi and fought against Lodan?

The caravan pulled into a clearing next to the road and assembled the wagons for camp. Cassandra stepped down and stretched her arms above her, loosening her back.

Her guards were no longer right on her heels but stood several paces away, watching camp. She studied the forest from the corner of her eye. It was about a half mile away, dark and foreboding. Too far to run for it, but several horses remained saddled near her. She could make it to one of them.

A horse bearing a rider with golden armor came into view. Seeing her, Lodan reined his horse toward her.

Her heart thumped painfully in her chest, and her stomach fluttered. She glanced at the forest again. Now wasn't the time to escape.

Lodan stopped in front of her and dismounted.

She reached out to pat his horse, then snatched her hand back, remembering she was supposed to be afraid of horses. "How did your nameless horse treat you today?"

He slipped his helmet off, then ruffled his hair. Uncinching the girth, he took the saddle off and laid it on the ground. "I gave him a name," he muttered under his breath.

Her brows shot up. "You did?"

He pet his horse, not looking at her. "I saw a rock that looked like a horse." He shrugged. "So I named him Stone."

She bit back a smile. "I was going to guess you named him Horse, but I see you have a tiny bit more creativity than I expected. Only a little, though."

He turned, and his eyes crinkled in the corners. "You really want me to punish you, don't you?"

The rush flowing through her limbs wasn't fear. It was anticipation. She wasn't afraid of anything he'd do to her. Somewhere along the way, she'd started leaning into his hands. Wanting them. "Are you going to make me read while you touch me again? This time, I think I can win."

He snaked an arm around her waist, hauling her toward him. This close, she could see his eyes clearly, and the desire blazing in them made her gasp. His lips curled, but it wasn't his cruel smile. This was something different. True. "No. Your punishment would be you writhing under my tongue for hours. Days." He trailed his fingers up her neck, cupping her chin and tilting her head back. His thumb whispered over her lips. "Pleasure. Lots and lots of pleasure, with no release. Not until I allow it."

She ran her hand up his chest. "I think it will be worse for you. Imagine me under you. Sweaty. Panting. Aren't Alphas programmed to want to give Omegas what we need?" She'd never spoken this boldly to anyone. Ever. She was flirting with him. Where was this coming from?

His eyes widened, and his lips twitched. The hand on her chin moved to the back of her neck, and he tilted her head up. “Tell me you hate me.”

“I do hate you.”

“Good.” His mouth claimed hers. She forgot she was surrounded by Myrdinian warriors and flung her arms around him. He tasted of pine air and smoky, rich wine. Her chest felt fizzy, like she might float away, except, she wanted him to keep kissing her.

One hand wrapped in her hair, and his other arm tightened around her. His lips were demanding. Hungry. They claimed hers, and when her lips parted, he took even more. A small purr rumbled from his chest, and she murmured low in her throat.

He was kissing her. Really kissing her.

This wasn't a game or a demand in his tent. He was kissing her in the open in front of everyone.

She hugged him tighter while her own lips became bolder and they fed off each other, Cassandra feeling like she'd been starved of this her entire life. Maybe she had.

He drew back, and his eyes were pure black. “I'm going to tell someone to drop whatever in Hades they're doing and set up my tent. Now. Then I want you naked, on all fours, presenting for me when I enter.”

Lust punched through her so strongly her knees actually wobbled. “I might obey that order.”

Swearing, he took her lips again.

She lost all track of time. She even lost track of the ground, not sure if she stood or hovered above it. Breathing hard, he parted from her. “If I don’t stop, I’ll rut you right here.” He cupped her cheek. “Go get ready for your Alpha.”

His senses seemed to sharpen as he strode around giving orders for protecting the camp. The smoke from the fires hit his nose so intensely he could identify the greener, bright tang of new wood being burned. Every moment that kept him away from his tent was torture. With each step he took, the stiff fabric of his pants rubbed against his length, both teasing and tormenting him further.

Needing to keep his focus, he sucked in a deep lungful of air. They'd reach Argos by mid-morning tomorrow, but all he could think about was Cassandra, and having her again.

Xander approached, removing his helmet. "Are we still on as planned for when we reach Argos?"

"What?" Cassandra's taste still lingered on his tongue. He hadn't meant to kiss her, he simply ... had. Now, he didn't want to stop. "Yes."

"With the Sardi, too? And your plans for her?"

"Yes. She'll come to Argos, too."

Xander nodded. "All right. I'll have everything arranged for when we enter."

Lodan waved him off. "Good. Finish the nightly preparations. Double the number in each watch just in case the Sardi are still nearby. Send out a scouting patrol."

“Should I have them report to you when they’re done?”

“No. You handle this one.”

Xander’s brows rose. “All right.”

Lodan usually wanted all reports to come to him, but tonight, he didn’t want to be interrupted. After having her tonight, he’d regain control over himself. No longer would he walk around camp like a randy teenager. He’d spend the night inside her, and it would slake his lust.

No, it wouldn’t.

He went to the armory tent and removed his armor. Then he dumped a few tankards of water over himself, washing away the dust from the road. He pulled on fresh clothes, barely noticing what he grabbed.

When he stepped out into the camp, his vision narrowed until all he saw was his tent. Had she obeyed his orders? Was she in there, waiting for him on all fours?

Only one way to find out.

With every step, his body coiled tighter. The vanilla-tinged scent of pure Omega arousal floated in the air as he got closer. He swore out loud and lengthened his stride.

He’d relaxed her guard to one warrior, who stood shifting from foot to foot beside the tent flap, his face set as if he were in pain. No Alpha could be around this kind of desire without responding. When he saw Lodan, relief splashed across his face. “I need to leave,” the warrior practically shouted.

“Leave.” He didn’t want any other Alpha inhaling her sweet scent. He didn’t want any other Alpha around her period.

Something awoke in his chest. Deep, primal need clawed at him. My Omega. Claim her.

He flung the door flap out of the way and shouldered inside.

Kassandra had half obeyed him. She was naked, but she stood next to the bed, not on all fours on top of it. It didn’t matter, she was ready for him.

He yanked the clasp on his pants and kicked them off. “I’ve been patient all day. I’ve reached my limit.”

The light blue of her eyes had almost disappeared. She crawled onto the bed with her hips toward him, then looked over her shoulder. He tore his gaze away from her face to what she’d bared to him. Her sex already glistened. Wet and needy. “I ache inside.” Her hand drifted down between her thighs, and she stroked herself.

“I’ll take care of you.”

She tilted her hips. “Yes. Take good care of me.”

His eyes flooded with black. “Get farther on the bed.”

Keeping her gaze locked on his, she slowly crawled to the middle of the bed. “Look at you.” He walked closer, shedding his shirt so he was as naked as she was. He climbed onto the bed and knelt behind her, his fingers going to her sex. “So ready for me. So wet and needy.”

A shiver went through her. “Yes.”

He settled on his knees between her legs. One hand landed on her hip, gripping her tight and hauling her back against him. The other went between her legs. He rubbed his cock through the moisture she'd created for him as his fingers slid through her slick heat. "All of this is for me." He needed to get inside her. "Say you want your Alpha."

Her gaze met his again, her pupils dilating. "I want my Alpha. I want you." The need churning inside him quieted for one brief, glittering moment. He leaned forward and kissed her shoulder. Softly. Gently.

He gripped her hips with both hands, digging his fingers in, holding her in place. In one thrust, he shoved inside all the way. He would have fallen to his knees if he hadn't been on them already. She was paradise, her soft heat welcoming every inch of him. She squeezed him hard, her inner walls already fluttering, eager for more. "Gods above. This is madness."

He withdrew and pumped back into her again. And again. He fully mounted her, sliding his chest against her back, his lips landing at her neck. His arms became two taut ropes on either side of her, keeping her caged under him.

She arched her back, giving him even better access to plunge deep. So deep. He could bed her hundreds of times and it would never be enough. "You'll take every inch. Then you'll scream for more."

"Alpha." The words tumbled from her in a kittenish purr. "Alpha."

His control snapped.

His strokes became savage. Demanding. She answered him in the same way, meeting every thrust. He was out of control because of her. Only her.

She clutched his hands, her fingers entwining with his on the bed, holding on with all her strength. Her hips bucked, and her sex clenched around him, faster and faster as she approached the edge.

“Not yet, Princess. Not yet.”

He used his thighs to wedge hers farther apart and changed the angle, hitting her exactly where she liked. His lips were at her shoulder, precisely where an Alpha left his mark, his teeth grazing her skin with each hard thrust. “I should make you wait. Finally get you to beg.” His breath was ragged. “But I’m not going to. Come for me. Let me feel what your Alpha does to you.”

She exploded, her entire body spasming, her sex gripping him. Milking him. Wanting all of him. A short, tortured scream ripped from her throat.

He groaned, and his hips pumped harder. He shoved himself all the way inside her, then stilled. “I’m going to stay buried inside you as I let my knot come. I want you to feel every inch of it as it swells. For you. Only for you.”

She shuddered beneath him. “Lodan.” His name on her lips punched another searing lash of lust through him.

He’d never done anything this intimate before. He nudged his hips, sliding his cock in small motions back and forth but not withdrawing. She moaned and whimpered, owning every part of him as his base swelled in rippling pulses. She would be able to feel every twitch as the motion added layers of friction to the sensitive places inside her.

He grew bigger, now snagging with each dip of his hips as his cock fought to seal them together. “Tell me what you want.”

She shook under him. “I want your knot. I need it. I ache .” The pressure of her squeezing him so tight was exquisite torture, right on the edge between pleasure and pain. And she’d be feeling it even worse.

He wasn’t going to keep it from her any longer. He groaned. “I’ve never been this hard. Or swelled this much.” He rooted deeper. “What are you doing to me?”

She whimpered. “I can’t take any more.”

“You can take it. You can take all of it.” With one final hard throbbing pulse, he fully knotted her.

Kassandra clawed at the bed. His knot held her in place, but even so, he wrapped one arm around her and pinned her to him. Crying out her name, he came. His vision darkened, and he groaned. He’d never released this hard, even after months of abstinence while battling. This was all because of her. She drove him to madness, then wrung every possible pleasure from him.

He hunched over her, his mouth at her shoulder. He released her, and his hand went between her legs. “Come again on my knot, beautiful. You need it.”

His hips snapped in small surges, pressing into her. She tightened around him again as she obeyed, catapulting into another release, milking his seed deep inside her. His release rolled on, and he shuddered.

Wrapped together, they fell onto the bed, and he shifted his weight so he wouldn’t crush her. He remained locked inside her a long time. He knew Alphas and Omegas were built for each other, but this was on an entirely different plane.

Nothing else existed. No time. No place. No prisoner. No enemy.

He'd kissed her earlier, something he said he wouldn't do, and he needed her lips on his again. When his knot finally softened, he turned her over and claimed her mouth.

She was taking a sword to each barrier he'd built around himself. The ones to remind him she was a Sardi. The brother of his enemy. The barriers collapsed more with each moment he spent with her. Somewhere, she'd stopped being a Sardi and became Kassandra.

"Each time I see you, your beauty hits me so hard, I can't take a breath," he whispered into her ear. "I want your lips." He ran his finger over them. "I'm obsessed with them. The taste. The feel. And most of all, the words that will come out of them next. It's never what I expect." It wasn't exactly poetry, but those were the words flowing through him.

He replaced his finger with his mouth, and she opened for him, whimpering low. He kissed her deeply, and her breath came quick and sharp. "Don't stop kissing me."

And he didn't. He kissed her as he took her again. Long, and slow. He kissed her as his knot filled her again, and this time, when he came, it was even more powerful because he claimed her mouth at the same time.

Deep inside him, the truth about their connection whispered to him with every beat of his heart, but he ignored it. If he didn't, it would change everything.

The sun was only an hour from full noon when they reached Argos. The caravans pulled up outside the main entrance into the city, and Cassandra hopped out with Cian. Homes made of pale stone stretched along roads winding upward to the large hill in its center, where imposing buildings with sweeping arches loomed. There sat the heart of the city, where the leader of Argos lived, as well as the main government buildings for the city.

An extra wariness threaded through the Myrdinian troops, and they wore more weapons than they had while traveling. Cassandra hadn't seen Lodan since they parted this morning. They'd rolled around in his bed all night, barely sleeping, and she'd lost count of how many times he'd sealed himself inside her, but when she'd woken in his arms in the morning, she wanted him again. He seemed just as eager, and they'd ended up on the floor somehow.

She was fairly certain the caravan departed late because of them, too.

Each time I see you, your beauty hits me so hard, I can't take a breath. She ducked her head, and her cheeks grew warm. Had he really said that? Had he meant it?

Two of her guards, Darius and Sebastian, stepped forward. Darius said, "You're to come with us." He didn't look at her face.

Over the past few days, her guards had grown friendlier, talking to her occasionally and giving her more space as she walked through camp, but today, they were both as stiff and unfriendly as they had been her first day. "Am I working with Jason today?"

Cian rounded the corner and bounded over to join them. “Come on, let’s go explore the town. I’ve never been to Argos.”

“No,” Darius told him, and for the first time, she noticed the rope he carried in his hand. “The Sardi needs to come with us.” He’d started calling her Cassandra two days ago.

“Put your hands behind your back.”

“What? Does Lodan—the Warlord—know about this?”

The guard still didn’t look at her. “These are his orders. Turn around.”

Confused, she obeyed. Not that she had a choice, not if he’d ordered it. “What does he want me to do?”

Cian came to her side. “Yeah, why are you trotting around a tied Omega?”

No reply.

Darius pointed at the road in front of them. “Walk.”

They walked past all the wagons on the hard-packed dirt road leading into Argos. The Argosian people milled about, gaping at the soldiers as they entered the town. The farther they walked, the more people streamed into the streets, all headed in the same direction.

So many people.

A stone lodged in Cassandra’s stomach, and icy cold fear shot down her spine. She stumbled, and Cian took her arm, squeezing it gently. She hadn’t realized he’d

remained at her side.

A man wearing rich, well-draped clothes stood on the roadside. The kind of clothing favored by men in her father's court. He stared at her, his gaze growing hard. He pointed. "I recognize her," he yelled. "It's the Sardi princess." People with hate-filled eyes turned toward her. So many eyes.

She trembled and staggered again.

The Argos nobleman spat in the street as she passed. Others followed, shouting at her, spitting, and pointing.

It was her worst nightmare come true. Crowds of people all staring at her. Hating her.

"You'll be all right," Cian whispered, gripping her arm tighter. "Don't let them see how much they upset you."

It was hard to hear him. Buzzing filled her ears, and her breath came too fast, yet she didn't think she was getting any air.

The road swept to a large fountain with ivy curling over the basin in the center of a large square. It seemed like the entire town had gathered, spread out in a semi-circle facing the fountain, where Xander stood, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Xander's voice floated over the murmuring crowd, and he pointed at Cassandra. "Here. We show you proof of how things have changed. The Sardi princess will soon bear the Warlord's child, and that child will prove the Blood Laws are gone. The Sardi are destroyed."

The crowd raised their fists in the air and cheered.

Kassandra tripped again, and if Cian hadn't steadied her, she would have fallen on her face. The Argosians were close with the Sardi, her father had wanted her to mate with one of their leaders, yet here they were jeering at her and praising her capture.

The guards pressed her forward, and everything became a blur. The crowd, all the eyes, the fountain, she barely saw any of it. She did, however, hear the vile things shouted at her as her guards ushered her to Xander.

Lodan ordered this.

Lodan wanted her paraded in front of Argos like this.

Tears burned, but she gritted her teeth and bit them back. She was a prize of war. A token Omega. Exactly as he'd told her when he captured her. The last two nights were nothing, simply an Alpha taking an Omega. She'd known he was her enemy. Steeled herself against him at all turns, but the last two nights, it hadn't felt that way, and somewhere along the way, he stopped feeling like her enemy.

Good thing she was getting a reminder of the truth. He'd always be her enemy.

She squared her shoulders. They may see her fear, but no one would see how much this hurt. How much it felt like a betrayal. He'd told her Myrdinian Alpha's would die for their Omegas. That they'd walk to the ends of the earth to see them smile. "All those pretty words he told me about Myrdinian Alphas being different. What a crock of shit." Then again, he'd told her that's how Myrdinian Alpha's treated their mates. She and the Warlord weren't mates.

She hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud until Cian answered, "I was deceived, too." He stared at Xander as they marched up to him in front of the fountain. "No one I choose to care about treats others this way. This is cruel. They're acting like the Sardi."

They wended through the crowd until they drew to a halt near Xander. For the first time, Cassandra felt the full weight of the number of people surrounding her. About as many as when she was ten and had fallen to the ground with a vision during her father's feast.

There was no escape.

Her breath came faster. She needed something to focus on. Anything. Her gaze landed on the fountain. It was made of beautiful white marble, exquisitely crafted, with a horse appearing to rear out of a clamshell at the top. Think of horses.

She trembled uncontrollably, so cold she might never be warm again.

"Get out of here, Cian," Xander barked. "This has nothing to do with you."

Cian scoffed. "Is this a taste of Myrdinian freedom? Tastes a bit like what I've supped on with the Sardi for the past thirty years."

Xander stepped closer to them. "Leave now."

"It's all right." Cassandra turned from the fountain to Cian. "You don't want the crowd to focus on you. Trust me."

But Cian didn't leave.

A hush blanketed the crowd. "Welcome, Myrdinians, welcome," a familiar voice called. The crowd parted, revealing a tall man wearing a dark purple tunic with gold thread, the symbol of Argos embroidered on the breast.

"Are you Leader Ambrose?" Xander asked.

Kassandra already knew the answer. She'd met Leader Ambrose at the palace when her father wanted her to marry him. He looked much the same.

"Yes. I see we have the honor of receiving the Myrdinian army." His gaze landed on her, and his brows lifted. "You have the Sardi princess."

"She's our prisoner, and proof the Blood Laws are over."

His lips spread into a smug, small smile. "I see." His gaze sharpened on hers. "Your options have really narrowed haven't they?"

Cian leaned closer to her, his shoulder brushing against hers. She appreciated the contact. The reminder that not everyone around her hated her.

Xander frowned. "Her only option now is to bear the Warlord's child."

Ambrose turned to him. "Where is the Warlord?"

"He walked directly to your estate to speak with you."

"Then I'll go meet him there." But he didn't leave immediately. Instead, he walked over until he was only a few inches away from Kassandra. He bent to her ear. "Perhaps you shouldn't have spurned my hand, then you wouldn't be a whore for the Myrdinian army." His foul breath clogged her senses.

She twisted her face to get as far from him as possible. "What have you been doing during this war, Ambrose?" she asked. "Did you fight?"

He drew back, his nostrils flaring. "You can refer to me as Alpha Leader, and I don't answer to Sardi scum anymore."

“It’s a fair question,” Xander said. “One the Warlord will want fully addressed.” He crossed his arms. “We know the Sardi passed by here about a week ago. Did they send messengers?”

Ambrose tilted his head. “They asked for aid. We didn’t grant it.”

“Do you know where they went?”

“I might.”

Xander slid his sword from its sheath and pointed it at Ambrose. “You may be used to the word games and tricks played at court. I prefer a more direct approach. Either tell us, or you will meet my sword.”

Next to her, Cian gasped, and his hand tightened on her arm. She didn’t think he was afraid though.

Ambrose’s face turned purple. “The king may have mentioned a fortress up in the Dorian mountains.”

Xander nodded. “Good. You’ll tell Lodan exactly what you know.” He jerked his head toward the road. “Now.” Without a glance at her, he marched Ambrose away, heading toward the hill behind them.

Cian grabbed her elbow. “The little spectacle is over. Come on.”

Neither guard protested as he led her back to the road or when he withdrew a dagger from his waist and cut the ropes at her wrists. The crowd pressed in on them, hissing and spitting out more taunts.

Fear swamped her again, choking the breath from her lungs. She panted, trying to

breathe, but couldn't. She choked and clawed at her neck. She needed air.

Cian dragged her along the road out of the city, faster and faster until he reached a tent in the Myrdinian camp. He tossed open the flap and called out, "I need help."

Greta struggled to her feet. "What happened?"

