

Trinity

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For Tom and Eleanor. I love you both.

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Chapter One

"Kiana, are you even listening to me?"

Kiana peeked over the top of her drawing board and smiled innocently. "Of course I am, Ducarius."

The old man pursed his lips and peered at Kiana, forcing the young girl to stifle a laugh behind her hand. He always seemed to be annoyed with his pupil.

Kiana looked back down at her artwork: a detailed charcoal castle. It stood on a tall hill, surrounded by a grey stone wall. She had never seen it before, except in her dreams. From her apartments in Blackoak Tower, she had only ever been allowed to see the sky.

"If you *were* listening to me, what was I saying?"

Kiana rolled her eyes, placed the board and charcoal stick on the plush two-seater and stood. "How can I concentrate when I have a new Guardian arriving today?"

"Kiana, we really *must* continue our lesson."

She folded her arms across her chest and stared down at him. "Why, Ducarius? I'll still be here tomorrow. And the day after that. And the day after that. I'm not *going* anywhere."

She was painfully aware of the petulance in her voice. "Besides, what's the point anyway? You fill my head with history, reading, writing, philosophy and art, *every day*. Why?"

Ducarius threw his hands up and stood. "You are the physical embodiment of a *goddess*, Kiana. Those are all things you should know." As he spoke, he glanced at the tapestry of Miale's symbol—a golden chalice—that hung above the oversized fireplace.

"But *why*?" Kiana turned her back on him and looked out of the open doors that led to her balcony. The sky was a deep, endless shade of blue. "I will *never* use any of it!" *Because I'm stuck here.*

She looked round sharply as the door to her chambers clicked open. It was always locked, confining her within three simple rooms.

Marcas, her favourite Guardian, stepped in and gave Kiana a charming wink. "Your new Guardian is on his way up."

She smiled sweetly at Ducarius. "Can we stop our lessons for today? I promise I'll concentrate tomorrow."

Marcas nodded at Ducarius.

The old tutor sighed and muttered something under his breath as he gathered up the pile of heavy books. "Fine, fine. I'll see you in the morning." He touched his fingertips to his forehead and inclined his head ever so slightly towards her.

Kiana returned the gesture. She kept her eyes fixed on Ducarius until the door was closed behind him. She shivered at the heavy clunk of the lock.

"Are you well, Kia?" Marcas said.

Kiana grinned and half-ran, half-skipped the handful of paces to Marcas. She flung her arms around his chest and gave him a hug. "Yes." She tilted her head up so that she could see the amused twinkle in his hazel eyes. "Are you? I hardly get to see you anymore."

Marcas nodded and used his knuckle to tap her lightly under the chin. "My promotion keeps me busy, you know that. Besides, in a few moments you'll have a new Guardian to entertain you."

Kiana released him and wandered across the cold stone floor. She stopped in front of the vast map of Gettryne that hung on the wall. Several copper pins protruded from the map, marking the villages, towns and cities that each of her Guardians had come from.

She plucked a fresh pin from a leather bag that hung from the wall and turned the cool metal around in her fingertips. The tower's blacksmith had crafted each of the pins individually for her. He had obviously put a lot of effort into each one, even though Kiana had never been allowed to meet him. The one that she held was exquisite: the copper curled round into a spiral, creating a nest in which sat a sparkling green stone that she had been told was an emerald.

"I wonder where he's from..."

Kiana looked back at the map. The greatest concentration of pins rested in and around the city of Ironhold, which lay to the southeast of the tower. She tapped the top of the pin to her lips and then dropped it back into the bag.

With a dramatic sigh, Kiana swirled round towards the window, holding the full skirt of her gold surcoat so that she could hear the swish of the crisp fabric. She could see some of her Guardians laughing and chatting gaily outside. Beyond the chatter, she could hear the annoying chirping of the crickets that lived in the forest. Kiana had never seen it, but she knew from the map that was pinned to the wall that it existed.

