

The five men at the fire have their backs to us; unbeknownst to them, death is creeping up behind. The closer we get, the hotter the air becomes. The faster my heart beats, the calmer I feel.

It's a strange high I've become accustomed to when walking into battle. My mind is empty except for a visceral need to kill and not be killed. A place and time where my thoughts cease and I'm nothing more than a girl using her body for what it's been trained for. Whatever the end may be—the reprieve of death or the sweet pleasure of victory—I'm ready for either outcome.

Shifting my sword in my hand, I dare a look at Fredrich. He's positioning himself to take the right flank, as I move left. Our eyes lock and . . .

. . . And he smiles. An impish grin I've never seen on his face before. Something more fitting for the likes of Messer.

"Intruder!" The man to the far right of the small congregation points in my direction, drawing the attention of the others.

His outcry dies on his lips as Fredrich swings his sword in a short arc, slicing through the side of the man's neck. He hasn't even hit the ground before Fredrich jabs his other blade through the throat of the next man in line—in one side and out the other before yanking it free.

The men are wholly unprepared for the ambush and scramble for their discarded weapons. Using their surprise to my advantage, I slice across the larger one's back. Non-fatal, but painful as fuck, making him arch from the discomfort. It takes a flick of my wrist to sever the artery in his neck, blood sent spewing across the ground. His scream turns into gurgles as he drowns.

The sound of hundreds of Strou warriors jolting from their sleep echoes from further in the cavern, but I keep my focus on the last man standing. He swings his sword toward my middle, and I leap back, waiting for his next move before advancing. Being smaller than most of my opponents, I'm often on the defense until there's an opening, and I've learned that even patience has a place in a fight to the death.

His next move is predictable. A backswing aimed at my neck. I lift my blade to block it, but before the steel of his blade meets mine, it hits an invisible wall of resistance. The warrior's rage morphs into undiluted fear at the realization, and I can't stop the grin pulling at my lips.

He's shaken, understanding that nowing he's on the losing end of my sword. He begins to fall back, footsteps shuffling as he retreats backwards.

The shield only protects me from harm, but it doesn't prevent my opponent from defending himself. I continue my assault. Front swing, back jab. Again, again, and again. I fake a jab to my left—his right—turning my body at the last second, and successfully disarm him. His sword skids across the cavern floor.

In a last ditch effort, he lunges for my throat, hands at the ready, only for his fingers to snap back from the force of meeting Fredrich's shield.

He screams when I plunge my dagger into his gut and I hold his stare as I twist the blade. His shrieks turn into choked protests as he fumbles for my wrist with gnarled fingers.

I acquiesce, releasing the weapon, blood gushing from the wound. It's too late to save himself though. His eyes roll back, body tilting in the same direction before he finally loses consciousness, falling with a loud crack onto the fire.

Darkness descends on the cavern, like the snuffing out of a candle. The commotion is extinguished along with the light.

After a beat of silence, the Strou warriors' voices begin to increase in volume again.

“. . . fucking kill you . . . Maile scum . . . another tally . . .”

A vibration hums in the air, and it takes me a moment before realizing it's the force of the shield holding the onrushing warriors back. Something touches the side of my neck.

I jolt.

“It's me,” Fredrich says, voice somehow clear above the chaos.

I let out a breath of relief, latching onto his arm, afraid to lose him.

His grip is firm but gentle as he pulls me closer. “Not scared of the dark, are you, light wielder?”

At the mention of my gift, I still. I'd all but forgotten the part of me that I've been constantly suppressing in the years since I left Kenta. That place inside me where my magic and Bond reside together as one.

I finger the stones at my neck. I never take them off.

The air becomes nearly unbearable. Deafening. *Violent.*

Fredrich makes the decision for me. “Show them how you burned down the Dark Forest.”

Taking a deep breath, I unclasp the necklace, slowly sliding it from where it rests on my collar bones. I remind myself that Acker has never tried to breach the Bond through the tether. Not once in all the years since I left Kenta. And if he wasn't wearing mangi stones himself, I'd likely already have been forced into his presence by now.

I let the string of stones slip through my fingers and fall to the ground.

The men rage beyond the invisible barrier and I focus on the beating of my heart to drown them out. Pressing my palm against the spot under my sternum, I concentrate as I beckon my magic forward.

Nothing happens.

It takes so long that I question whether I've smothered my magic to death.

Then I feel it.

As if unfurling from a winter slumber, my gift stretches. Slowly at first, but I feel it nonetheless. Like taking a shot of good whiskey, it burns, growing warmer as it spreads through my veins.

I gasp as a dusting of light shines from the exposed skin of my hands. I'd forgotten what this feels like. Painful, but delicious. Intoxicating. *Powerful.*

Then, in the blink of an eye, everything ceases to exist. The air stills. Silence descends so loudly that my ears ring. And I'm staring at a textbook laid open on a wooden desk, lit by a single candlestick. I struggle to make sense of what is happening when I see them. Male hands I've stared at for hours on end. Hands capable of amazing and terrifying things, with a silver scar that sits between the thumb and pointer finger.

The right hand slides underneath the tissue-thin paper and lazily flips the page.

In a panic, I attempt to squeeze my eyes shut, and just like my nightmares, the scene persists whether I want it to or not.

He reaches for something out of sight. His hand returns with a grape pinched between two fingers. The scar glints in the flickering light as he rolls the fruit between his fingers while he reads. More like skims, as I can barely make out the words on the page before he's moving onto the next.

Oh my gods.

The grape comes closer before disappearing. Sweat sugar coats my tongue, the crunch of the skin echoing in my ears as he chews.

This is not like the times after I accepted the bond, when my mind could be in two places at once.

No. The Bond doesn't want to let me go. Beau's words ring in my head.

*Magic doesn't like being denied.*

I need the stones.

Fredrich's voice sounds hollow when he yells.

"Jo!"

Acker's gaze snaps up.

Pain lances across my face, and the last thing I see is a view of Acker's bedroom and the figure of a woman asleep in his bed.