"She was paraded in front of Argos like some kind of trophy. She doesn't look well."

Kassandra choked and tried to suck in more air.

The healer clutched at a walking stick, leaning on it to hobble to Kassandra. She scanned Kassandra's face, then pointed at the chair she'd vacated. "Sit." Using her walking stick, she pointed at a blanket on her bed. "Wrap that around her, and up around her mouth, too. Try to get her to breathe into it. It will help her breathing slow."

Kassandra heard them, but it was like they were at the end of a long tunnel. "I don't like crowds. I don't like crowds." She said it over and over.

Greta limped over to her table and opened a jar. "Let's get you a sleeping draught. Good thing I had you pull all that valerian root earlier in the week."

Cian wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, tucking it up around her mouth. "What's wrong with her?"

Greta kept her back to them. "I've seen this before. Deep fear can freeze someone or cause an attack of some kind, like she's having." She turned, a steaming cup in her hand. "Give her this, it's weak so it will be more for calming than sleeping."

Cian fetched the cup and handed it to Kassandra. She took a long sip. The taste was

flowery, and the warmth hit her stomach and eased into her. “Thank you.” She took a deep breath. Then another.

“Good girl.” Greta walked over and peered into Cassandra’s eyes. “Good. Good.” She ordered, “Tell me what happened. What do you mean she was paraded around?”

Cian described the crowd in Argos and how the guards walked her through the streets up to the fountain.

“Did anyone hurt her?” Greta spun toward her. “Did anyone hurt you?”

Kassandra shook her head. “No. No one hurt me. I can’t handle a lot of people looking at me. I ... it’s pathetic.” She lifted her cup back to her lips. “I’m sorry. I’ll be all right.”

“Pah, it’s no trouble.” Greta peered at her again. “Fear is a funny thing, and not something easy to control.” She turned to Cian. “Lodan could see she was frightened, and he did nothing?”

“He wasn’t there, but the guards said it was on his orders,” Kassandra said.

“I’ll have another bed set up in here. You’ll sleep with me tonight.”

Kassandra cupped her drink, letting the last of its warmth thread through her fingers. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

If Lodan came for her tonight, she was afraid she’d reveal exactly how much he’d hurt her, and she didn’t want to let him know. If he could still treat her as an enemy, she’d do the same.

Tonight, she would remember why she hated him. Tonight, she would escape.

24

Lodan ran his finger along the map, tracing the route of the road north of Argos. “You’re certain they said they’re going north?” He and Xander sat with Leader Ambrose around a gilded table in Leader Ambrose’s palace of a home. Paintings and sculptures stuffed every square inch of the place, and it looked like a gold mine threw up, not just on the table they sat at, but on the walls, the painting frames, and the chairs.

“They said they were going to the fortress up north near the Dorian mountains.”

“We have no Sardi fortress on our maps.”

Ambrose waved his hand. “It’s old, and it wasn’t built by the Sardi. It comes from the time when Anatolia was new.” He gestured toward a sculpture in the corner made from light stone. Not pristine or shiny, it had caught Lodan’s eye first when he entered the room. The head was missing, but it was clear the sculpture was of a winged messenger, and even from across the room, he could see the skill in detailing the feathers, and the tunic the figure wore looked like it truly rippled in the breeze. “This entire area is built around old ruins. We find some old stuff sometimes when we dig new homes. Usually, I sell them to the Dorians, but this one I kept.”

Lodan glanced at Xander. “You trade with the Dorians?”

Leader Ambrose shrugged. “We see them from time to time, and we learned they love antiquities. They pay in true Dorian gold.”

That explained the room, then, yet this was the first he'd ever heard of the Dorians mingling with southern Anatolia.

Another pang twisted in his chest, and he rubbed it. For the past hour, something felt off, and it wasn't only this sad sack of a city leader and his lies. His chest hurt, and he kept tensing up in expectation of a fight, yet he sat in a meeting with an elder statesman, without a reason to believe a threat was present. He hadn't even worn his armor because he wanted Argos to know they came in peace—well, peace as long as they weren't helping the Sardi.

“Do the Dorians meet with the Sardi?”

During their entire conversation, Ambrose's eyes would dart away. They did so again. He was either withholding information or lying outright. “I'm not sure.”

Damn.

If the Dorians decided to enter this war to aid the Sardi, there could be years of fighting still ahead of them. “Can you set up a meeting with me and their leader?”

Ambrose pushed back from the table and paced over to the window. “We've survived this war by staying out of it. Some of my people did choose to fight, on one side or the other, but I worked hard to keep the wolves from sacking our beautiful city.”

Xander slammed his palm on the table, making Lodan's untouched tankard of wine wobble. “You mean you're lurking on the fringes, waiting to see who will win Anatolia.”

Lodan caught his eye and shook his head a fraction. A power play wasn't the right way to manipulate this leader. A little flattery and this man would give them what they wanted.

“No, he put his people first, like a good leader does,” Lodan said. Or a selfish one who didn’t want his hoard of gold looted and taken.

Ambrose twisted around, his brows shooting up. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Your people are the people of philosophy. Intelligence. Think this through. The Sardi are currently on the run, and Anatolia belongs to me. I will win whether I meet with the Dorians or not. When I do, I’ll be poised to give those who helped me whatever they want.”

Ambrose’s expression turned shrewd. “And if I ask for something now?”

“What do you want?”

“The Sardi princess.”

Shooting to his feet, Lodan’s hands tightened into fists. “You want the princess?” The thought of someone else near Cassandra made him want to rip this statesman in two.

“I scented her, and she isn’t bonded to you.” Ambrose leaned against the windowsill. “She was supposed to be my bride before the war. I’m no longer interested in making her my bride, since she’s obviously had many lovers now. But I could take a new concubine.”

“You scented her?” He turned to Xander. “When?”

Xander stood. “I brought the Omega into town, like you ordered. The people appreciated seeing how the Sardi are no longer in charge.”

“It was a nice touch,” Ambrose said. “It was delightful seeing a Sardi princess tied up and humiliated. Quite a pretty picture.”

Whooshing filled his ears. It had been his intention to take her from town to town and parade her exactly like Ambrose described, but that was before he knew Cassandra and the thought was impossible now. He wouldn't torment her like that.

He whirled on Xander. "I didn't tell you to bring her into town."

"Yes, you did." Xander's brow furrowed. "I asked if your plans for Argos were the same, and you said yes. You said the Sardi would go to Argos, too."

He vaguely remembered talking to Xander last night, but he hadn't said to march her through town. "My plans changed."

A whiff of Alpha lust plumed in the room. "Yes, a very pretty picture."

This Argos nobleman dared lust after Cassandra?

Charging across the room, Lodan snatched the ancient sculpture from its pedestal and threw it as hard as he could. It smashed into the stone wall, breaking into hundreds of pieces.

Eyes wide, Ambrose shrank back.

"Where is Cassandra now?" Something vicious clawed inside him. "I need to see her. Now." He stalked to a sculpture crafted entirely in gold and lifted it. Ambrose let out a small cry.

"Send a message to the Dorians, or one by one, I will destroy every single thing in your palace and take this gold and melt it for weapons for my army."

He barely waited for Ambrose to nod before tossing the sculpture to the ground and striding out of the room. Xander caught up with him at the front door. "What's

wrong?”

“Kassandra is not a prized animal to be paraded around and gawked at.”

Xander scoffed. “What do you want to do, then? Tell Anatolia you took a Sardi as a mate? Make her your queen? Another Sardi in power won’t go over well. It’s against everything we’ve fought for.”

His step hitched. “Let me figure that out. You make sure Ambrose sends a message to the Dorians and find out how he aided the Sardi.”

He stormed into the Myrdinian camp shouting, “Kassandra!” An unfamiliar feeling pounded in his chest, icy cold and fluttery. Even in his worst battles, the ones he wasn’t sure he’d win, he’d never felt this way.

Panic. It was panic.

Outside her tent, Greta leaned on Cian’s arm. “Ah, here he is,” Greta said, sneering. “The mighty Alpha. The savior of Anatolia.”

“Where’s Kassandra?”

“I gave her a sleeping draught about an hour ago. She’s asleep in my tent.”

He quickened his pace. He needed to go to her. To hold her and make sure she was all right. To be there when she woke up so he could fix this. He needed to fix this.

The Beta and the Omega moved to block the entrance. “No,” Cian said. “You don’t get to see her. Not anymore.”

“Get out of the way.”

“If your goal was to truly make her hate you, good job, you succeeded.”

Xander growled behind him. “Cian ...” His voice held a hint of warning.

The Omega’s eyes blazed. “And you.” He wheeled on Xander. “If your goal was to make it so that I’ll never want to sleep in your bed again, you’ve succeeded. The pair of you are disgusting. Parading a person around to serve your own agenda.”

Xander let out a hollow laugh. “Come on, all this outrage for a Sardi? Stop it, Cian. You saw what happened in the town square. People are rejoicing at finally being free.”

“Oh yes, I saw what happened,” Cian sneered at the Alpha warrior.

Rage surged through Lodan but it wasn’t Cian he was angry at. He should have realized what he was feeling in his chest. Bonded Alphas could sense what their mate was feeling, and even unbonded pairs could sense each other if strong emotions were involved. He’d sensed something was wrong.

Xander put his hand on his sword and glared. “We’re Alphas, we can tear the tent apart.”

“If that happens, I’m gone,” Greta said.

Cian nodded. “Me, too.”

Lodan rubbed his face. “It was a mistake. Cassandra wasn’t supposed to be taken into town.” He glared at Xander. “No one will be tearing down the tent.”

Cian crossed his arms, his expression still wary.

“Let me see her. If she’s asleep, I won’t wake her.” His hands fisted. “But I need to see her. I need to—” The iciness in his chest surged again. How was he supposed to explain his need to physically see her and make sure she was all right? That he needed to hold her, otherwise he might go mad?

Greta released Cian’s arm and hobbled forward. She studied him closely through narrowed eyes. Her brows rose, and her expression softened. “Interesting. Very interesting.” She turned back to Cian. “Since he asked, the least we can do is let him see her.”

Cian didn’t answer but stepped to the side, opening the path to the tent entrance. Lodan bounded forward. He tore open the flap and scanned the room.

A crumpled blanket lay next to a mattress on the floor. Greta’s bed was also empty, the blankets pristine and tucked in.

Kassandra was gone.

Kassandra leaned over Zephyr's neck, trying to pierce the screen of darkness ahead of her. She urged him into a trot, pushing as fast as she dared. The moon remained shrouded in clouds, both a blessing and a curse. A blessing when the long shadows of the city walls provided a nice cover for sneaking out of Greta's tent to the horses, but now a curse. She was on the road, and seeing more than a few feet in front of her was difficult.

The trickiest part of her escape was stealing Zephyr. First, she'd had to snag a bridle, then sneak past the men near the horses to put it on him. Luckily, many Myrdinians remained inside Argos, leaving fewer men in camp. All she could hope for was that the Myrdinians would expect her to be on foot and limit their search. By the time they discovered Zephyr gone, she'd have a strong head start.

How quickly could she get to Eretria? Two days? More? She'd stuffed a little food and a water pouch into a saddle bag, but it wouldn't last long.

She patted Zephyr's neck. "A few more hours, then we will find a good place to stop. I know you need a rest." They needed a place far off the road, with water and grass.

However, when dawn blushed the road with a faint pink hue, she pushed him on, wanting more distance between her and the Myrdinian camp. She hadn't slept much the past few nights, and weariness seemed to have settled in her bones, but she kept pushing.

As the light increased, the thicket of forest along either side of the road was less of an

imposing black wall. A narrow path, possibly a game trail, opened a small passage between two trees off to the right, and light glistened off something beyond. “Come on, boy.” She patted his neck. “Looks like water.”

She was right. A small spring bubbled into a gentle pool of water under the cover of a copse of pines. It was the perfect place to stop, and she tied Zephyr so he could drink and graze. “Is this the perfect place to rest, though?” The road wasn’t far away, and if she could see the water through the trees, others might, too.

Other than her trip to the temple and the trek with the Myrdinians, she hadn’t traveled much and certainly never on her own. “What’s safe? What isn’t?”

Zephyr flicked an ear but otherwise continued eating grass. She scanned the clearing. “Greta would like this place. Lots of wild oregano and valerian root.” A cool breeze rustled the branches, and she shivered. They both needed to rest if they were going to push on later. Pulling her cloak around her, she settled with her back against a tree.

“Well, the gods work in mysterious ways.”

Kassandra jolted awake. For a moment, she didn’t remember where she was. The day had grown dark, and a steady rain dripped off the trees onto her. How long had she slept?

She scrambled to her feet.

Soldiers dressed in black and gold flooded the clearing. The one in front walked closer and grabbed Zephyr’s bridle. The stallion’s ears shot back, and he snapped at the man’s arm. He laughed. “This horse never did like me.”

Kassandra’s mouth dropped open. She knew that voice. “Harl?”

He slid his helm off, revealing his fair hair. "Sister. It's been a while." He eyed her. "I can say you've looked better." His face was a little more weathered than she remembered, with lines around his arrogant mouth and pale eyes. "The gods smile on you, bringing you back to your people." He waved his hand. "You're home now. Safe."

She stood frozen. "It's really you. You survived the fall of Sarda City."

"Of course." His lips twisted into a grimace. "I left when the city was about to fall."

"But ..." Their home. He'd abandoned it and their people. "Didn't the city need you?"

His gaze grew icy. "They need me alive more. Alive I can gather an army to take it back." They'd never been close, and she couldn't say she had much affection for him, but right now, all she felt was repulsed. She shouldn't feel that way. He was her kin, her only kin. But how could he turn his back on their people and flee?

He peered around. "How did you get here? Did Ambrose help you? Where is he?"

"Ambrose?" What was he talking about? "You're in communication with Ambrose?"

He turned away. "Check the area. She can't be alone." He pointed at the spring. "Water the horses, we'll stay here tonight."

A soldier, a head shorter than her brother, stepped to his side. In a low, deep voice, he said, "We should head back, my lord."

"No, you see how the gods smile on me. Instead of having to charge into Argos to snatch my sister, she's here, ready to meet me."

"You were coming to get me in Argos? How did you know I was there?" It seemed

incredulous. Her brother detested her, she couldn't imagine him trying to fight his way into Argos to get to her, but maybe all this time, he really had cared for her in his own way.

He ignored her questions. "I want dinner, and I want to sleep." He sounded like a petulant child about to stomp his foot, exactly as he had while arguing with his tutors.

A few of the men around her brother peeled away from the group and began unloading their horses, but the shorter man remained in place. "Ambrose's message said the Omega was with the Myrdinians. If he sneaked her out of their camp, then they'll notice she's gone and pursue. We need to head back to the Dorians as soon as possible."

Ambrose told her brother she was in Argos, and he must have done immediately after he'd seen her at the fountain. He was still working with the Sardi and must have pigeons set up for communication with them.

And her brother was living with the Dorians.

Instead of feeling a bubble of hope that the Sardi still had allies and might be able to rally in this war, a stone lodged in her stomach. "The Dorians? You're working with the Dorians?"

Her brother snarled. "Quiet. Speak when spoken to."

Her face heated. He'd said something similar to her many times growing up, telling her Alphas didn't care what an Omega had to say, only what they could do on their back. She'd never listened back then and wasn't about to now. "I thought the Dorians didn't have anything to do with the rest of Anatolia?"

Her brother went to his horse, loosening its pack and sliding it to the ground. He

gestured toward the shorter man. “Take care of this. And you,” —he pointed at her— “make our dinner.”

Her brother was just as demanding and difficult as she remembered, but she wouldn’t get any information if she argued with him. She bowed her head. “Of course, I’d be happy to take care of you.”

He grunted.

Five Sardi soldiers sauntered back into the clearing, smiling at each other. One tossed a sword onto the ground in front of her brother. “We found an Alpha lurking in the woods near here. Most likely her traveling companion. He fought well, but we knocked him out. Gave him a good beating and tied him up by the horses.”

Kassandra gasped. “I told you I traveled alone. You attacked an innocent man.”

The same Sardi sneered at her. “Why would an innocent man be searching the woods?”

Her brother sniffed. “I told you she didn’t escape on her own. Is he a Myrdinian?”

One of the soldiers shook his head. “Doubtful. He wore no armor.”

It couldn’t be Lodan, he always wore his golden armor.

“Argosian?”

“His clothes are plain. He looks like a poor farmer, so he must be a Myrdinian.” The guard laughed. “They’ve ransacked cities and are still too stupid to wear anything but rags.”

“What are you going to do with this man?” she asked.

“You worry about dinner.” Her brother gave her his back and walked away.

One of the Sardi men dumped a hunk of dried meat and some bread at her feet, as well as a large pot. She hauled it all to the fire, where her brother sat polishing his sword. She laid the meat out, then lifted the pot into her arms. Her brother didn’t even glance her way as she walked to the spring.

The Sardi had tethered their horses near Zephyr, a few paces along the edge of the spring. She filled the pot with water, then started plucking oregano from the shore, slowly winding closer and closer to the horses.

The faint trickle of light from the fire revealed a large man lying on his side. The Sardi had tossed him partially in the water, with a burlap bag over his head. His clothes were muddy and torn, and she could see the size of him the closer she got. Only one Alpha was this large.

She bit back a cry and ran forward, tearing away his hood with one yank.

It was Lodan, blood streaming down his face from a gash to his forehead. He lay on his right side, his hands bound behind his back and his ankles tied together. “What are you doing here?” she hissed. She examined the rest of him. Everywhere looked bloodied and bruised.

“Looking for you.” The words came out garbled.

“How badly did they hurt you? Can you move?”

His gaze raked over her face. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” She touched his head, and he winced. “Where’s your armor? Your sword?” Seeing him injured made her stomach churn. Seeing him tied made her want to claw at everyone around her until he was free. The irony didn’t pass her by. He had no issue tying her up, but she couldn’t tolerate it when it was him.

“You left.” He stopped, panting for breath. “I didn’t stop to put on my armor.”

She stiffened. “I left for a good reason.”

“I didn’t—” He grunted and tried to move, struggling to free himself. “I didn’t want you marched through Argos.” He sagged back onto his side.

She stood. “We both know that isn’t true.”

“Old plan.” He grimaced, but his gaze locked on hers. “Plan changed. Xander didn’t know.”

Could that be true?

A bark of laughter floated on the air behind her, and she stepped back. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Of course he didn’t listen, he thrashed against his bonds. “No. Untie me now. You aren’t safe.”

She put her hand on his arm, and he stilled. “And what are you going to do? There are at least thirty men over there, maybe more. They’ll kill you.”

“You’d get away first. That’s all that matters.”

Her heart did a funny flip. “Don’t be ridiculous. I have a plan. One where we both

live. You need to trust me.”

He growled but stopped struggling. She wished she could loosen his bonds, but she’d already lingered near him too long.

She threaded back along the water’s edge, this time pulling up as much valerian root as she could find. When she reached the pot, she tossed it in, then dragged the pot back to the fire.

Adding the meat and bringing the stew to a boil, she watched her brother. He pulled a long, thin dagger from a holster at his ankle. Drawing out a small black pouch, he put on a leather glove. He dipped his fingers into the pouch and smeared a milky substance onto the blade.

“What are you doing?”

Her brother glared at her, and she expected to be yelled at for speaking to him, but he said, “This is hemlock. I keep this blade poisoned. It’s saved me a time or two.”

A poisoned blade.

Lodan had told her that Myrdinians believed in keeping honor in battle. A poisoned blade wasn’t honorable.

His gaze grew shrewd. “At least the Myrdinians didn’t kill you. All the better for me. The Dorians won’t meet with me without you, so if you were dead,” —he shrugged— “things would be more difficult for me.” He wiped more poison on his blade. “I considered finding an Omega who looked like you and lying, but the Dorians have traveled through Anatolia more than I expected. They may know your face.”

She dropped her head and stared at the boiling stew. So, he hadn’t come to Argos to

rescue her because he was concerned about her. He needed her.

Oddly enough, she didn't feel anything. Where her brother was concerned, she was empty inside. Everything Lodan said about the Sardi, the arrogance, the disdain for others, her brother showed in spades. Even as a child, he'd been cruel. To her and others. Keeping her voice soft and her neck bowed, she said, "Rather surprising that the Dorians would care about me."

He pursed his lips. "Perhaps they don't have many Omegas up in those shitty mountains." It was the exact same expression he'd wear when she'd discover her toys broken and he swore to her he had nothing to do with it.

He's lying. But what about? Did he know why the Dorians really wanted to see her?

His smile turned cold. "Ambrose's letter said you were trussed up like a partridge in the center of Argos. What exactly have the Myrdinians been doing to you, dear sister?" He wrinkled his nose. "Well, we'll keep that information from the Dorians. Let them think you're still a virgin when I offer you to their leader." He shook his head. "My sister with one of the Dorians. How the mighty blood of our line has been polluted. Then again, we're only half-blood, I suppose it was to be expected. Father was going to marry you off to a non-Sardi because no decent Alphas would accept you."

Gritting her teeth, she stirred the soup more vigorously. Picking valerian root was one of her first tasks for Greta. The same thing Greta gave her yesterday to calm her after her walk through Argos. The healer told her a few things about valerian root, most importantly to be careful with the amount. Too much could put someone into a dangerously deep sleep.

Eat up Harl.

Her plan to drug the Sardi into sleep was originally only to help Lodan escape. But now she knew Harl only wanted her as a pawn in this war, too, she wasn't interested in remaining with him. Even if she hadn't always wanted to listen, she had still heard what Cian, Lodan, and the other Myrdinians had to say about the Sardi, and it was possible that a lot of things she'd grown up with, things she'd been told were true, weren't true at all.

While she hadn't had a Chiron to help her figure the world out, she had read his lectures, especially his teachings about thinking critically, about thinking for herself, and not assuming that things she was told were true.

It all led to one thing.

She wasn't staying with the Sardi. She would find her own way. A way that felt right.

It seemed to take forever for the meat to soften in the stew, and she kept glancing toward the water, knowing Lodan lay there uncomfortable and in pain. When she finally served the food, she pretended to eat but really poured hers onto the ground.

The valerian didn't take long to kick in. The first to succumb was her brother, who ordered the others to take first patrol and crawled into his tent. While all became drowsy, not all had gorged on the stew like her brother and would sleep as soundly. Still, it was the best she could hope for.

Kassandra rose. She waited for the first patrol to reach the woods, then sprinted for Lodan.

Another kick aimed for his ribs. Lodan twisted, drawing his knees up and deflecting the blow off his thigh. The Sardi warrior snarled and aimed again. Icy rage surged through Lodan, blocking out the pain. When he was fifteen, he swore he'd never be on the ground before a Sardi again.

The Sardi drew back a fist, aiming for his face, and Lodan tensed.

A crack shattered the air, and the Sardi groaned. The warrior took a step, wobbled, then toppled onto his face into the muck.

Lodan blinked the rain from his eyes. Holding a heavy branch, Cassandra stared down at the Sardi, her eyes wide. Never mind she'd swung a branch with enough power to down an Alpha, but she'd attacked a Sardi, one of her people.

Something shifted deep in his chest, pushing aside his rage. He kept trying to dismiss her, telling himself she was a spoiled Sardi, but she wasn't. She was Cassandra, and she was undefinable. "Impressive, Princess."

She still stared at the slumped figure. "Is he dead?"

"Probably not. It takes a lot to kill an Alpha."

She sniffed and walked over to the fallen man. "You would know." She knelt and patted the warrior's sides. "We need to move quickly, there are others who aren't asleep, either."

“Asleep?”

“I drugged them with valerian root.”

She’d drugged her own people.

Time slowed for a moment. Every inch of his body felt like one big bruise and chilly rain poured over him, but all he could think about was that she’d risked her life to do this. No one else would think of drugging an entire troop of soldiers, but she’d done it. For her supposed enemy.

For him.

“He must have a blade other than a sword,” she muttered. “I need to cut your bonds.”

“Check the thigh.” He clenched his jaw as he watched her grope the Alpha. Watching her touch another man was worse than a kick to the ribs.

She nodded. “Yes, here it is.” Extracting a dagger, she rushed over to him. To reach his wrists, she crouched against him and leaned over his hip. He curled around her as much as possible. Pain screamed up his side, but it was worth it to feel her against him again.

Sawing at the rope, she whispered, “How did they get you? Aren’t you the best fighter in Anatolia?”

“I was distracted.” A ripple of pain seared up his side again, and he flinched.

Her sawing paused. “You’re a mess. What kind of Alpha warriors attack a man tied up on the ground?”

“I’ve broken ribs before.” He sucked in air. “Will again.”

She hissed and sawed faster. “The ropes are wet, this is taking too long.” The bindings loosened a fraction. “How were you distracted, oh mighty warrior?”

Since discovering she’d gone, he’d been distracted in a way he’d never experienced before. He’d leaped onto Stone, only grabbing a sword when Xander shoved it at him as he rode out of camp. Thoughts of all the bad things that could happen to her had chased through his mind. At some point, he’d moved forward on instinct alone. When he stopped to let Stone rest, he swore he smelled her dainty orange blossom scent and charged after it. Too fixed on reaching her, he hadn’t heard the men in the woods or sensed their presence. “I thought I’d found you.”

His wrist bindings fell away.

Gritting his teeth, he rolled to sit up. Cassandra already knelt at his ankles, working the knife on the rope there. Slowly he stretched his arms. He opened and closed his fingers but couldn’t feel anything. His arms and hands were completely numb.

His leg bindings cut faster, and Cassandra tossed them aside after a few hacks of the blade. “Can you get up?”

“No choice.” He jerked his chin toward the fallen soldier. “Grab his sword to take with us.” Sucking in a breath, he pushed himself to his feet. The world tilted, and he swayed. They’d gotten a couple good blows to his head along with his ribs.

Sword angled awkwardly in front of her, Cassandra pressed against his side. “Lean on me.” As they took a step, she groaned. “Why do you have to be the biggest Alpha in Anatolia? Gods above you weigh a solid ton.”

He hissed out a breath. “You like that I’m big.”

She harumphed but didn't argue. Of course she didn't argue because he was right. Whenever she didn't think he was paying attention, she looked at him, and her scent thickened. He suspected it was because she liked what she saw.

The horses were only a few steps away, and she led him to a Sardi horse with four white legs. His Sardi horse. "I'll hold him so you can get on."

He raised a brow. "Afraid of horses, huh?" It hadn't taken him long to find the hoofprints indicating she'd left camp on horseback, and he'd realized she'd deceived him about that.

She ducked her head. "I lied a little about that. I hate lying. I'm sorry."

"Don't. I would've done the same thing."

Her chin jerked up, her mouth opening. "You would?"

"Clever. Don't let your enemies know your strengths." He put his hand on the horse. Instead of swinging its head back to try to bite him like it normally did, it nuzzled at him. "We can ride and get Stone. He isn't far to the south."

It wasn't easy, and his ribs felt like they jabbed his insides, but they got him on the horse.

Kassandra grabbed the bridle.

"What are you doing?" He shifted, trying to lessen the agony in his side. "Get on the horse with me."

She shook her head. "No, it will be better if I walk and save Zephyr's strength."

He pulled the horse to a halt. “I don’t ride if you don’t ride.”

She hissed, but a shout from the camp behind them rang through the air. “You’re such a stubborn idiot. Fine.”

They managed to pull her up on the horse in front of him. Gingerly, he circled his sword arm. The numbness was fading, but white-hot pain shot up his elbow. Not good. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her flush against him.

Kassandra urged Zephyr forward, and they rejoined the road, each strike of the horse’s hooves sounding like thunder on the hard dirt.

“How did you find the Sardi?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I didn’t try to meet up with them. They found me.” She stiffened. “They were looking for me.”

His hands fisted. “Why? How?”

“When you dragged me through Argos in ropes, the City Leader of Argos recognized me and told my brother where I was.”

It took him a moment to fully understand what she’d said. Icy rage punched through him, and he growled. His ribs screamed, but he barely felt it. He pulled the horse to a halt. “Your brother is back there?”

“Come on.” She tugged on the reins. “We need to move.”

All he had to do was turn around, and he’d finally have his vengeance. “Where’s the sword?”

She gestured at the saddlebags slung behind him. “I tied it on Zephyr.”

“We’re turning around.”

“What?” She gripped the reins tighter. “Absolutely not. We need to get you to safety.”

“Your brother—” He cut himself off, staring into the darkness. Rage scorched through him. He didn’t see the forest, or her. All he saw were flames. Dead bodies. Her brother standing over him fifteen years ago, laughing as everything Lodan loved burned to the ground. “He took everything from me.”

She put her arm over his, as if trying to hold him in place. “Even if I helped you turn around to attack my brother, how do you think you would do that? You have no armor, and you can barely move.”

“All I need is the strength for one blow.”

“And then you’ll die when the other warriors discover you. They aren’t all asleep.”

If he pursued her brother tonight, she was right. Most likely he would die, but he faced death in every battle. “Death is an old friend.”

“You’ll spoil all the work I did to sneak you out of camp.” Her voice was higher pitched, and the scent of her fear rose into the air. She trembled.

She was afraid. For him?

If he died, he’d leave her in the forest. Alone.

He needed to protect her. Take care of her.

A force stronger than his anger washed over him, melting the icy rage inside. He looked back over his shoulder for one long moment. “Our meeting will be soon.”

She clucked her tongue and urged the horse onward. Her arm remained on his, and he switched their positions, tucking her hand under his, then threading his fingers with hers. He really should stay quiet and spare his ribs, but some things needed to be said. “We need to talk about Argos.”

She tried to jerk her hand free, but he kept it in his. “Lodan, save your?—”

He growled, and pain stabbed his ribs, chasing the breath from his lungs. He took a beat, trying to find some relief. “My plan was to walk you through the cities.” He bent forward, sucking in another breath. “I wanted to show Anatolia the Blood Laws were only lies. That a Myrdinian could lie with a Sardi.”

She nodded. “You were clear about my role the first day you captured me.”

“Xander knew the old plan. He didn’t know I changed my mind.” Pain lashed up his side, and he grunted. “I didn’t want you paraded through Argos.”

A long pause. “You really changed your mind?”

“I don’t see you as my prisoner anymore,” he gritted out.

Silence stretched as he reined Zephyr off the road onto a game trail where he’d tied Stone.

Why wasn’t she saying anything?

“My brother wants me because he said the Dorians won’t meet with him without me being there, too.”

He growled, injuring the stab in his side again. “Why?”

“I planned to go to Eretria because I think I could have a safe haven there.”

The ice inside turned glacial, and his breath hitched. “No.”

She ignored him. “My brother won’t stop pursuing me if he needs me. And if he knows the people in Eretria are hiding me, he’ll treat them like he treated you tonight. Maybe worse.”

“Yes.” She was seeing the Sardi more clearly, something he’d tried to make her do since he first captured her, but it wasn’t as important as it had been.

She jerked her chin up. “I don’t want to be a pawn in this war. For you, or my brother. I want to decide what I do. Where I go.”

“Come home with me. Not as a prisoner but as my—” The word he wanted was on the tip of his tongue, but he didn’t say it. Couldn’t say it. “As a protected Omega like Cian.”

She didn’t say anything for a long time. “How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

He stroked his thumb along her skin. “Have I lied to you?”

A long pause. “No.”

“Come back with me.” This was all that mattered. “Stay with me.”

They reached Stone yet she still hadn’t replied.

She slid off Zephyr. “It will be too difficult for you to change horses. Stay where you

are.” She was right, his ribs got worse with every jolt, and changing horses wouldn’t be pleasant.

She untied Stone, swung up, and they returned to the road. The cloud cover thinned, and the road stretched before them like a dark river.

“I didn’t say goodbye to Cian,” she said, reining Stone to the south. “Perhaps I should return with you. At least to do that.”

“He would miss you if you left.” Their gazes met, and he felt a tug deep inside, as if she were pulling him toward her. “He would yearn for you.”

The dark hid her face, but he thought her expression softened. “We need to move as fast as you can.”

Riding through the night was torture. His side felt like it was on fire, but he clutched at it and rode on.

An hour or two before dawn, they slowed to a walk to give the horses a rest.

Kassandra reined closer. “You all right?”

“Talk to me. Distract me.”

“What about?”

“You’ve seen my past. Talk about yours.”

“My past?” At least five minutes passed before she continued, “Well, you know a little about my time in the temple.”

“What about before?”

“I was kept to the palace and the palace grounds most of my life. I met who my father wanted me to meet and when he wanted me to meet them. Otherwise, I was on my own a lot.” She sighed. “It was because I had visions. I was tainted. A disappointment.”

“He was a fool.”

She didn’t respond right away. “I think my father only intended to send me to the temple for a year, to try to make me listen to him and his wishes better, but he died, and my brother refused to bring me back.”

His hands tightened on the reins. Her brother. The shining King Harl. “You didn’t get along with your brother?”

She continued to look straight ahead. “He was ten years older than me, and he was the heir. We barely interacted. When we did, he wasn’t very nice to me. He felt his mother was the true queen and my mother was an impostor. An outsider. When I was five, he told me she was supposed to be a concubine. A mistress hidden in the shadows.” She lifted her chin. “And that I was really just a bastard and had no place in the royal family. Since my father never paid me any attention, it felt like he was right.”

The Sardi took whatever women they wanted all the time. They did treat them as concubines. But her father married her mother. “Outsider? How?”

“She was supposedly the most beautiful woman who walked Anatolia, and he said she had royal blood, but she wasn’t from Sardi territory. I’m not sure where she came from.”

Lodan growled low in his throat. “He wanted her, and he took her.”

She sniffed. “Similar to how you took me.”

She never tempered her tongue when she spoke to him. He enjoyed it. “Not anymore. You aren’t my prisoner any longer.”

They rode a moment in silence. “I don’t have much more to add about my past, but I am curious about yours.” She raised a hand. “But don’t talk. I’ll make guesses, and you can grunt or something.”

She guided Stone closer to his horse. “I know you play chess, but what else do you do? I’m going to try to guess.”

He responded with a low rumbling noise. It was the only noise that didn’t make his side throb.

“Let’s see, you hunt, and when you aren’t hunting, you’re hitting people with swords.”

He frowned and grunted. “Have to do those things.”

“You sure about that?”

He’d battled day and night for so long that warring had become his entire life. He prodded at his side. Still painful, but he could speak a little. “I like making things with my hands. And making things grow.” He stared at the forest, not seeing the swaying pines, he was picturing fields rich with dark soil.

Every day in the spring, he’d walk the rows, looking to see what plants had broken the surface to find the sun. There was a peace to it. A sense of connectedness. “You’d

say it's because I'm a Myrdinian and I'm supposed to farm."

There was a long pause. "No, I'd say it's tough to picture you without your armor. Or to think of your hands doing anything but holding a sword."

"I hold you."

"Your hands are very skilled."

Her hand had also gripped him exactly how he liked. His groin tightened. "And yours play the lute. What else do you like to do?"

"You really want to know? Don't you just want to know how I feel when I'm on my back?"

"I already know how you feel." He sucked in a breath, waited for the pain in his side to lessen. "When this war is over, and I've won, I want to know what you will do with your time."

She put her hand on her stomach. "Aren't Omega's supposed to only spend their time having children?"

His cock twitched. It was what he'd wanted, what he'd intended to use to prove the Blood Laws were gone, however, he'd barely allowed himself to think about a child. Their child. It had always been abstract. Take the Sardi princess. Bed her. Keep her locked away unless he needed her to prove to Anatolia things were different.

"Do you want children?" he asked.

Her shoulders slumped, and he wished he could see her face more fully. "Yes." She said it so quietly he barely heard her. "But I want my children to grow up in a place

where they know they're loved."

It was a simple desire. He'd had that. She hadn't. "And what does that look like? A palace? Servants? A doting Alpha who obeys your every whim?"

She scoffed. "You don't know me well."

He'd been working hard not to know her. Already his desire for her surpassed anything he'd ever felt before. It flamed higher each time he touched her. And his thoughts turned to her more than they should, considering he was tracking down the last remnants of the Sardi so he could bring Anatolia the freedom it deserved. "Tell me what you want, then."

She was silent for a long time, and he thought she wouldn't answer. "I hated palace life," she finally said. "I never knew what to say, and I was forced to sit and meet new people or play the lute for them. All the while, they're watching me, waiting to see if I'll fall down having fits or show why I'm the unwanted princess. No one says what they truly mean, and you can't trust anyone. Even my ladies-in-waiting were spies. I would never want that again." She glanced at him. "That's what you can expect when you become king and get what you finally want."

She didn't know him, either. "Things will be different."

She shook her head. "I want a simple home somewhere the air smells sweet in the spring and where I feel safe and happy. Where I can walk around without people thinking I'm brain-addled." Her shoulders rose and fell in a small shrug. "I grew crops at the temple. That was one of the only things I enjoyed doing there. So, I know what you mean about feeling good when things grow. I was proud when we ate things I'd grown, but I didn't have a clue what I was doing."

Once it might have been difficult to picture her digging in the dirt, but it wasn't

anymore. So far, she hadn't complained or turned up her nose at anything in camp. Or at any of the chores he'd assigned to her. She even seemed comfortable in the rough-spun clothes she wore. "Did your plants die?"

"No."

"Then you did all right."

She ducked her head and he thought he got a glimpse of a small smile on her lips, but it was impossible to tell in the dark.

"Tell me what you grew."

Over the next hour, as the rain lightened, they talked about planting, and she told him more about her life in the temple. She was sparse with details, but he could put an image together of the place. She wasn't allowed more than one blanket, so she was perpetually cold. Everyone knew Omegas ran cold, and Alphas ran hot. Sarda was in a warm climate, where they barely got a frost, even in winter. The cold would have been especially difficult for her to bear.

He didn't think she'd gotten enough to eat, either. If the point was to make her more dedicated to the temple goddess, he didn't think it worked.

He stared straight ahead for a long moment.

She really had been a prisoner her entire life.

He pictured her alone in her room, and anger replaced discomfort. How could her father, her brother, abandon her like that? Because she had visions? She was vibrant, clever, and interesting. Sending her to a place like the temple was condemning her spirit to a slow death.

Her brother would pay for that, too.

It didn't feel that long before they crested a hill, and the lights of Argos twinkled through the forest. A Myrdinian patrol galloped toward them. "Halt."

He raised a hand. "I'm back."

"Lodan?"

"He's hurt. Inform Greta and tell her to get a hot bath ready." One of the men wheeled back around and charged back to camp. Interesting that they'd obeyed her without a word from him. He didn't even mind.

As they entered camp, Xander rounded a tent at a fast clip. "What happened?"

Kassandra dismounted. "He needs healing. He can't talk right now."

Xander stared at her. "How did he get hurt? What did you do?"

Lodan swung off his horse, his knees almost buckling when he hit the ground. Xander leaped forward and grabbed him, putting one of Lodan's arms around his shoulders. Every inch of his body screamed in pain, but he turned to Xander. "Kassandra joins us as our second healer." Every word hurt. "Not a Sardi. Not a prisoner."

Kassandra grabbed his other arm. "For the gods sake, you can discuss this later. We need to wash his wounds and see how badly he's hurt."

They helped him into his tent, where a copper tub was already in place. Several Betas poured jugs of steaming water into it, and Kassandra and Xander helped him step into the tub.

As Kassandra stripped his shirt off, Greta entered, an assistant behind her carrying her box of treatments. Greta pointed next to the tub. "Put the box there." She eyed him. "Did Kassandra beat you up because of how you treated her?"

"The Sardi attacked him in the woods," Kassandra said.

"How did the Sardi get anywhere near him? Where are they? Are they a threat?"

"About thirty of them. Fifteen miles to the north. The king is with them." He leaned back in the tub. "They didn't pursue." He nodded toward Kassandra. "She poisoned them."

Xander's eyes widened.

"Send a patrol north anyway."

Xander nodded, turned, and rushed from the tent.

Kassandra grabbed a clean cloth and dabbed at the wound along his brow. He flinched.

"I know," she said in a low, cooing voice, one he'd never heard from her before. "I'll take care of all this, and you'll feel better."

He looked at Greta's assistant. "Get dry clothes and a bath for Kassandra." He grimaced, grabbing his side.

The Beta whirled away, and Kassandra frowned down at him. "I'm fine."

"No." He was getting her out of those sodden clothes.

She finished mopping up his face and strode to the table where water, wine, and food stood stacked. She picked up a jug of water and returned to his side. “Drink.” She held the water to his lips herself.

Greta joined them at the tub.

At least Cassandra hadn’t removed his pants—he didn’t need Greta seeing him naked. When Greta scrubbed at the nasty gash on his sword elbow, Cassandra frowned. “I’ll treat him.” She handed him the water jug and took the cloth from Greta. “He’s used to my touch.” She edged the other healer out of the way.

Greta cackled. “I hate treating bonded Alphas. I have to deal both with him and his Omega.”

At the same time, he and Cassandra said, “We aren’t bonded.”

“Right. Because unbonded Alphas pursue a runaway Omega like the world will end.”

Kassandra pulled at the neck of her cloak. “Look. No bite.”

Greta shrugged and bent to her tinctures. She pulled a few out. “Apply these to the worst bruises.”

Kassandra nodded. “How quickly will he heal?”

Greta shot her a sly grin. “Alphas heal very fast and bonded Alphas even faster.”

Kassandra huffed and wiped at his chest, removing dirt and muck from more wounds. Dark bruising was already visible underneath. “I was told bonding made an Alpha weaker.” She paused. “Actually, they said bondmates made an Alpha weaker.”

Greta snorted. “No. Both Alpha and Omega benefit from bonding. I’ve seen it in healing, but I’ve heard they both benefit in other ways, too.” She shrugged. “I don’t know details about that, though.”

Kassandra worked over his torso, and the scrapes and cuts stung as she cleaned them, but it was also soothing to have her near him like this. She kept making small, calming noises in her throat, and he sank back into the tub.

He barely noticed when the Beta returned with the things he’d ordered for Kassandra, or when the Beta and Greta left.

“Can you stand? We need to get your pants off.” Her face turned pink.

He pointed at her clean clothes and the jug of water. “You change, too.”

“I’d have to get in the tub with you.”

Exactly. And she’d be naked. “Yes.”

She let out a long sigh. “Keep your hands to yourself.”

He rolled his shoulders. His ribs still ached, but the warmth had helped his arms, and they felt a bit better. Gripping the side of the tub, he slowly rose.

Without looking at him, Kassandra peeled off her cloak, then her shirt and pants. She shivered violently and snatched the jug of hot water.

He growled, then instantly regretted it as his ribs shrieked in protest. “Get over here. Let me warm you.” He should have demanded she change the instant they arrived.

He put a hand on her waist and helped her into the tub.

They stood staring at each other for a long moment. He gently plucked the jug from her hands. Taking care, he slowly poured it over her shoulders. The water cascaded over her body, and another part of him rose to a standing position.

Tossing the jug aside, he grabbed a clean cloth and wiped away the flecks of dirt and grass stuck to her skin. “I’m supposed to be taking care of you,” she said.

“I won’t be comfortable until you’re comfortable.”

Confusion flickered across her face, and she ducked her head. Just as quickly, she snapped back upright, her face red. “You’re—” she pointed at his groin “—you have a cockstand.”

“You’re naked, of course I do.”

She shook her head. “Your entire body is battered and bruised.”

“Not that part.” He unclasped his pants and peeled them down his legs. His right knee was swollen, and it took a minute to work his leg free.

“I won’t apologize for running away, but I’m sorry you got hurt.”

He cupped her cheek, and she didn’t move away. “I would deal with much worse to find you.”

Her breath fanned against his arm. “You said Myrdinian Alphas are loyal.”

He’d said bonded Myrdinian Alphas were loyal, but the fact he wasn’t bonded to Cassandra hadn’t seemed to matter when he’d noticed she was gone. He’d reacted exactly like a mated Alpha. “And I said I would walk to the ends of the earth to make sure you’re safe.”

She stared up at him. “I rescued you. ”

“Perhaps you’re as loyal as a Myrdinian, too.” He lowered his head to kiss her, but she turned away, grabbing the soap.

She didn’t say anything as she scrubbed at her skin, then stepped out of the bath. Keeping her back to him, she put on her fresh clothes. That gave him a great view of her behind, and he thought of her on the bed on all fours, inviting him to mount her.

“All right, let’s get you dry and put the ointment on you.” She muttered under her breath as she blotted him with a towel, “Probably a few places needed stitches but they’ve stopped bleeding so I’m leaving it.” The white goop she rubbed on him felt like a cool balm, dulling the pain in his ribs a bit more.

Working thoroughly, it took her a while. He wanted her to fuss and touch him as much as possible, so he tried not to flinch when she hit the sore spots.

Things had shifted between them, and he wasn’t quite sure what to do next. He had the odd feeling that he had to ... woo her. Before, it was about seducing her, showing her how much she wanted him despite all her arguments. Because of all her arguments. Now, that wasn’t enough.

He needed a new strategy. One to win her heart.

Kassandra wiped a bead of sweat from her brow and gave the arnica cream another good stir. It was a small fire without much heat, but she was still hot. Ever since she woke up this morning, she'd been hot, which was rare for her since they'd traveled so far north into the colder weather. "I need to get a little air," she said to Greta, pulling the small copper jar from the fire and bringing it to the table where the healer laid out the medicines she was working on.

Greta examined the cream and gave it a curt nod of approval. "Going to go look for Lodan again?"

"I don't go out looking for Lodan." Kassandra paused. Maybe she did look for him.

Two days had passed since they'd returned, and Lodan had named her one of the camp's healers. She was completely free to come and go as she pleased, with no hulking Myrdinians at her heels all the time, however she hadn't altered her schedule much. When she wasn't tending to Lodan, who was the worst patient in all of Anatolia, she helped Greta in the healer tent, exactly as she had in the evenings before.

Greta was right, though, she did scan the camp constantly for him, letting out a small sigh when he was near, as if something inside could finally relax. She kept telling herself it was only concern about his injuries, injuries he'd sustained going after her, but deep down, she knew it wasn't because he was healing fast. Already he walked as if he'd never broken a rib. "He needs to rest more."

Greta shrugged. “That one will never rest. He’s haunted, and until he defeats those demons, he’ll never know peace.”

“Demons?” Lodan certainly hated the Sardi, and he’d shared his hatred of the Blood Laws, but she wouldn’t describe either of those things as demons. “Do you know what haunts him?”

“He’s never told me, but I have an idea. And no,” —she held her hand up— “I’m not going to share.” She peered at Kassandra in the odd way she had, as if she saw right through her. “When the time is right, you’ll see who he truly is.”

Kassandra sniffed. “Well, I’m going to go find him and bribe him to play chess again.” Since they’d returned, the only times she could get Lodan to rest was to tempt him with a chess game. They still made bets when they played, but her bets weren’t for freedom, and his were for her to tell him things. Silly little things, like her favorite fruit and her favorite flowers.

It was strange. For so long he’d used his touch, or her touching him, to weave a sort of spell around her. Now he was using words, which might be just as effective because she liked talking to him. He also told her what was going on in camp while they played. After finding Ambrose hiding in Argos, he’d removed him from power, and no one in Argos seemed upset by the change. And he’d sent a message to the Dorians and was waiting for a reply.

All he’d done was talk with her. No demands to touch him. No demands to kiss him.

And now all she could think about was his mouth on hers again. His kisses were like him, powerful and demanding, yet also surprising at times, like when they gentled, as if memorizing the shape of her mouth. She couldn’t stop thinking about it, especially today. She could almost taste him on her tongue, smell his lingering scent on her shirt. Her skin. She tilted her head, drawing her nose closer to her shirt, and inhaled

deeply. Another pulse of heat washed through her, and she fanned herself. “It’s hot today.”

Greta walked to her side. “Look at me.” Her cool fingers gently gripped Cassandra’s chin, and she moved her head slowly from side to side. “I haven’t treated many Omegas since I specialize in mopping up Alphas, but ...” She frowned, and limped back to her table. “Come here, I think you’re going to need this.” She reached into her box of medicines and grabbed a small packet wrapped in leather. “I picked this up in Argos for you.”

Kassandra joined her. “What is it?”

“It prevents conception.”

Kassandra’s face flamed with even more heat. “I don’t need to worry about that.”

Greta rolled her eyes and leaned on the table. “Don’t be coy. The two of you aren’t only playing chess together.”

“That’s not it.” Her face grew hotter, and she wiped at her brow again. “I don’t go into heat.”

“Lodan mentioned you said something like that. You sure about that? Because it’s colder out today than it has been. Not warmer. Have you been feeling off at all? Uncomfortable?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m just hot. And as for Lodan, I’ve been taking strobile to help with things.” She bit her lip. She’d said too much. Greta would certainly tell Lodan what she’d said. Then again, if she was a free Omega, who cared if she was taking something to prevent bonding.

Greta's brows shot up. "Strobile. Really?"

She nodded. "Yes. Cian had some."

"Do you know what strobile does, girl?"

"It suppresses an Alpha's impact and prevents bonding."

"Yes, but it's a bit more complicated than that."

"What—" Another blaze of warmth swept over her, this time so strong her knees buckled, and she crashed into the table. Jars and vials tipped over.

Greta grabbed her arm and helped her into a wooden chair. Shoving the leather packet into her hand, she said, "You'll need this. Let me go find Lodan, it's his lucky day. His Omega is in heat."

Kassandra bent over. Her entire body felt like it was on fire, with an ache throbbing deep inside. An ache spread through her similar to hunger or thirst, but with an edge of pleasure uncoiling wisps of need between her legs.

This was impossible. This didn't happen to her.

She opened her palm and stared at the leather pouch. When he captured her, Lodan told her he wanted her to bear his child, but since then, he'd given her freedom, and things had changed. Having his child bound her to him forever. Bound them in the exact way he wanted. Whether he paraded her around Anatolia or not, she would still be a representation of the Blood Laws falling. A Sardi at his side he could still use at will.

Another wave flashed through her. It burned deep inside, a heat that needed

something to cool it. She knew what she needed.

She rubbed her thighs together and gasped. The sensation was incredible, as if feeling pleasure there for the first time. The world around her turned fuzzy, and she slumped forward, panting.

She opened the leather pouch, knowing what she was going to do.

She had no idea how much time passed, she wasn't aware of anything until the scent of cedar and leather wafted through the tent. Her chin shot up. Lodan.

He dropped to a knee in front of her, one hand cupping her cheek.

"Lodan." She threw her arms around his neck and clung to him, burying her head into his neck where his scent was strongest.

"I've been waiting for you to finally stop fighting how much you want to touch me, but this feels a little like cheating." He scooped her into his arms and turned to the Beta, Carl. "You, get cheese, bread, dried meat, and those figs and apples I bought and stack them outside my tent. Also, I need wine and water."

Figs and apples. She'd told him those were her favorite.

Cool air kissed her skin as Lodan carried her out of the healer's tent. She nibbled at his neck. "It's you. Only you. No other Alphas smell good. I never wanted any of them." She was babbling, unsure if she even said the words aloud.

He groaned, and his steps quickened.

She flattened her palm over his chest and caressed along his collarbone up to his broad shoulder. "You were right before, I do like that you're so big."

He swore. “You keep talking like that, and I’m going to go into a rut. It’s better for us if I don’t do that.”

The ache inside squeezed, driving pure pleasure through her. “It might be better for us if you do.”

He shouldered his way into their tent and was at the bed in two strides. Her back hit the blankets and he was on top of her a second later, his mouth claiming hers.

Yes. Oh yes. She clawed at his armor, wanting his skin. “Lodan. Alpha.”

He froze, then slowly drew back. His golden eyes were dark, more the color of amber, with his pupils already wide. “As I first started battling across Anatolia, the people named me Lodan.” Their gazes locked. “In here, call me by my true name—Vasick.”

“Vasick.” She leaned forward and kissed him gently. Slowly, she traced the scar on his upper lip with her tongue.

He shuddered. “Not touching you has been torture. Far worse than the beating.”

She tugged at his cuirass, and he reached under one arm to undo the lacing. With a shrug, he tossed it to the ground. She shoved his shirt up his chest, her hands skating up his warm skin. The ache intensified, and she whimpered. “I need you.”

“I know what you need.” He grabbed the neck of her shirt and in one yank, ripped it in two.

Her fingernails dug into his chest, and she mewled. She’d never made such a desperate sound in her life. She didn’t care, she needed him to help her. To soothe the ache. His seed was the balm.

His mouth landed on her breast, and she jerked. “Ah. Oh gods above. That’s so good.” She was so sensitive. Every lap of his tongue, every circle, made her even more mad with desire.

In the back of her mind, she knew she was in baby-making mode, her breasts primed for Alpha stimulation, but she didn’t care why she felt like this, only that she did. She wanted more.

Lodan reared back to remove his greaves and step out of his pants, and Cassandra shimmied out of her own. She touched her breast, still slippery from his mouth, and rolled the tip between her fingers. Falling back on the bed, she spread her legs.

Lodan stretched over her, his chest heaving. “You want me to take care of you. Only me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. You.”

“You do have a choice.”

She ran her hands up his stomach, skimming over his ribs because they were probably still sore. “What choice?”

“You can tend yourself through your heat. I’ll stand guard and get you food and water. I won’t ...” He looked down at her, trailing his gaze down her body. The muscles in his arms flexed as he fisted the blankets. “I won’t bed you.”

She pushed at him, and he let her roll him so he was on his back. Cassandra straddled his hips, and slowly, slowly dragged her sex over his length. She was so slippery, so wet. So ready. “Should we test if you really can resist me? Maybe have you read poetry?”

His big hands circled her waist. “I won’t be able to read a single word.” He sucked in air. “Shit. You’re a free Omega. I want you to know you have a choice.”

She lined herself up. “My choice is to have you deep inside me.” With one dip of her hips, she took him inside. “Alpha,” she whispered, her head falling back. She sank down.

He filled her and let out a strangled groan. His hands tightened, holding her in place. He pushed upward with his hips, driving himself in even farther, and put his hand between her legs.

She cried out so loud she was sure it would carry through camp, but she didn’t care and moved her hips in rhythm with his fingers.

He crooned to her. Soft. Intimate. Only for her. She was swamped with need, spinning so rapidly with her desire, she couldn’t make out what he said, only the soft way his words rose and fell, caressing her with speech.

The ache inside grew stronger, a lustful, needy thing demanding relief. His fingers stroked faster, and she shot over the edge. Despite the pleasure clawing through her, the ache only deepened.

“Vasick, I need more.”

“My name on your lips is like one of the goddesses has come down and blessed me.” He flipped her onto her back. He withdrew, then surged back inside. His pace became frenzied, as if he ached inside, too. They rolled across the bed. She clawed at his back. He pinned her hips and slammed deep. The bed creaked and groaned, if it wasn’t so well made, they would have shattered it into splinters.

This was exactly what it was supposed to be like. Her Alpha on top of her. Holding

her. Pushing into her like he'd die if he didn't have her. He really was her Alpha. The only one she'd ever wanted. The only one she may ever want. His scent swirled around, thick and potent. "I see you. I really see you."

He released a guttural cry and pinned her hips harder to the bed. A telltale thickening caught at her entrance, and he ground himself deep, letting his knot rise to bind them together. She wove her fingers in his hair and drew him down to her.

He groaned in her ear, then nipped at her neck.

With a throb, he came.

The minute his seed entered her, the ache inside cooled. It was both relief and pleasure, a tingling sensation that only made her shudder into a stronger release. It rolled on and on, wringing every bit out of her until she thought she might pass out from the pleasure.

His mouth found hers, and they kissed as he remained in place deep inside her.

She'd never felt anything like this. Pleasure, yes, but it felt like something much deeper. Much more.

She entwined herself around him, her entire body quivering. What was he doing to her? How was she supposed to recover from this? She wasn't sure she ever could because right now, the truth about what she felt for him blazed through her.

Every muscle ached, but despite the exhaustion after two days of nonstop rutting, she felt better than she may have ever felt in her entire life. Lodan—she hadn't quite gotten used to calling him Vasick—had been the perfect partner. Most of the time, it was a haze of need, pleasure, and her body insisting he fill her again, but a few things stood out clearly. Like the times he fed her by hand, whispering how he handpicked

every piece of fruit earlier in the week especially for her, and even though she had no appetite for food, she still ate because he'd chosen it for her. She fed them to him as well, so when she kissed him, he tasted of fig and Alpha.

She also remembered the time he took her slowly, so achingly slow her entire body was strung like a lute, taut and needy. He hadn't demanded she look at him, but she had, their gazes entwined the entire time. She'd almost tipped her head to invite him to bite her neck and bond with her. Almost. She was lost in her heat, but not so lost she didn't hear the voice deep inside whispering how a future with Lodan could never give her what she truly wanted.

They lay facing each other on the bed, Lodan's arm slung over her waist, holding her close. He let out a small, soft purr, and Cassandra closed her eyes and drifted off.

But she didn't fall into sleep.

The ground tipped, pouring her into a vision. She struggled. Why couldn't she fall into the oblivion of a dreamless sleep? Why did she have to have this vision now? It didn't matter, they didn't come by invitation.

The darkness lifted, and a charming town spread before her with rolling fields full of crops behind it. The sun was low and hazy overhead, giving the place a golden glow as if the sun worshipped this one stretch of land. A river snaked through, and tall poplars punched into the air in the funny, narrow way they had.

A woman, probably around twenty years old, reached out and ruffled a boy's dark hair. They stood before a stone house with a thatched roof. A dirt road, wide and well-tended, rimmed by a low fence wound beyond it. Sunflowers filled the yard, interspersed with low lavender bushes.

The woman was pretty, with warm brown eyes and a kind smile. The boy was on the

cup of manhood, with the stretched look of having grown a great deal in a short amount of time. He grinned a cheeky, lopsided smile, and his golden eyes shone in the light.

Lodan.

Almost unrecognizable, but not because of his youth. It was because he smiled.

“Pa’s going to be mad if you don’t get the last of those tubers in,” the young woman warned.

“I’ll do it later. Xander and I are going fishing.”

Normally, Cassandra was a passive observer in her visions, but in this one, she could feel what Lodan felt. He was content. Happy. A peace rolled through him in a way she didn’t think she’d ever experienced herself. It was wonderful. Blissful. When the feeling faded, it made her want to weep with longing.

The image changed.

Burning. Ash. Screams. A soldier clad in bright armor yelled as he stalked past. Lodan ran into the central square full of people. More soldiers marched through the cobblestone streets.

She’d seen this fire before when she was fifteen years old standing with her father in front of most of Sardi City.

Her brother strutted amid his guards, his armor perfectly clean and sparkling. “You Myrdinian scum.” He scanned the crowd until his gaze snagged on Lodan’s sister. Harl pointed at her. “You’ve all disobeyed for the last time.”

She staggered forward, clutching one bloodied arm against her chest. “You attack the innocent because I found a bondmate the Sardi didn’t approve of?”

Harl sneered. “Myrdinians defy the Blood Laws all the time, but we’ve overlooked it because the unions have created strong lines regardless. Not anymore.” His gaze hardened. “You weren’t to take a mate.”

She scoffed, and Cassandra could truly see the resemblance between Lodan and his sister now. They both had a regal air, something that could never be taught. “You think I’d eagerly become your concubine? You think that’s a better choice?”

Harl’s laugh was cold and cruel. “See, that’s the problem with your kind. You think there’s a choice.” He waved his hand.

Lodan’s panic, his terror, and his anger surged through her so strongly she couldn’t breathe. Cassandra struggled. She needed to wake up. Right now. Something bad was going to happen. In the same way the air stilled before a brutal storm, this scene bristled with expectation. Dread.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t wake.

Harl pointed with his sword and shouted to the soldiers. “This entire village gets destroyed. Kill them all. Omegas too. We’re stamping out their rebellious genes once and for all.” Harl turned his back and walked away, calling over his shoulder, “A pity. The Omegas here are a lot of fun.”

Lodan roared and launched himself at Harl. The prince seemed stunned for a moment, frozen in place, and Lodan sank his fist into the side of Harl’s face.

It was probably the first time her brother had ever been struck. In all the sparring sessions she’d watched with his tutors, they’d never engaged him in more than a

mock duel. But this would never be a fair fight. Not with Harl having an army at his back, and not a full-grown Alpha to Lodan's half-grown one. And her brother wore armor, Lodan had nothing.

Lodan's sister screamed and ran toward them, but the soldiers surged, blocking her.

The beating that followed was brutal. Clawing against the vision pinning her in place, Kassandra was forced to watch her brother attempt to beat Lodan to death. Her throat clogged with tears, and she gasped for breath.

The scene darkened, loosening its hold on her, but before it faded, Harl smashed his foot down on Lodan's face. Now she knew the origin of the scar that bisected his lip.

"Wake up."

She gulped in air, and was back in the tent, cradled against Lodan's chest, his arms wrapped tight around her.

"All right," Lodan whispered. "You're all right." He sounded relieved. "I couldn't get you to wake." Purring rumbled from his chest, and she sagged into him. His warm hand rubbed up her back, soothing her.

With a jerk, she launched herself out of his arms and scrambled backward. Her entire body felt coated in ice, as if she'd never get warm again.

Lodan reached for her, but she scuttled back farther.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What did you see?" The calm expression drained off his face, and he leaped off the bed. "Are the Dorians going to attack?"

She shook her head and wrapped her arms around herself. She managed to whisper,

“I didn’t see anything about the future.”

Lodan went still. He stood beside the bed, and she scanned his body, taking note of every scar. Which ones were from her brother?

Her gaze jerked up to his face. “I saw how you got your scar.” She lay a finger on her lip, mimicking the position of his. “The image I got when I was ten, the one of a village burning. It was your village I saw.” She swallowed, and her throat was like sand. “Tonight, I saw exactly what happened. I saw you.” Her voice dwindled to barely a whisper.

He didn’t say anything.

More tears threatened, burning the back of her throat. They may have been running down her face, but she was too numb to feel them. “I understand why you’re fighting. Why you’re hunting down my brother and want to destroy the Sardi.” He—” she swallowed hard “—he killed your sister. And your parents, too.” It wasn’t a question. She already knew.

He ran a hand through his hair, and his gaze grew distant. “Yes.”

“How did you survive?” she whispered.

He didn’t look at her. “Xander and his family were having a holiday camping in the forest, so they escaped the slaughter. When the Sardi left, they searched the village for survivors and found I still breathed. I was on the brink of death for four days, unable to wake up, but Xander and his family took care of me, and they took me with them when they fled deeper into Myrdinia.” His hands fisted. “They snuck back and buried all the dead properly, even though they could have been caught and killed themselves. I wish I could have helped, but I was ...” His expression grew even harder. “I was unable to move for weeks.”

Tears blurred her vision. “I’m so sorry.”

“It took a long time, but my body healed.” He put a hand to his chest. “Inside though, something broke that will never be fixed. At least not until I hunt down the king and finish what I started. I will get my revenge. I will avenge them.”

Pain lashed through her like a whip. Sorrow and misery for him, and an understanding of how things really were between them. His hatred for the Sardi was all-consuming and never-ending. He may have softened toward her some, but she was still a Sardi. She always would be.

And she didn’t blame him for that. If their positions were reversed, she would feel exactly the same.

The problem was, though, that somewhere along their journey together, she’d stopped hating him, and after he’d asked her to return with him to camp as a free Omega, a slim, trickle of hope had bubbled through her that maybe, maybe, things could be different between them.

But now she knew that was impossible.

It felt like someone kicked her in the chest. “You should have killed me.”

He didn’t answer.

Her hand fisted the blankets, and her shoulders shook. “I’m so sorry. Both for seeing your memory, but also ...” Her words dried up. What else could she possibly say?

Lodan returned to her side, pulling her into his arms. He purred his soothing purr and tucked her into him.

She thrashed against him. “You shouldn’t be comforting me.”

“Stop.” He spoke quietly, but it was an order. An Alpha order.

She stopped trying to escape but couldn’t stop crying. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know my brother did that. That my people did that.”

One of his hands rubbed along her back. “I know. You’ve been sheltered from the real Anatolia.”

She drew back and swiped at her face, meeting his gaze. “How can you even touch me?” She bit her lip and looked away. “Everything I think is wrong. I’ve been wrong about my life. About my people. And I’m wrong about thinking sometimes—” She sucked in a sobbing breath. “Sometimes you may not hate me.”

“Kassandra—”

“I can’t be in here with you. Why would you even want me in here with you?”

A long silence filled the tent like a living thing, curling onto itself. Finally, Lodan said, “You didn’t come to my village and kill my family.” He put his hand under her chin and tilted her face to his. “I expected a spoiled princess, one I wanted to use to flaunt my victory over the Sardi. What I found was a woman who was abused by her family and shut away from the world. I’ve hoped you’d come to understand what the Sardi have really done, but I didn’t want it to be like this.”

“What I went through was nothing compared to what you did.” Her shoulders sagged. “Why are you being kind right now?”

“I’m not kind. I’m just stating the truth.” He shifted her in his arms, holding her more comfortably against him. “Let’s build your nest back up and get you back in bed.”

He was being kind, and that made it so much worse. “I’d rather have you yell and rage at me.”

He sighed. “My rage will find the right target.”

She waved her hand at the bed. “We can’t be together. You must see that.” Tears choked her throat again. “I can’t do it. Every time I look at you, I’ll think of my family murdering yours.” A sob welled up so strong it carried her away. All she could do was cry.

The vision played over and over in her head. His sister’s beautiful face in particular. Her life was crushed simply because she wanted a bondmate she loved instead of becoming a mistress to the king.

The cold reality of her place with Lodan crashed in on her. This was so much worse than being marched in front of angry villagers. Then, she’d felt betrayed, and hurt. This was grief. Mourning. Sadness at a loss of something she hadn’t realized she’d started to hold close to her. She’d been a fool to think she and the Warlord had something real forming between them. To think, when he’d kissed her, that it actually meant something.

Lodan rolled them both fully onto the bed, then pulled some of the sleeping skins over her. “We’ll discuss this more later.” He lay on his side, and he pulled her into him, his arm heavy over her. Then he started to purr. His long, slow purr.

She didn’t stop crying, but the horrible tight feeling in her chest loosened. Waves of drowsiness washed over her. She fought against it, but his purring and the warmth of his body were like a drug, lulling her to relax.

He might be able to calm her body, but he couldn’t calm her mind. The image of him as a young boy with that lopsided smile made her cry harder. That Lodan had died,

and he'd never come back.

Greta had told her to find the real Lodan, and she had. She understood the Warlord. Understood his battle. Understood why he was so remote and scary. However, she also understood there would never be a future between them.

She'd felt his true happiness back when he was a kid in his village. The wonderful, all-encompassing bliss. He deserved to feel that again. And that wasn't going to happen by being with her. It could never happen by being with her.

They needed to part because every time she saw Lodan, her heart leaped a little. Every time he touched her, she wanted to curl into him and demand he never stop. They had to part because she had a sneaking suspicion that blissful feeling he'd experienced was love. And the last two days in bed with him, she'd gotten awfully close to feeling it herself.

He deserved to feel that again. And she was never going to make him feel that way.

Xander reined up next to him. “We’re an hour away from the meeting spot, but there’s a complication.”

Lodan tensed, and Stone’s ears twitched. The Dorians had finally responded to his request for a meeting while Lodan lay with Cassandra during her heat. Their instructions were to proceed into the mountains to a meadow northeast of Argos, then follow a footpath to one of their villages. It was a parallel route to the one he’d taken while chasing Cassandra and one leading directly into the heart of the Dorian mountains.

They had been on the road for a day and a half, and Cassandra had slept the entire journey in the Omega caravan. He knew she needed sleep after their time together in the tent, but he needed to talk to her.

And tell her what?

Despite having thought of nothing else but trying to find the right words, he still didn’t know what to say. He didn’t hold her responsible for her brother’s actions, and he didn’t see a Sardi when he looked at her. But how did he see her? How did he see their future together?

If he took her as his mate, she’d always be the Sardi princess. Would his men accept her? Xander may have grown less suspicious of her, but he hadn’t accepted her.

One thing Lodan knew for sure, though. He never wanted her crying in his arms like

that again. He'd spend his entire life making sure she was never sad like that again. "What's the complication?"

Xander's gaze drifted to the Omega caravan next to them. "They said they'll only meet with you if Cassandra comes, too."

Lodan jerked upright, and Stone shied to the right. "What?"

Xander nodded. "Yeah. She has to come. If she doesn't, they won't meet with us. Ever."

"Did they say why?"

"Nope."

The Dorians had already demanded the meeting to be on foot inside their forest. Their territory. This was too much. This was Cassandra. "The Dorians told the Sardi they'd only meet with them if they brought Cassandra, too. What is this?"

"It's strange," Xander agreed. "When has a city-state demanded an Omega be present?"

"I don't like it."

Xander pointed towards the front of the procession. "The Dorian messenger is still here. Do you want me to cancel? We can turn west and pursue the Sardi."

He thought for a long moment. "If the Dorians are this serious about meeting her, I doubt they want to do her harm." Most likely they had other interests in mind. He growled deep in his throat. If they thought one of their males would be allowed to lay so much as a finger on her, they had another thing coming.

“I’ve heard rumors the Dorians don’t have many Omegas.”

It seemed Xander’s thoughts were running parallel to his own. “But they know her by name, and that concerns me. How’s that possible?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Lodan nodded. “I’ll ask her. If she wants to go, we go.”

After he’d woken her up, she told him she wanted to go. Now, they stood side by side at the edge of their new camp in the wide mountain meadow the Dorians had selected for the meeting place. Sometimes, after their first battle, young soldiers would go into a kind of shock where they struggled to process all the death they’d seen. He always sat with them and asked them to speak of home. Of whom they fought for. Usually, if he could get them talking, they would get better. Cassandra had the same look to her, her eyes blank and hollow looking.

Often when he closed his eyes to sleep, he saw the end of his family. He would never have wished for her to see it. Never. Not even when he cursed her stubbornness, clinging to Sardi lies and refusing to see the truth.

Reaching out, he said, “Take my hand.” After a moment, she slid her hand slowly in his. His fingers tightened around hers.

Better.

“Look at the men in camp.”

She bit her lip but did as he asked. Thoas waved at her, and Jason gave her a curt nod. “They think of you as the camp member who saved Thoas and his team. And the healer who helped Greta. You’re no longer a Sardi here.”

Her expression smoothed. “You really think so?”

He scowled down at her. “Am I the leader here or not? I don’t think anything. I know.” And he did. He’d watched his men all day and considered what they’d think if he took Cassandra as his own. While Xander might still be a hold out, everyone else seemed to like her. Even Jason.

He halted and closed the distance between them. Bending to her ear, he lowered his voice. “Maybe they’re wishing they were lucky enough to have an Omega like you. One who screamed her Alpha’s name with pleasure.” He shifted, searching for the right words. The kind of words that didn’t come easily to him.

He brushed his thumb across her cheekbone. Yes she had the fine golden hair of Sardi royalty, but how had he not noticed that her hands were rough from work? How she walked around in cast-off clothes without a care or complaint because she didn’t care about fancy dresses. “They see an Omega who wanted them to have better-tasting food. An Omega who plays the lute like an angel. Who chose, out of all the songs in Anatolia, a song about courage and battle. An Omega who has not once backed down against any enemy she’s faced, not even me.”

He tilted her chin up. “They see you, Cassandra.”

“Is that how you see me?” Her eyes searched his, and she seemed vulnerable for the first time since he’d known her. As if he could crush her with one word. And he probably could, but he wouldn’t. He smiled, and the muscles of his cheeks twitched, unfamiliar with the motion. “Yes.”

Her eyes widened, and she gasped. “You don’t smile.”

“No. And I don’t laugh either, yet I’ve done both with you in the past few days.” He jerked his head toward Xander and the band of warriors going with him into Dorian

territory. “Now hold my hand and walk at my side. You belong here. With me.”

Her hand squeezed his tight, and she nodded. She’d asked him, What do you want from me? At this moment, he knew he wanted her at his side.

He studied the dark forest ahead of them. Myrdinia was a land of open fields and lush river valleys. The forests there were nothing like these trees lurching high into the sky. “When we get into the Dorian forest, if I tell you to do something, you do it. Instantly. I don’t know what to expect.”

Her brow furrowed. “The Dorians have never attacked Anatolia.”

“True.”

“I’m good with a bow,” she said. “A small bow, one you’d probably give to young Alphas in training. Your larger bows are too hard for me to draw. If you have one, I can help.”

While he had a few archers in his army, they rarely fought with bows. Myrdinians preferred swords. “I’ll find you one later.” He squeezed her hand gently. “Even though I know you might decide to shoot an arrow at me instead.”

He was gifted with a small smile.

“Today though, with the Dorians, I need you to listen to me for once.”

She squeezed his hand back. “I’ll consider it.”

His lips curled for the second time that day.

Keeping her hand in his as they entered the forest, his other was ready to grab his

sword off his back and strike.

A narrow path, barely wide enough for one horse, led from the main road into the trees. It resembled a game trail and nothing more. They wouldn't have noticed it if the Dorians hadn't pointed it out as the road they needed to take.

The mountain forest was thick, and the trees a green so dark they almost seemed black. The air up here smelled different, too. It didn't have the warm, mineral smell of Myrdinia or the tang of the ocean from the land near Sarda City. This was pine mixed with the fresh scent of the earth after it rained.

Xander caught his eye and motioned with his hand—signaling he hadn't seen anything alarming yet. They were ready for an ambush in case the Dorians had chosen to join with the Sardi and this was a trick.

He scanned the trees. Nothing. He mimicked the signal back to Xander.

They rounded a bend, and two male Dorians stood beside the path. One light-haired and the other dark. The one on the left, his blond hair a bit long and—was it styled?—stared at Cassandra as if he'd never seen a female before. Both were big, well-muscled Alphas, but neither wore armor.

The tension in Lodan's shoulders relaxed a fraction. No one came to a battle without wearing armor.

The dark-haired one said, "When we approach the village, you'll remove all weapons." The Dorian lifted his arms, revealing no sword at his belt, although he could have blades hidden under his tunic. "Then you'll meet with our leader."

Lodan's men were all brawlers. When they first became an army, they hadn't had many swords, so they'd trained with pitchforks fastened into spears, and with their

fists. No other army, not even the mysterious Dorians, would have trained like that. If his men had to fight without their weapons, they would win. Except, he didn't think the Dorians were going to attack. He didn't get the sense of an ambush.

However, something still wasn't right. Why was Cassandra here?

The Dorian male staring at her dropped his gaze to where Lodan held Cassandra's hand, and he frowned. He muttered something to his companion, whose gaze flitted from Lodan to Cassandra. The dark-haired Dorian's expression hardened.

"We'll come, but the Omega doesn't need to join us," Lodan said.

"She joins, or there's no talk between us," the dark-haired Dorian replied, addressing Xander as he stood in the command position at the front. They'd played this role many times. Xander acted as the leader, giving Lodan the chance to observe. It didn't always work because sometimes those they encountered already knew about the Warlord and recognized his armor, but usually it did.

Xander raised a brow at him, a tiny motion few would notice.

Lodan tapped his index finger twice on his belt—the sign to proceed.

Xander nodded, and the group resumed walking into the forest. The farther they went, the more Lodan's free hand twitched toward his sword. The sensation of being watched prickled at the back of his neck.

He caught a slight glimpse of motion above him and scanned the boughs. The trees in this part of the mountain were massive, with walkways built in their upper canopy. Unarmed sentries watched the procession below.

Xander fell back into step with him. "I think there are a lot more Dorians than we

considered.”

Lodan nodded.

Like Cassandra had said, the Dorians had never attacked Anatolia. There had been skirmishes over the years, but only when the Dorians thought the rest of Anatolia infringed on their mountains. Even though Dorian territory was part of Anatolia, they were a kingdom unto themselves.

What was really known of them? They were fierce, had strange customs few people had witnessed, and didn’t allow strangers to enter their lands. At least, not until now.

His hand twitched again.

The path widened, revealing a town built into the mountain itself. Rock stairsteps laced up the side of the mountain face, leading to ornate doors of wood, each with a large, yellow knob in the center. It was impossible to guess the number of people living here. Those doors could be for a single home, or a passage into the mountain.

Homes built from wood surrounded a central square. He studied them out of the corner of his eye. The joists were like nothing he’d ever seen, each one interwoven as if braided. He didn’t have much time for woodworking, but he still studied techniques, applying a few of them at camp when he could, and he’d never seen homes structured like this. In other circumstances, he’d ask how they did it.

“Weapons off here,” the dark-haired Dorian said.

It took five minutes for him to remove all the blades strapped to him.

“You all right?” he asked Cassandra as they waited.

Her eyes were wide as she scanned the clearing. “This village is nice. Cozy.” While he still didn’t like the demand that she join them, he did like the change in her expression. She looked more like herself. And that made him feel better.

He rubbed his chest. They weren’t bonded, yet she was entwined with him in a way he didn’t understand.

Keeping Cassandra tucked against him, they followed the Dorians through the village. The main street appeared deserted, but when Lodan looked up, more Dorian women and children stood among the leaves in the huts built high up in the trees. It was the spying of the curious, not the bloodthirsty.

Inside a large, high-roofed building, a great hall stretched to a tall chair near a roaring fireplace. The chair was empty, but Lodan expected this was where the Dorian leader met with his people. A large, older man stood before the chair, built like a barrel with close-cropped dark hair and arms almost as large as Xander’s. Behind him was a tall, older woman, her dark hair worn in a long braid down her back. Her cool gaze lingered on Cassandra.

The large man nodded at them. “I’m Manix.” He gestured toward the blond escort. “This is Davos my eldest son.” He turned to the dark-haired male. “This is Ision, my youngest.” He stepped back and waved his hand at the woman. “This is Clara.”

Xander took the lead in introducing their group. No one reacted when he introduced Lodan. It wasn’t clear if they recognized him or not.

“As you can see, we wear no armor and carry no weapons,” Manix said. “Today is a day for talk.”

“Do you know why we sought council with you?” Xander asked.

Lodan studied the Dorians as Xander led the discussion and found Clara studying him back, her eyes narrowed. She wore a green dress with ornate stitching that hugged her figure and came up in a high collar that framed her face. She had the same far-seeing gaze his most battle-worn Myrdinians had—the eyes of a warrior.

Other than his sons, Manix hadn't explained who the other Dorians in the room were, and he'd assumed she was Manix's mate, but now ... he wasn't so sure.

"We aren't interested in engaging in the battles of the downlanders," Manix said.

"Good," Xander replied. "Then this meeting isn't needed. We aren't asking for your aid. All we ask is that you don't aid others, either."

Clara leaned over and whispered in Manix's ear. Lodan shifted. The sense of something being wrong pressed on him like a blanket.

He bent his head close to Cassandra's. So far, she'd said nothing, only watched what was going on around her.

He whispered, "I'm not an expert on clothes, but it looks to me like Clara's dress is finer than what Manix is wearing. Do you think the same?" Manix wore nicer linen than the battle-tested clothing Lodan and his men wore, but it wasn't court garb, at least, not compared to the other city-state courts he'd visited, while Clara's clothing would be appropriate at any court event in any city-state.

Kassandra nodded and turned her head, her lips only a few inches from his. "And she wears a large sigil ring on her middle finger. Some of the leaders I met in Sarda wore those."

He hadn't noticed, but the gleam from the fire caught the large ruby in the center of what must have been the seal of the Dorians.

He almost smiled. Apparently, the Dorians played the same trick he did, hiding their true leader.

“The Sardi came here for our aid, and we said the same to them,” Clara said. “We don’t aid downlanders. But the Sardi did tell us something interesting, and we do aid our own.” She turned to Lodan. “I’ll meet with the Warlord and Cassandra privately now.” She waved her hand at Manix. “Offer the others food and drink.”

Our own. What did she mean by that? He didn’t like the sound of this.

Xander stepped forward, continuing to pretend he was the Warlord, and Clara shot him a severe look. “Don’t play us for fools any longer.” She turned to Lodan. “I know who the Warlord is.”

“And you’re also the leader here,” Lodan said. “Give us your real titles.”

Clara’s gaze was hard as she continued staring at him as if angry. “I’m Clara the Fleet-Footed. The Leader of the Northern Tribe of the Dorians. Manix is my companion and Tribe Commander. Ision and Davos are our sons.” She sniffed. “Alphas tend not to believe an Omega can be a leader.”

“Sardi Alphas, perhaps.”

Clara studied him for a long moment. “Perhaps.” She waved her hand toward a door to her left. “Let’s sit and talk.”

He nodded at Xander.

Xander’s lips thinned into a straight line, a sign he didn’t agree, but he remained behind with the rest of the men. Lodan and Cassandra followed Clara into a small sitting room, richly outfitted with tapestries on the walls and wide windows showing

the trees outside. Some of the trunks were so large, they might provide enough wood to build an entire house from one tree.

A table covered with a deep green runner sat in the middle of the room, and Clara led them to it. As she sat, she asked, “Wine? Water? Our water here is from the mountain, so it’s pure and fresh.”

He and Kassandra both declined.

Lodan leaned forward. “State your purpose.”

“Typical Alpha politeness.” Clara turned to Kassandra, “How are you? Are you all right? Have they treated you well?”

Kassandra shot him a quick glance. “It could be worse.”

Clara nodded as if she’d expected that answer. “The Sardi told us that you were a prisoner of the Myrdinians, and we saw what they did to you in Argos.” There was no disguising the disgust on her face when she turned back to Lodan. “At least she isn’t bound in ropes today.”

He sat back in his chair. Out of everything he’d expected to discuss today, Kassandra being led through the village of Argos hadn’t been one of them.

Clara continued, “My offer is simple. We will accept your request not to aid the Sardi, and you may enter our forests to attack if the Sardi take refuge in them. In return, Kassandra stays here. With her people.”

It felt like being punched hard in the stomach. “No.”

“My people?” Kassandra asked.

For the first time, Clara's expression softened. "Your mother was my younger sister. I told her no good would come of taking the Sardi king as her lover, but she did it anyway. He cut off all contact with us after she left. He was probably afraid she'd return home after she learned the true ways of the downlanders." She practically snarled the words. "I didn't know about her death for years. And I didn't know about you at all."

Lodan barely heard what she said. All he could focus on was that this leader wanted Cassandra to stay here. Forever.

"My brother always called me an outsider, but he never told me my mother was a Dorian," Cassandra said. "He must have known, though, if he told you about me."

Clara nodded. "He did. And I sent scouts to watch the Myrdinian army to confirm you were with them." She smiled and the hard gaze of the warrior vanished entirely. "Other than your hair color, you look exactly like her."

Lodan gripped the edge of the table so hard his knuckles turned white. "Half Dorian or not, Cassandra is with me."

Clara ignored him. "Did he bond you to him?"

Kassandra shook her head. "An Omega must start the bond. I haven't offered."

She'd never offered her bond. Not even when his Alpha side took over, and without him being aware of his actions, he'd nuzzled at her neck, nibbling and biting, courting her to offer the bond.

It hadn't worked.

Clara nodded. "It's like that for us, too, but I wasn't sure about downlanders. Thank

the heavens. You can be clear of him without impact.”

It felt like he was a step behind, clutching to hold onto the conversation. Lodan growled. “No, she won’t be clear of me. She’s mine.”

“Because she’s a possession, isn’t she? A nice toy for you to play with.” Clara’s smile was cold. “We heard your Commander’s words in Argos. You’re using Kassandra, this perfect, powerful Omega, as fodder for your aim to be king of Anatolia. Too bad, Warlord . She’s safe here. She’s free here. And she’ll stay here.”

His grip tightened so hard the table cracked. “Or what?”

Kassandra interrupted. “You want me to live here? With the Dorians?”

Clara smiled. “Yes. No one will tell you what to do. Or who to bond with. Here, Omegas invite Alpha attention only when they want them. And we only bond if we find a bondmate.” A glimpse of what seemed like sadness crossed her face. “It happens less often than we’d like. We have few Omegas.” She straightened and waved her hand toward the door they’d come through. “Manix is my bondmate, but I chose our bonding. No one else.”

Lodan’s hands fisted. “No. She doesn’t belong here.”

Clara snarled, looking like she was about to swing a sword at his head. “Then we will help the Sardi crush you. Their king promised Kassandra was free to live here.”

He went white hot with pure rage. “So much for not interfering with downlanders.”

“Like I said, we’re willing to fight for our own.” Clara slammed her fist on the table. “I lost my sister. I won’t lose my niece.”

Lodan jerked to his feet, his chair tipping backward and crashing to the floor. “Then we are at war.”

Kassandra reached out and put her hand on his arm. Her eyes had the same haunted look from this morning. “Focus on defeating my brother and find the peace you seek. As long as I’m with you, I’ll remind you of what you hate.”

He knew he breathed, but he felt like he was drowning. He turned to Clara. “Kassandra and I will speak privately now.”

At first, he thought the Dorian leader would refuse, but she stood slowly. “I’ll be right outside the door.”

It seemed like a lifetime for her to leave them together.

Kassandra stood. “Lodan.” She swallowed hard. “Vasick ... there’s no future for us. Don’t shed your blood, or those of your army, for me. You asked me what I want, and I told you. I want to live a simple life, pursuing simple pleasures. A family. An Alpha who loves me.” Her eyes suddenly seemed too large for her face, and bone-achingly sad. It made his chest hurt. It demanded he give her whatever she wanted to make it go away. “You can’t give me that.”

He heard her words, knew the truth of them, but shook his head anyway. Their time together had been too short, and he wanted more. “You might be pregnant.”

She turned and gazed out the windows. “I took an herb Greta gave me to stop conception. I’m sorry. I should have told you.”

He rubbed his face and stepped back. Every time he’d knotted her, he’d thought about how he might be getting her with child, and something warm had blossomed in his chest. Having a baby, their baby, had stopped being an abstract idea.

“Pregnant or not, you have a home with me. With the Myrdinians. We’ll keep you safe.” For the past ten years, he’d fought to free Anatolia, and to free those oppressed by the Sardi. He’d stopped seeing Cassandra as the enemy and recognized her as someone he needed to protect. Needed to help. He fought for her, too.

She’d been abused and imprisoned by the Sardi, and not one single day in her entire life had she ever been free. She’d never had a choice about her life, at least, not until he offered his camp as her refuge, not her prison.

“What about the prophecy?” she asked.

“What about it?”

She sucked in a breath. “Gain everything you want in battle. It’s the only real choice.”

The prophecy.

Die in everlasting glory at the gates of his greatest enemy. Or live a long life, his name unknown to all but those who love him.

He remembered how he’d mocked the idea of love. A long life. He didn’t feel like mocking it any longer.

“Avenging my family has been my one goal.” It was finally within his reach, right at his fingertips. And it wasn’t just his family. Those who followed him and fought with him, who’d lost their own families, deserved to be avenged.

Kassandra wrapped her arms around herself, still staring out at the trees. “I hope your life isn’t short. I hope the prophecy is wrong about that. But you must avenge your family. Leave me here with the Dorians. Finish your war.”

“This is really what you want? To stay here?”

She nodded. “Please.”

Please. She’d said she’d never beg.

“I would have fought every last Dorian to keep you at my side,” he said softly in the voice he used when they were in bed together, the one that was almost a purr. “I would have fought the grasping hand of death for one more day, one more hour, at your side.” What he said wasn’t enough, wasn’t nearly enough, but he couldn’t find the words. She deserved an Alpha who would love her. Who would stop seeing her as a link to the worst moments in his life.

What do you want from me?

“I know what I want from you,” he said. “I want you to be happy. I want you to be free. I want you to be able to choose what you want.”

Her lips trembled. “I want to stay here.”

Moving closer, he took one of her hands in both of his. Something feral inside clawed and raged like a wounded animal, but he didn’t let it show. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. It was something his father had always done with his mother. “Goodbye, Cassandra.”

“You have a visitor from the Myrdinian camp,” Clara said.

Clara—calling her Aunt Clara still didn’t feel natural even after several days—stood in the doorway of the living room of Kassandra’s new house. It was a cozy place along a quiet street near the center of town. A beautiful house, and all her own, but she still missed her tent.

Kassandra leaped to her feet, her heart in her throat. “Lodan?” She knew the Myrdinians still camped in the meadow near the path to the Dorian village. Yesterday, she’d asked Ision for a tour along the Bough Walkway, the path up in the trees, and she caught a glimpse of the camp when they walked to the west. Ision had turned them back before they got too close to the forest perimeter though, telling her there was a prettier path to the north.

She thought he might have wanted to keep her from getting closer.

Clara studied her and frowned for a moment. Clara often frowned, but not normally at her. Her aunt was serious, almost humorless, and oddly, she reminded Kassandra of Lodan in some ways. Not only her serious demeanor but her devotion to her people above all else, and she spent twenty hours every day working. Lodan had done that, too.

There was one big difference between them, though. Whenever she was with Lodan, Kassandra always felt she had his complete attention, but with her aunt, she could tell Clara was working other things out in her head. Not that Kassandra minded. The

Dorians were much more involved with the goings on in Anatolia than Cassandra expected, and Clara was worried about how the war would end.

“No. You have a very insistent visitor. One who has already charmed my son into showing him the path up here.”

Cian ducked around her aunt into the room, and Cassandra ran to him. He wrapped her in a hug and swung her around. “You didn’t say goodbye to me. Again.”

“I’m sorry. Everything happened so fast.” Her eyes filled with tears, and she lowered her head. “I’ve wanted to come see you, but I didn’t think it would be a good idea to go down to the camp.”

Clara nodded. “Probably wise. I trust that Alpha to keep his word, but the less temptation the better.”

Kassandra glanced at her aunt in surprise. Saying Lodan would keep his word was high praise for her. While Clara hadn’t said anything outright, she’d made it clear she found the Sardi distasteful, and so far, she was reserving judgment on the Myrdinians, although her inclination was to dislike them as well. She didn’t seem to care how the war ended; her main goal was to keep her people safe.

Clara took a step toward the door. “I have a meeting, but I’ll come back later.” Her gaze lingered on Cian. “We have no male Omegas here. We don’t allow outsiders to live with us, but perhaps things need to change.”

For the first time since Cassandra had left Lodan, the pressure in her chest lifted, and she grabbed Cian’s arm. “You can live here with me.”

Clara paused at the door. “If Cassandra invites you, then I do too. Think about it.” And she slipped out the door.

Cian flopped down on the loveseat. “There’s no ocean here. What would I do with myself? What would I look at every morning?”

“Well, I know it isn’t the ocean, but the woods here are wonderful, like they hold a great secret you need to explore and find. And Clara’s right, there are no male Omegas, but” —she lowered her voice— “there aren’t many Omegas at all. And I learned there haven’t been a lot of births in the past decade either. I think being so secluded has hurt them. Clara has done a lot of work getting the different Dorian tribes to mingle more, but only a few bondmate ceremonies happen each year. I can tell she’s worried about it.”

“Well then, there will be many Alphas desperate for me.” But he didn’t sound very excited. “What else is it like here?”

Kassandra described the nicely built homes, the hidden walkway in the trees, and the miles and miles of passageways and rooms inside the mountain itself. She also told him how warm and kind the people were, although reserved and still a bit guarded around her.

A soft knock interrupted them. A young Omega named Starli, who worked for Clara, entered. In her hands, she held a small parcel. “This is a present for Mister ...” Her face flamed red, and she walked over to Cian. “I forgot your name. Damn it, I’m not supposed to forget a guest’s name. Ever.”

Kassandra shrugged. “It happens.”

“Not for me. I’m in training as one of the tribe liaisons. That means I’m supposed to know each and every guest and make sure Clara never says the wrong name when she addresses them.” She thrust the parcel at him. “I’m so bad at this.”

“This is for me?”

“You know, I used to have to greet many people at my father’s palace,” Cassandra said. “It’s easier if you try to make an association. Like Cian. His name is the same as cyan, the color blue. Cian has blue eyes. Blue. Cyan. Cian. It sounds silly, but it helped me.”

“Thanks. I’ll try it.”

Cian tapped the package. “Back to this present. Is this a welcome-to-the-village gift?”

Starli smiled shyly. “Not exactly. Dorian males give presents to request the right to court an Omega. There are a lot of Dorian Alphas, who never come anywhere near court, suddenly extremely interested in learning about the male Omega visitor.”

Cian’s eyes widened. “There are men lined up for me? Am I dreaming?” He glanced at Cassandra. “What about Cassandra? Where are her presents?”

“Oh.” Starli dropped her gaze to the floor. “Well, she gives off the aura of one already bonded. Dorian males are honorable and won’t go after one already taken. It’s caused a lot of disappointment.”

Cian raised a brow. “Bonded, huh?”

Kassandra twisted to stare out the window. “I’m not bonded. And Lodan and I are over.” Just saying the words was hard.

“Well, my aura is waving a warm welcome. No bonding here.” Paper rustled, and then Cian gasped. “This is gold. ”

Starli lifted her chin. “True Dorian gold. There’s none better. Now you have a choice with what to do with it.”

“A choice?”

“Well, you could accept the gift, which means the Dorian male—” she squinted to read at the tag on the present “—Damon, will court you. No one else will court you until your time with Damon is done.” A witchy kind of smile crossed Starli’s face. “But, if you were undecided about Damon’s courtship, other gifts would continue to come, and you could choose between them. It becomes a bit of a contest.”

Cian’s face lit up. “Oh, I want that. Definitely.”

“I’ll tell them you’re undecided then, so other presents will be welcome.” Starli grinned. “Besides, Damon is an arrogant ass, and it will do him good not to get what he wants right away.”

Cian put his arm around Starli. “We’ve just become friends.”

She laughed, gave them both a small bow, and dashed out of the room.

“I really do like her, but she needed to leave because you need to talk. And not about the Dorians and their village. About you.” He moved his legs on the loveseat and pointed next to him. “Sit.”

Kassandra scowled. “You know, for an Omega, you’re really bossy.”

“I get a lot of Alpha in me.”

Kassandra laughed and sank onto the seat beside him. “When? You didn’t take any lovers during the entire time I traveled with the Myrdinians. And you and Xander took things slow.”

Cian’s brows flew up so high they almost touched his hairline. “Traveled with the

Myrdinians? Now you're sounding like you joined them voluntarily." He waved his hand. "But forget about all that. For days, you were sealed off with Lodan in his tent, and all the Alphas turned edgy. Briseis had even more males begging for her attention than normal. The rumor was you were in heat. Is that true? How did it go?"

Pain slashed through her chest. "It was all hazy, like I was looking through a thin white curtain. I was more in my body, living moment to moment in pleasure, but my mind wasn't exactly there. It was like I'd drunk the most exquisite wine, and I was giddy and at the top of the world, but I didn't really know what was happening, just that he was there. It was pretty great." She wasn't going to say any more. What happened between the two of them was private.

"He took good care of you?"

"Yes." She frowned. "It's strange, though, I don't really remember a lot of detail around those two days." She hugged herself. "But little bits are coming back to me." She remembered the way he'd held her to him, and the way he'd fed her. She also remembered him talking to her but couldn't remember what he'd said.

Her throat clogged, and she shook her head. "I don't think I can talk about him."

Cian took her hand. "I'm sorry he left you here, but you'll get better."

She shook her head, and her cheeks were wet. When had she started crying? "I asked him to let me stay here, and he did." Her heart squeezed. When he'd said goodbye, she'd looked into his beautiful eyes and seen ... not hate. The unreadable Warlord was laid bare before her, his gaze letting her in. If he'd held her hand a fraction longer, she would have flung herself into his arms and never let go, but her decision was correct. They could never be happy together, not when her family had killed his.

"You did?" Cian's hand squeezed hers. "But you're miserable."

She drew in a shaky breath. “There’s no future for us. He needs to finish his war. But that doesn’t help it ache less.”

“Ache?” A long silence filled the room until Cian asked, “Did you take the strobile?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“How much, and when?”

She jerked her chin up to look Cian in the face. His expression was serious, his eyes without the normal twinkle of mirth. “I took it daily from the day you gave it to me.”

“And you didn’t ask for a bond?”

“No.”

His fingers closed more tightly around hers. “Did you want to?”

She screwed her eyes shut as pain pounded in her chest again. “Yes. Many times.”

“I think, perhaps, you shouldn’t have taken strobile.”

Her lids flew open. “What? Why?”

Cian fell back against the loveseat and ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t tell you everything about it. Honestly, I didn’t think it would matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“Strobile dulls our instincts, you understand? Which is good if you’re an Omega looking to have fun with many males. But we also have instincts that tell us if an

Alpha is something more for us. Something important. Taking strobile, you dull that part of yourself.”

Kassandra pushed herself off the couch, not seeing Cian or the room around her. “Are you talking about bondmates?” She walked to the window and put her hand on the pane. The coolness of the glass leached into her palm.

“Yes. It would block the ability to recognize your bondmate.”

“Would he know if I was his?”

“That’s a good question. I don’t know. I would think the Alpha would recognize something, but bonds are mystical. No one knows how they work.”

Kassandra sagged forward. “Then everything is all right. Lodan only ever saw me as an enemy.”

“Don’t be daft. When you fled Argos, he chased after you and asked you to return to camp as a free Omega. Why would he do that if he really hated you?”

That was the question she’d asked herself nonstop since they parted. “At first I was his prisoner. He wouldn’t even use my name.” She gazed out at the dark trees. “That changed. I can’t really pinpoint when, but it did.”

It wasn’t just her name, it was a million other things. Like keeping her in his bed every night. At first, when he settled them in for sleeping, she thought him tucking her close was only possessive Alpha nonsense. But after a few nights, she realized that he nestled her against him, then rolled slightly, as if blocking out the rest of the world with his wide shoulders, making it just the two of them.

She loved how he caressed her face and ran his fingers through her hair, small

touches of affection she'd never had. He didn't look through her, or ignore her, or treat her like she was addled. "He might have softened toward me, but it isn't enough to—" She shook her head. She wasn't about to tell Cian about Lodan's past. About how Lodan could never really care for someone related to the man who'd destroyed his family.

When she'd experienced the vision of his past, she'd thought her agony was despair over what happened to him. It was, but it was also despair for them. At that moment, she'd truly understood they didn't have a future together. "I think I might love him," she whispered. "But it's impossible for us to be together."

Cian joined her at the window and turned her to face him. "I want you to do something for me."

"What?"

"Have you taken strobile since you've been here?"

She shook her head.

"Good." He took both of her hands in his. "I want you to close your eyes for a minute."

Kassandra raised a brow. "What?"

"Just do it."

Kassandra sighed but obeyed.

"Now, go inward. Listen to your Omega instinct. Or, as idiotic as it sounds, listen to your heart. What do you feel?"

She took a long moment, but all she felt was the perpetual ache of missing Lodan mixed with a wistful sorrow. “It’s all muddled. I miss him. That’s all.”

“There’s nothing in there urging you? Telling you he could be your bondmate?”

Lodan, her bondmate?

She opened her eyes. “No. No way. Things changed between us, but there wasn’t a thunderclap from the heavens giving me a bolt of recognition that Lodan was mine.”

Cian’s brow lifted. “Who told you it worked that way? No one knows how the recognition happens. It just does.”

She frowned and remembered her first night with Lodan. The night after he’d captured her, but before Cian gave her doses of strobile. Something had happened between them.

Yes, he’d been demanding and difficult, but the moment Lodan touched her, something inside woke up for the first time, and it had stayed awake ever since. Demanding more of him. Thrumming at his touch. That first night, it pushed her to offer the bond, and she’d resisted, but it never faded completely, not even with the strobile. It whispered at her when his lips claimed hers. It sighed out with longing when he knotted her.

She pressed her hand to the window again. “If we are bondmates, it’s a cruel joke. There is something between us that can never be overcome.”

“Are you sure? Because he’s not all right, either.”

“What do you mean?”

“He tore his tent to pieces and said he can’t ever sleep in his bed again. Actually, I’m not sure he’s slept at all since you left. He goes out scouting for the Sardi, or he’s with Xander pouring over dusty maps. He’s not acting like an Alpha who doesn’t care.”

Kassandra stared out the window again, peering into the thick trees as if they’d magically part, allowing her to see through them to the meadow beyond. “He tore his bed apart?”

“Yes.”

Pain slashed through her. “It doesn’t matter. It’s impossible for us to be together.”

Cian slumped against the window as if he’d suddenly gone boneless. “That’s how I feel, too. Xander may have thought he was following orders, but he had no qualms about treating you the way he did. He’s just another asshole in a long line of assholes, and I don’t see that changing.”

“Did you take strobile when you and Xander were together?”

“Of course. It’s better not to feel anything, then you don’t feel crushed when they aren’t who you think they are.” Cian sighed. “Although, I still felt ...” he trailed off for a moment. “I felt a pull with him I never felt with an Alpha before. It was like we were going through a courtship dance as old as time, and it was almost inevitable. Like a path laid out by the gods. When he touched me, it felt like the first time I’d ever been touched, but it was also familiar, like I was returning home to something that was always meant to be.” He ducked his head, and his cheeks tinged with pink. It was the first time she’d ever seen him embarrassed. “I’m talking nonsense.”

She knew exactly what he meant. “No.” She followed him to the couch and slumped sideways to lean against him. “I think you should stop taking strobile, too.”

He slung his arm around her. “Then what? The Myrdinians will leave soon to hunt down the rest of the Sardi. I’ll never see Xander again.”

Her heart squeezed hard. Soon Lodan would be gone. “I think you should do it, anyway.”

They sat together in silence while the sun dipped below the trees and shadows lengthened in the room.

Cian decided to stay, and the days slipped by. The Myrdinians remained in the camp nearby but the troops left for longer and longer periods. Clara and the Dorians followed, slipping through the forests to observe the war’s progress. Cassandra heard snippets from Clara. She knew her brother was in an impenetrable fortress, keeping the Myrdinians at bay. For now.

Kassandra walked among the trees every morning, trying to memorize the winding routes down the mountain’s slope. Some led to the small lake, some to the fields. And one, the one she always ended up on, passed where the Myrdinians camped in the meadow with its sea of flowers.

Today, while she strode along that path, a large shape stepped from the trees. She let out a small cry and stepped back.

“Don’t be alarmed. It’s me. Xander.” He came closer. “Our scouts said you walk here every day, and I wanted a word.”

Kassandra halted and crossed her arms. “Are you alone?” She scanned the woods behind him.

He nodded, and the bubble of hope in her chest turned to stone. “Why did you seek me out?”

Xander's gaze flitted over her shoulder and up the path to the village center. "The Dorians have been trading with us."

"That's what you wanted to tell me?"

Xander frowned. "The cook was so grateful for fresh food he sent a pie as a present to Leader Clara. Her mate charged into camp, sword in hand, ready to take his head off. I guess the Dorians give presents for courtship."

She nodded. "Yes, that's right. What are you?—"

"Is Cian getting presents?"

"What?"

Xander paced a few steps away. "Of course he is. Every Dorian male will want him."

Kassandra watched him and said nothing.

"Cian isn't ... he wasn't the reason why I came here." He turned back to face her. "I came here to apologize for what happened in Argos. I haven't felt right about it. We're leaving tomorrow, and I didn't want to leave without saying so." He looked away. "Lodan was different when you were around. In a good way. In a way I thought he lost a long time ago. He stopped seeing you as an enemy, and I've worked at doing the same."

Alphas didn't apologize. Ever.

"I had a lot of assumptions about Myrdinians," she said. "I didn't see you all clearly for some time either." She stared past him, catching glints of the golden grass of the meadow. "I can understand why you hated me." Xander may not have lost his entire

family like Lodan, but he'd lost everything else.

A long silence stretched between them, punctured only by the sweet calls of songbirds flying overhead.

"I appreciate you coming here and telling me," she said. "You didn't have to."

Finally, Xander nodded. "That's all I came here to say. I need to get back." He gave her a small bow. "Take care." He turned to leave.

"Wait."

He paused.

"Why do you call him Lodan? You must have known him as Vasick."

Xander jolted and faced her. "He told you his old name?"

"Yes."

Xander sucked in a deep breath. "He stopped using Vasick a long time ago. He said Vasick died in Myrdinia, so he embraced the name that followed him across Anatolia. I think, to some degree, he was right about that. To tell you his real name means a lot."

The scarred warrior appeared to be debating something, his brows furrowing. Finally, he said, "Myrdinian Alphas fall hard, and we only fall once."

"He didn't fall for me. Maybe he stopped hating me. Just a little."

"He never would have touched you if he truly hated you. No matter what his plans

were.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I saw how he looked at you from the first day you showed up at camp. Then, the night you played the lute, when he carried you away, I knew for sure there was something much bigger between you. I recognized it because for the first time, I understood what it felt like. What it’s like to meet someone who changes your entire world.” He shook his head and turned away.

Was he right? Xander knew Lodan better than anyone. Was Xander telling her Lodan cared for her?

She studied him a long moment. “You feel that way for Cian?”

He held her gaze, his expression fierce yet vulnerable. “From the first moment I saw him, I fell. There will be no other for me. Not even if he never speaks to me again. And it will be the same for Lodan.”

Tears burned behind her eyes. She was turning into a complete idiot, crying all the time. “Flowers.”

“What?”

“Pick Cian flowers. Pick the ones you think he’d like most.”

“Flowers?” He seemed incredulous, as if it was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard.

She nodded. “It’s not about the most expensive gift, it’s about the most thoughtful. The one that speaks to his soul. He doesn’t believe real love exists and thinks everyone will disappoint him. Show him otherwise. Show him all those things Lodan told me Myrdinian Alphas do for those they love.”

“Flowers.” Xander smiled, and his entire expression changed. She caught a glimpse

of the Alpha he might have been if war hadn't hardened him. "Thank you." With a nod, he returned to the path back down to the meadow.

She stood there a long time, wanting to follow Xander into camp and fling herself at Lodan, but the same barrier always knocked her back. Her family destroyed his. It was insurmountable.

She headed to her new home, instead.

Later that evening, Starli knocked on Cassandra's door. Blooms of lupine cascaded from her arms, bound in rope with a scroll of parchment tied to it. She held the bundle out to Cian. "Another gift for you."

Cian scooped up his flowers. "This is stunning. Who would think to give me flowers?" He unrolled the scroll, and his mouth dropped open. "Xander."

"I saw him today," Cassandra said. "He apologized to me about Argos. He's an Alpha, and he apologized."

Cian looked stunned. He nodded and, without a word to Cassandra or Starli, strode out of the room, cradling the flowers to his chest.

"And this is for you." Starli handed her a single, perfect mountain rose. "These are rare, especially this time of year." The perfect pink blossom was at the point where it had just started to open, the outer petals softening into a lighter blush. Starli frowned. "There's no tag."

"I know who sent it." Her heart beat so hard the noise echoed in her ears. This could only be from Lodan. He'd remembered she said the mountain rose was her favorite flower and picked it for her. A perfect, beautiful flower. She brought it to her lips and inhaled. It was probably her imagination, but she thought she might be able to tease a

small trace of his scent.

She closed the door behind Starli and collapsed against it, sliding down to the floor. Closing her eyes, she tried to sense with her instincts the way Cian had told her to. Was Lodan her bondmate? And if he was, would it change things?

Lodan's head snapped up. "What do you want?"

Greta entered the armory tent to join him, no longer hobbling or needing her walking crutch but still moving a little slower. "I come to where the wounded are."

"It's well past midnight, and as you can see, there are no wounded here." He was alone, wiping down the sword on his knee. "Get your rest, I'm sure we'll have men who need help tomorrow."

As usual, Greta ignored him. Hands behind her back, she walked slowly around the tent, peering down at the armor and weapons laid out, ready for his warriors to grab. "I'm not the one who needs rest."

He wiped his cloth down his sword again, even though it was already clean. "I need little sleep." He hadn't slept in days. He'd found another bed that didn't smell like Cassandra, but it didn't matter. Without her tucked next to him, he couldn't sleep.

He was mere hours away from finally battling the king, and he needed his rest, but it was impossible.

After days of searching, they'd found the ancient crumbling fort where King Harl and his band of soldiers were hiding. Harl had chosen his retreat well. Similar to Sarda City, the great walls were high and smooth. Unless the gates were open, there was no way to get inside, and no way to scale the walls. Invaders would be heavily wounded if they tried.

However, they opened the gates when they took delivery of food or other goods.

While camped in Argos, Lodan had discovered the secret messages and trade flowing from Ambrose and a small band of other Alphas still loyal to the Sardi. The Argosians delivered food and other goods daily to the Sardi. He'd let it continue.

Tomorrow, there would be a delivery they didn't expect.

"Xander met with his Omega tonight," Greta informed him.

He'd forgotten Greta was still here. "I know."

"He told me he's coming back to the Dorian forest for him after the battle."

Lodan nodded. "I know. Is that why you're here? To gossip about Xander?"

"I told you why I'm here. I heal the wounded."

"And I said there are no wounded."

She turned on her heel in one quick movement and pointed at him. "You let Cassandra go." She huffed out a breath. "Between you and Xander, I figured you'd be the one to realize you're a proper fool first and go back for your Omega. I see I was wrong."

He scrubbed harder at his pristine sword. "She chose to leave. She's a free Omega and it was her choice."

"Yet you'd been rather obstinate about keeping her."

"She deserves her freedom. And the Dorians can keep her safe." He didn't need to

explain himself to Greta, to anyone, but he kept speaking anyway. “Even if she finds happiness with me, there will be Sardi out there who think they can use her to return the Podarce line to power. They might try to take her and put her on the throne. She’ll never be safe or free. The Dorians can give her that. And there are other things between us neither of us can overcome.”

What she’d said about the breach separating them made sense. Over the past week, he’d thought about her words constantly.

Every time you look at me, I’ll remind you of what you hate.

What he’d found though, was that it wasn’t true. Every time he thought of Kassandra, he thought of the few times he’d made her smile. Her sweet scent. The way she made him feel like he was standing in the sun in Myrdinia again, warm and happy.

“If you bonded with her, those loyal to the Sardi wouldn’t try to steal her. They couldn’t part her from you, or she’d die. Or fail to thrive. Regardless, she wouldn’t be able to be a new queen. Besides, I’d like to see them try to make her do anything she didn’t want to. You’re the scariest warrior walking the land, and she didn’t obey you.”

“No. She didn’t.” Except for the few times she’d wanted to. Like when she’d waited for him, naked, on his bed.

“She never invited the bond, and it would be another prison.”

“Isn’t that why you took her? To make her your prisoner?”

“Things change.”

Greta strode over and grabbed his wrist. She studied his face in the way she examined

men dripping with blood and needing healing. Her fingers tightened. She was rather strong for an elderly Beta.

“How much has it hurt to be parted from her?”

Every day, he felt like he'd been run through with a sword, but he forced himself to keep going. To breathe in and out. The few times he'd been seriously injured, he counted his breaths to deal with the pain. Since leaving Cassandra, something would remind him of her, and a wave of pain would slice him, and he'd have to stop and count. One breath. Two.

The problem was, everything reminded him of her.

“How much?”

Breathe in. Breathe out. “It hurts to even breathe.” He didn't realize he'd spoken aloud.

Greta sighed. “I don't have much I can give you for emotional pain, and even less for losing your bondmate. I'm not sure the ache will ever fade.” She dropped his wrist and dug her hands into the large pockets of her tunic. “But this will help you focus for the battle tomorrow. Maybe even get a little sleep.”

He froze. “Bondmate? No. If she was my bondmate I would have recognized her instantly.”

“Pah.” Greta pressed a small packet into his hand. “No one knows how the gods determine bondmates. Or how or when the connection happens. The two of you were so far up your own asses and blinded by prejudice, you ignored the signs.” She crossed her arms. “And Cassandra was taking suppressants.”

He jerked, and his sword clattered to the ground. “What?”

“Whenever you weren’t looking at her, she watched you as if you hung the moon. And when she wasn’t looking at you, you stared at her like she was a goddess on earth.”

Lodan surged to his feet. “What do you mean suppressants? What did you give her?”

Greta shot him a small, satisfied smile. “Oh, that change things for you? She was taking a drug Cian gave her. One he used to insulate him from desiring a bond. But Cian couldn’t know the full potency of it. It prevents bonding, but it also suppresses other instincts, like the ones that ignite a bondmate connection.”

He stood frozen for a long moment. She’d taken a drug to suppress their true connection. During her heat, Cassandra told him she saw him. She’d wrapped herself around him and swept him away. She may not remember any of it, but he did. Every second. Those two days in bed with her may have been the two most perfect days of his adult life.

Because she was his bondmate?

But he’d lost her. She’d chosen to leave. “It doesn’t change anything. I’m about to go kill her brother. No love can spring from that.”

“Interesting word you chose. Love.”

He paced to the end of the tent. “I need to free Anatolia. Every step for the past fifteen years has been focused on that, and I’m almost there.”

Greta only nodded.

“I can’t give that up. I don’t care what a prophecy says or what might happen to me, I—” The memory of the burning houses, of his sister’s face before he blacked out, of his father and his mother dancing together during festivals, all floated before him. “I need to avenge their deaths.”

“Let your sword bite true and freedom claim the land and all that.” Greta’s expression sobered. “You’ve defeated the oppressors here, but remember, you’re fighting for your freedom, too.”

“I’ve been free for fifteen years.”

“Have you? Or has your past trapped you? Is it still trapping you, even now, from seeing what you really need?”

He picked up his sword. “You’re telling me to stop battling?”

She cocked her head. “Did I say that?”

He snorted. Typical Greta answer.

“What will you do after you get what you want?”

He set his sword on the armory table, its gold hilt glinting in the low light. “I’ve never looked past the final battle. Not because of the silly prophecy, but because the day the Sardi fell always felt so distant.”

“Not so distant anymore, is it?”

He didn’t answer. No, it wasn’t distant anymore, except he couldn’t see his future. He couldn’t picture anything beyond the battle tomorrow. No home waited for him. No mate. He wasn’t even sure what a home would be anymore. He turned to answer

Greta, but no one remained in the tent with him any longer.

31

The fresh pine air changed to the coppery scent of blood, and Cassandra froze. It was market day in the town square, with laughter and easy chatter filling the air, including Cian discussing his evening with Xander. She whirled around, scanning the crowd. No one bleeding here.

The dark trees and mountain-backed wooden houses blurred. She gasped and staggered, falling to her knees. “No,” she whispered. “Not right now.” Not here. Not in front of everyone again. The Dorians didn’t know about her visions, and she’d hoped to keep it that way.

Cian dropped to her side. “Are you all right?”

She couldn’t answer. Clutching his hand, darkness swirled, and the vision took over.

It was no longer morning in her vision. The sun was lower in the sky, dipping below a towering, crumbling wall to cast long shadows over a weed-strewn courtyard. How far in the future was she seeing? This afternoon, or much later?

The high stone wall swept in a semicircular arc, protecting a cleft in the mountain where buildings stood. Windows and doors had long since been worn away by the weather, and they stood open and gaping, leaving the houses with a perpetually surprised look. It was clear no one had lived here in ages, yet fires burned in the courtyard, and smoke trickled from a few chimneys. Soldiers, dressed in black with a gold insignia, strode past.

This wasn't Sardi architecture. There was a heaviness to it, an emphasis on function and battling the weather, rather than an expression of form, yet many Sardi hunkered down here. Scanning the courtyard, she counted at least a hundred men. It was far more than the thirty or so she'd met on the road last week.

Her brother, wearing a long blue tunic and white cloak, sauntered through the courtyard with a shorter, squat man hustling to keep pace at his side. Harl may not have worn armor, but he had a sword at his side, the ancient sword of Sarda that had hung over her father's throne.

A yell split the air. "Messenger from Argos with supplies. Horses, too. Sardi horses."

Her brother sneered. "It's about time. We told them to get us more horses weeks ago."

The shorter man scowled. "Ambrose was supposed to come himself. With troops, too, not just horses."

"He better be hunting down my sister." Her brother clasped the hilt of his sword, his knuckles turning white. "That blood traitor poisoned me. She needs to pay."

"We can still use her as leverage, my lord. We need to."

"Her death is long overdue. I gave orders for them to starve her in that temple, and they failed." Cassandra had seen him give the order to kill Lodan's entire village, she knew who her brother truly was, yet still, his words hit like a physical blow.

He hadn't ignored her letters to return to the palace because of her visions or because he was too busy, he'd wanted her dead all along. Surprisingly enough, she didn't feel anything inside.

She was completely cold. Remote.

If Lodan measured every Sardi by her brother, of course he'd hate them all. But not all Sardi were sycophants, bowing and shuffling around court for every scrap of wealth her father and brother could throw at them. There must be Sardi out there like her, who may have grown up with Sardi views but wouldn't remain blinded by the lies. Who could see the truth.

Lodan wasn't right about everything, but he was right about a lot. Every day she spent with him, he'd proven the Blood Laws were utterly false. Lodan behaved more like a king simply walking around camp and checking in with his men, than her brother ever had.

Lodan needed to win this war.

"We need her alive," the squat man said. "We need the Dorians on our side. With them, we win this."

Her brother hissed. "At what price? To have their disgusting hovels expanding into Anatolia? To have them mingling with us? My father already disgraced my family by taking a Dorian whore as his second wife. Look how that turned out. My sister has fits. We don't need their blood mingling with ours."

"We focus on obliterating the Myrdinian hoard. Rebuild. Then we chase the Dorians back into the mountain holes they came from."

Yells punched through the air, followed by the clash of weapons on armor. Her brother whirled to the right. Myrdinians, with Lodan in his golden armor at the lead, flooded the courtyard. Her brother shouted, then whirled around, sprinting toward the back of the camp.

Time whipped forward in a blurred frenzy of flashing swords and horrible cries. Blood drenched the cobblestone courtyard, and men fell to the ground.

Lodan shouldered through the scrum, charging forward as if looking for something. Someone. A figure in shiny, black Sardi armor stepped out from the entrance to a grand building. A golden plume decorated his helm.

Her brother.

Time seemed to stand still as Lodan and her brother noticed each other. Her heart beat so hard in her ears, it drowned out the terrible sounds of battle around her. A deep sense of foreboding pressed on her. She was seeing this for a reason, and her visions were never good.

The two warriors clashed, sword to sword.

Their battle seemed to last for hours, but it may have been minutes. Lodan's blows rained on Harl, stronger, harder, but her brother was swift and could block and parry better than she expected, considering how much his sword masters coddled him growing up. Lodan struck him hard along the side, and Harl staggered backward.

The king dropped to a knee. It seemed he'd bent over to draw in a breath, but Cassandra caught the flash of silver at his ankle. The poisoned blade.

Her stomach dropped, and she tried to run forward, but the vision kept her locked in place. "No!" She screamed as loudly as she could, but no one heard her.

Her brother fisted the small dagger. She kept screaming as Lodan raised his sword to level a chop at Harl's head. Harl swung upward, and buried his poisoned dagger deep into Lodan's lower ribs, right below where his armor ended.

She screamed so loudly she thought her throat would rip apart.

Lodan's blow skated harmlessly over Harl's shoulder. He lurched sideways. Her brother lifted his sword. "It's over."

The last thing she saw was her brother's sword arcing down.

The tall trees swayed behind Cian from her position on the ground. Bile rose into her throat, and she jerked to a sitting position. She curled forward and heaved, but nothing came out.

"Are you all right?" Cian rubbed her back. "What is it? What did you see?"

Clara stood next to him, panting. "What's wrong? I heard Cassandra fell."

"I think she had a vision," Cian said. "Xander told me she gets them."

"She's a seer?"

Kassandra barely heard them. The prophecy was real. Lodan was going to die.

A memory surfaced of their time together when she was in heat. It pushed aside Cian, Clara, and the rest of the bustling market center.

It was of Lodan holding her in his arms and coaxing her to drink some water in between bouts of coupling. She nestled deeper into his chest, feeling blissful. Happy. That special feeling.

He used the back of his knuckles to wipe a strand of hair from her face. "You slay me."

“What?” She’d struggled to keep her focus on him so she could hear him through the haze of her heat. Understand his words.

He purred, the vibration rumbling through her. “I traveled halfway across the world to get the best armor, but it doesn’t work with you. You’ve gotten inside me.” He kissed her, his lips warm and gentle.

She brushed her fingers over his cheek.

“I can’t fight it anymore. I want you there.” That was when he’d rolled her onto her back and taken her slowly. As if he’d cherished her. He’d spoken her name as if it were beloved. Tangled his fingers with hers above her head, and whispered his mouth over hers. When he’d released inside her, sealing them together again, his lips went to her ear, and he said, “I don’t care who you are. I want you because I can’t imagine not having you beside me. I want to do this, exactly this, every day for the rest of my life.”

The memory faded.

Certainty flooded through her. Those words weren’t idle twaddle. Not from a Myrdinian. Not from him. They were his words. The words a bondmate would say.

A warmth uncurled deep inside her and thrummed. It pulsed with certainty. And it spoke clearly for the first time.

This was what Cian meant when he said to sink into herself to learn the truth. The truth was there; it had been there for a while, and it could finally come to light.

He hadn’t looked at her with hate. He hadn’t looked at her with lust. This was Vasick, looking at her like he would look at his mate.

At his bondmate.

Kassandra lurched to her feet. “I need to go to Lodan. I need to get to him. Right now.”

“The Myrdinian battalion left early this morning,” Clara said.

“I need to follow them. He’s going to die.” She whirled around. “I need Zephyr, and I need to find Greta. Or her healing kit. Wherever the poison antidote is.”

“Poison?” Clara laid her hand gently on Kassandra’s shoulder. “Let’s take a minute and think about this.” She turned to one of her assistants. “Get some water.”

“No.” Kassandra peered upward. The sun was still low in the sky. “It may happen today. I need to warn him.” She spotted the path to the Myrdinian camp and ran.

Another Sardi soldier fell at his feet, and Lodan stepped forward. Shadows from the walls darkened the battlefield, and the ancient buildings appeared twisted and grotesque, looming half in shadow and half in sun. The sounds of battle echoed around him, but he searched for only one thing—the golden-plumed helm. He growled and aimed for the deepest recess of the courtyard. In every other battle with the Sardi, King Harl hung at the back of the ranks, rarely fighting himself, always surrounded by a cluster of guards. Today was the same, except Harl couldn't slink away from the battle and escape into the forests. Today, this war would end one way or the other.

The battle raged for hours, the Myrdinians slowly pushing the Sardi back from the front gate, but still more Sardi troops slithered from the back of the fort like snakes. It was almost mythical, as if killing one Sardi made two others spring up in his place, but Lodan's men held on.

This was the moment. All the pain, all the suffering, all the death, it was finally time for the king to fall. The anger burned inside him, and he clutched his sword harder.

Gold flashed to his left, and he turned.

The king stood between two thick columns before the building which once may have been the fort's great hall. He held his sword ready for battle but didn't fight, shouting orders that no one heard because none of his guards were near him.

The king was unprotected.

This was the moment. Every drop of blood, every scar, every fallen warrior had led him to this moment. The faces of his parents and his sister flickered through his mind.

He bared his teeth, and charged.

“Lodan!”

He froze. He knew that voice. He’d know it anywhere. “Kassandra?” Whirling away from Harl, his foot slipped in a pool of blood. Where was she? Why was she here? If Kassandra was really here, he needed to find her. Get her far away from the battle.

A large, black Sardi horse with four white socks galloped around a corner, followed by several other horses carrying warriors wearing unfamiliar armor. Like an avenging queen galloping into battle, Kassandra sat astride Zephyr.

Kassandra reined Zephyr in.

“Go back,” he shouted, but she didn’t hear.

All the anger clawing at him for revenge, ripping at him to fight longer, to slash harder, morphed instantly into a different demand. He needed to protect her.

His destiny lay entwined with hers. He still cared about Anatolia, about freedom from the ways of the Sardi, but he cared because he wanted the world to be a place where she could be happy. Where they could be happy together.

Having driven him on for fifteen years, anger was a close friend. And an enemy.

But his wrath, his vengeance, was nothing compared to how he felt when he looked at Kassandra. She’d shattered all the brittle, broken pieces inside him, and forged them into something new. Forged his heart into something new.

There was only space in his heart for his anger or for his feelings for her, and he had to choose.

Run to Cassandra and protect her. Or kill Harl. Love or vengeance. He couldn't have both. The world didn't work that way. His world didn't work that way.

Meeting his gaze, Cassandra yelled something, but he couldn't hear over the noise of the battle. She scanned the ground as if looking for something.

Then she slid off Zephyr.

"No," he shouted. She needed to get out of here.

In that moment, he chose. He wasn't sure it was ever even a choice. She was his from the first moment he'd seen her. He just hadn't realized exactly how much.

He sprinted for her. Nothing was more important than keeping her safe and getting her out of here. Nothing. She was all that mattered.

A heavy figure slammed into his side, spinning him sideways. Lodan crashed to the ground, his sword skidding across the cobblestones.

Black armor gleaming in the dying sunlight, a Sardi soldier stood over him, his golden plume cascading above his helm.

"Aren't you supposed to be some kind of unkillable fighter? Look at you." The king spat, missing Lodan's face by a few inches. He studied Lodan through narrowed eyes. "I remember you."

"Good. You should know the man who's going to kill you." Anger no longer drove him. It was the need to end this fight forever. To create peace.

For her.

Harl's mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "I can't believe you survived. Guess I need to finish the job now."

Harl swung.

Lodan rolled, and the king's sword rang against the cobblestones. Lodan grabbed his sword from the ground and raised it before him just as Harl's second blow crashed down. Bronze blade screeched on bronze blade. Lodan heaved mightily, pushing. Harl staggered backward, and Lodan flipped onto his feet.

Harl snarled and struck again. Lodan parried, then returned a blow. Cassandra's shouts filled the air, and Lodan shouted again, "Kassandra, get out of here!"

Harl swept with his sword, aiming for Lodan's neck. Lodan twisted, and the blow skidded across his breastplate. "Trying to help my sister?" Harl laughed and swung again. This time, Lodan swung, too, meeting Harl's blow mid-strike. The king's smile slipped, and he grunted, scrabbling to keep his balance.

Lodan swung again, hitting the king in the side where the armor turned to leather. His sword bit deep. "That was for my sister."

Harl sidestepped, stabbing at Lodan's thigh, but Lodan batted it away. He returned the blow, striking Harl in the hip. "That was for my parents."

Harl raised his sword again, but Lodan smashed his sword down on Harl's hilt, and her brother's sword clattered to the ground. "That was for Kassandra."

Raising his sword, Lodan aimed for the king's neck. "This is for Anatolia."

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Kassandra's heart stuttered. This was the moment from her vision. Her brother fell to his knee, grabbing the dagger from where he'd hidden it at his ankle.

"Lodan," she screamed. "Poisoned blade!" This time, it finally seemed like he heard her.

Lodan twisted, but not fast enough. Harl slashed the poisoned dagger across Lodan's upper bicep. Not in his side like her vision, but he'd still cut him.

She'd failed.

Lodan staggered but regained his footing. He swatted Harl's hand with his sword, and the knife dropped to the ground. Lodan wavered again, his feet slipping. It was enough time for Harl to grab his sword from where he'd dropped it.

Blood dripped from Harl's hand as he swung his sword above his head, aiming for Lodan's neck. Lodan raised his sword in time to block the blow. The two stood like that for one, horrible moment, pressing against each other. "I'll drag your body through Anatolia, letting everyone see exactly what happens to my enemies," Harl sneered. "Then I'll drag hers. That's what we do to traitors."

The noise of battle faded, and she heard Lodan snarl. "You failed to kill me fifteen years ago. You'll fail again today." His arm shook, blood dripping from the wound.

He needed help. He needed the antidote to the poison. Now. Otherwise, he would die.

Her foot rested against something hard, and she glanced down. A bow lay there, a quiver half filled with arrows next to it. Built for a full-sized Alpha warrior, the bow was far larger than any she'd ever used.

It didn't matter, she had to try.

She picked up the bow and slotted an arrow. Her hands shook so hard she almost dropped it. Focus. She had to focus.

The muscles in her arms screamed as she hauled the string back. Clenching her teeth, she pulled harder, aiming for Harl's side.

She exhaled, and let it loose.

The arrow ripped forward with a twang. It sailed through the air but didn't reach his side. It arced downward, and sliced through his ankle.

Harl screamed and jolted back, but still managed to keep hold of his sword. "You traitorous bitch." His face was set in a mask of pure rage. "You turn your back on me? On your people?"

"I've chosen my people."

Harl shook his head. "After I kill the Myrdinians, I'll kill you."

Lodan lunged. "I don't think so." He swooped upward with his sword, and when her brother raised his arm to block, Lodan changed the direction of his strike. Harl was too slow to counter. The lethal point sank into his neck. Blood sprayed, and Harl slumped to the ground.

The Sardi king was no more.

Lodan's sword fell, and he collapsed sideways.

"No!" Pulling the antidote from her bodice, Cassandra raced to his side.

She dropped to her knees and pushed at his shoulder, rolling him onto his back.

His eyes were open, and his golden gaze locked with hers. "Kassandra." His breath rattled as he spoke. A death rattle.

Her stomach churned, and time seemed to stop. No. He couldn't die.

She yanked the top off the jar and scooped out the wet leaves of the antidote. Pressing it to the wound on his arm, she leaned closer. It had to work. It had to draw the poison out and save him. How much time had passed since he was slashed? Five minutes? Seven? The poison couldn't have reached his heart. Yet. "Stay with me. I'll get the poison out, and you'll be fine."

He raised his uninjured arm and cupped her face. "It's too late."

Her insides seized with ice. "No. Don't say that."

Xander dropped to his knees beside her. Blood splattered his armor, but it didn't seem to be his own. "What happened?"

"A poisoned blade. Can you get his armor off?"

Xander nodded. With two deft motions on the straps along the ribcage, the armor opened, baring Lodan's chest and neck. Cassandra put her hand over his heart. His heartbeat was slow and weak. So weak.

"What do I do?" Xander asked.

“Press here.” She lifted her hand, and Xander replaced it with his on the clump of leaves. “Keep the pressure there to draw the poison out.”

“Xander, finish what we started.” Lodan’s voice was low and soft. While he may have spoken to Xander, his gaze never left Cassandra’s face.

“Once the king fell, the battle was over,” Xander said. “You need to get up and see what you’ve worked for. Anatolia is finally free.”

Lodan took a long breath. “Good. Help them see it. Help them learn how to live with freedom.”

Kassandra wrapped one of his huge hands in both of hers. “Stay with me.” She leaned closer. “Stay with me, and stay with ... our child.”

His expression softened, and she saw Vasick. The boy who’d lost his entire family and finally avenged them. The man who’d held her. Cradled her. The man who didn’t hate her. “Our child?” he whispered.

“I didn’t take Greta’s herbs.”

His fingers loosened inside hers, growing slack as if his energy slowly leaked away.

She clutched them harder. “I might carry our child.”

A small smile flickered on his lips. “I’m glad.” His gaze grew more clouded, and his breathing more labored. “With my last breath, I can gaze upon the most precious thing in all of Anatolia.” His eyes searched hers for one more long moment, then slowly closed.

“No!” she screamed. This couldn’t be the end. She refused to let the prophecy come

true. To let death reach up and take him. “Don’t leave when I finally know ...” She threw herself on his chest and whispered, “When I know I love you.”

Beneath her chest, she felt his heart beat once, then no more.

Kassandra let out a strangled cry. Her mouth was at his neck, right where it sloped into his shoulder. Without thinking, she bit.

The bond started slow, a warmth like a hand on her chest. It quickened and grew but then turned cold. Ice cold. She clutched at Lodan. “You come back. Come back to me.”

A flood of heat washed through her. The bond, the primal, mysterious bond between Alpha and Omega, clicked fully into place. It was lightning. Fire. Like coming home after a long, long journey.

Lodan’s heart thudded. His chest rose and fell as he took a breath. Then another.

She gasped and drew back.

His eyes were open. “Vasick,” she whispered.

Lodan wrapped her in his arms and hauled her farther onto his chest. Growling, he sank his teeth into her shoulder.

The completion of their bond punched through her instantly. It slashed at her, fierce and possessive, but then warm, safe, twining around her so tightly it would never leave. It was Lodan. Exactly where she wanted him.

Lightness flooded through her like she was floating. His head fell back, and he gazed up at her. “You saved me.”

She smiled. “I had an arrow, and I didn’t even use it on you.”

“A lost opportunity. Now you’re stuck with me forever.”

She let a small cry, half sob, half laugh. “I don’t want to be parted from you ever again. Not even by death.”

“Good.”

His arms tightened, as if he was afraid she’d slip away. “Tell me you hate me.”

Her smile widened. “I love you.”

He smiled, too. “I know.”

EPILOGUE

Lodan stood outside their tent, watching the sun rise over the valley, bathing Myrdinia in gold. The flap rustled, and he turned. Cassandra walked out, and his heart thudded strangely, the way it always did every time he saw her. They were bondmates, true, but he didn't think the reaction was because of that. He thought it was because she'd made his heart start beating again, and it always recognized her.

It beat for her.

Her hair was loose down her back, and she wore a silky gown. It hid the swelling of her stomach, which had become much more noticeable in the past couple of weeks. "Quail eggs again?" he asked, trying not to flinch.

All she'd wanted for days were quail eggs. Chicken eggs were unacceptable. Duck eggs a definite no. So he, Cian, and Xander hunted the woods for hours to find quail. Even in Myrdinia, where game was plentiful, finding quail wasn't easy.

She shook her head. "No." Her gaze was distant, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. It was the expression she got after having a vision.

He cursed. Over the past few months, she'd slept soundly without visions. "What did you see? I should have been with you."

"I did see a vision." Her gaze locked on his, and she smiled. "But this one was wonderful."

He let out a long breath. “Truly?” He’d spent years in battle and never once prayed to the gods, but during their journey back to Myrdinia, they’d passed a small temple to Hypnos, the god of slumber, and he’d left an offering of wine and bread. He’d appealed to Hypnos for Cassandra to be able to sleep peacefully whenever she desired it. Until today, it had worked. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She joined him on the lip of the hill they camped on, fully facing the valley where his village once stood. Where it would soon stand again. “We were outside our home. It was a beautiful house made of stone and wood.” She pointed down at the valley’s eastern side, close to the river. “I think it was over there. It had to be, because those funny trees were near our house.” Cassandra liked the poplars that only grew in this area, calling them meat-on-a-stick trees, and they did look that way, with long bare trunks at the bottom.

He nodded. That was the exact place he was thinking about for their new home. “It’s a great spot.”

Her hand landed on her stomach. “You’re holding our son.”

His breath caught in his throat. “A boy?”

Her smile widened. “He looks exactly like you. Dark hair and golden eyes. I think he’s three or four years old.”

He put his hand on top of hers. The moment seemed to shimmer. A healthy son and a healthy Cassandra, both at his side years from now. There was nothing he wanted more.

“But I don’t understand something,” she said.

“What?”

“Why are we living in Myrdinia?”

“You don’t want to live here?”

She reached for him, pulling him closer. She’d become a cuddler, wanting him to touch her all the time. He wanted it, too. He was most content when her skin brushed his. “I know you wanted to rebuild, but I figured afterwards we’d end up in a palace where you ascend the throne and become king.”

“This is my home. Our home. I’ve sent messengers to all the city-state leaders, asking them to come to Myrdinia. To talk about how to rule together, to keep peace in Anatolia.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You aren’t going to be king?”

“I never wanted to be king. I never really saw past the final battle with the Sardi until you. Now all I want is a happy home where we can live in peace. Where our children can enjoy a free Anatolia. Where they can grow up knowing they’re loved.”

She hugged him fiercely for a brief moment, then relaxed, leaning into him. “I was worried about returning to palace life.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” During the time they spent with the Dorians opening new trade and forging an alliance, and then joining with the rest of his army to journey south, they’d spoken freely with one another, cementing their bond even further. He thought she’d gotten used to telling him everything in her mind.

“I know you’re the best thing for Anatolia, and I want to do whatever I can to help you. If that meant court life again, I’d do my best to like it.”

He sighed. “Do I need to punish you until you promise to always tell me what you feel? What you want?”

Her eyes lit up. “Can you?”

He hardened instantly. “We’ll be late for Cian and Xander’s bonding ceremony, and Cian will never forgive you.” Today, Xander and Cian would undergo the traditional ceremony along the ocean, about an hour’s walk away. The day would be spent feasting and dancing. A much-deserved day of relaxation for everyone.

Kassandra hadn’t wanted a bonding ceremony. She’d said that everyone saw them bond on the battlefield already.

He suspected it was also because she hated being in front of other people. The fact she was willing to return to palace life, where she’d face people daily, meant a lot to him. But he wouldn’t put her in that position.

She sighed. “Yes, I’d better get ready. I have to prepare my hair precisely how Cian wants it to be, or I’ll have to deal with him re-braiding it and fussing with it for hours.” But she didn’t leave his side. “There was something else in my vision.” She bit her lip, and he could feel her anxiety through their bond.

He tensed. “You said the dream was good.”

She nodded. She turned so their gazes met. Held. “You told me you loved me.” Kassandra put a hand to her chest. “I feel it through our bond, but you’ve never said it.” She looked away. “You said that part of you died, so I never expected?—”

He bent down and kissed her, intending to only whisper his lips across hers, but her arms slid around his neck, and he deepened it.

He would never get enough of this.

He pulled his face back a few inches. “I did say that. But that was before.” He placed her hand on his chest, the way he would during a bonding ceremony. He covered her

hand with his. “Do you feel this?”

She nodded. “I feel it beating.”

“My heart is yours. You brought it back to life. Not just by giving me the poison antidote and using our bond to save me, but in another way.”

“What way?”

“My path had become war and vengeance. A part of me was dead, and I didn’t see anything but those two things. I would have willingly met death because I didn’t remember that life could be more. But the first moment I saw you, my heart woke up again. It knew you, and you changed my destiny. It let me make the right choice with the prophecy.” The warm breeze wafted over him, and the cobalt sky reflected in her eyes.

His heart felt too full for his body. “When I took what I thought was my last breath, I only thought of you. All the battles, all the turmoil, it was important, but in the end, all that mattered was getting to see you one last time. I didn’t want to live a short life with my name living on forever. I wanted to live as long as possible with you in my arms.”

He ran his thumb across her cheekbone. “As darkness took me to the underworld, I heard you say you loved me, and I turned back, away from the darkness.”

She wound her free arm around his waist and pressed closer. “It would have been darkness for me, too. I can’t imagine my life without you.”

“The underworld wanted to keep me. I felt its hold. But when you bonded us, your love crashed over me. It fought against Hades itself.

“I had to return, because how could I leave you behind? You were my bondmate, and

I needed a lifetime to cherish you. To dream with you. To hold our children and keep you tucked close to me as we sleep. The underworld couldn't win, and it let me go." He kissed her gently. "We didn't have a proper bonding ceremony, but I should have said the bonding oath to you anyway. I'm going to say it now."

Her eyes were shiny. "You've already said more than enough."

No, he hadn't. Not if it shook her to see him express his love in a vision. He wrapped his hand more firmly around hers. "My blade is yours, so I can keep you and our children safe. My breath is yours, so I can share my thoughts with you. And most of all, my heart is yours because, from the first moment we met, it belonged to you. Only you. I love you, Kassandra."

Her eyes widened. "I love you, Vasick."

He swept her up into his arms. "We'll definitely be late now, and your hair will be a mess."

She laughed, and he cradled her close. He held his entire world in his arms, and he wasn't ever letting go.