Without thinking, Kiana strode out onto the balcony and tried to carry on up the ramp that would have allowed her access to the higher level. Two Guardians blocked her path. Kiana wanted to see the forest, touch the bark of the trees with her fingertips and see the birds that sang every morning. She wanted to hear what grass sounded like as she walked across it and how it felt between her toes.

Marcas' hand closed gently around her arm, just above her elbow. "You can ask him where he's from when he arrives." He led her back into her chamber. "Finn is giving him the grand tour of the tower first. He'll be here soon. That's if he isn't too scared to talk to you."

Kiana stared up at him, her eyebrows knotting together in a frown. "Too scared? Why would he be scared of me?"

Marcas laughed, letting go of her arm. "Ever since last summer, Finn has been telling tall tales about you!"

Her frown deepened. "Last summer?" Nothing special had happened the previous summer. Nothing special ever happened.

Marcas scratched the top of his head and looked away from her awkwardly. "Since you... blossomed."

Kiana stared at him for a moment and then her eyes widened as she glanced down at the slender curves of her body. She had watched her handmaid's body change long before hers had, even though they were the same age. Kiana felt her cheeks grow hot and turned away abruptly. "What exactly will Finn be telling my new Guardian?"

"Oh, you know, how terrifying you can be."

Kiana's lips parted into a small o. "Terrifying?"

"How difficult you can be."

Her mouth dropped open a little more. "Difficult?"

Marcas took hold of Kiana's hand and twirled her round. "And how much you like men!" As she came to a stop, Kiana realised her mouth was hanging wide open. Marcas' grin grew so wide she could see his crooked teeth. "*Especially* your Guardians!"

Kiana snapped her mouth shut. "He won't believe any of that, will he?"

She jumped as she heard two sets of approaching footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Quickly, Kiana smoothed out her clothes, brushed a stray strand of blonde hair behind her shoulder and took a deep breath in a failed attempt to calm herself as she waited with a smile for her new Guardian.

As Finn led the smart young man inside, Kiana looked him up and down. Like every Guardian, he wore a jet-black uniform made of finely spun wool. Beneath it, she could see the curves of his strong muscles. He wasn't tall; however, he had an air of confidence about him that seemed to drain away as soon as his dark brown eyes met hers. His face flushed red, which was an unfortunate combination with his straw-coloured hair.

"May I introduce you to the current incarnation of the goddess Miale: the lady Kiana." Marcas gestured towards her and gave a knowing grin.

Kiana rolled her eyes at the needlessly formal title. The new Guardian would know *what* she was. It was only her name that he wouldn't have known.

"Kiana, this is your new Guardian: Nidan Ward."

Nidan. She liked the sound of his name. "Finn hasn't been mean to you, has he?" Kiana greeted him formally by touching her fingertips to her forehead and then holding her clenched fist out towards him. She expected him to complete the greeting by meeting it with his own fist.

Nidan's cheeks flushed an even brighter shade of red as he took

a half-step back, struck his hand over his chest and bowed rigidly.

She looked at Finn and narrowed her eyes. "Finn, what *have* you said?"

Finn held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Nothing! I swear." There was a smirk on his lips that told her he was lying.

Kiana shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Of *course* you haven't." She looked back to Nidan. "You mustn't pay any attention to him." *Please don't believe anything he might have said!* "Finn has an odd sense of humour."

Finn and Marcos both laughed as they wandered outside and onto the upper balcony. She watched as they lounged against the railing, searching the horizon with their eyes.

Kiana flashed Nidan a smile, retrieved the pin that she had dropped into the bag below the map and then looped her arm through his. "Where are you from? Please tell me you aren't from Ironhold! I hope it's somewhere new. If it is, you'll have to tell me all about it."

"A village near Lorwick." Nidan's words sounded clumsy as they tumbled out of his mouth.

No other new Guardian had ever acted so nervously around her. *Should I ask him what Finn said about me?* She glanced briefly at Finn, narrowed her eyes and then turned back to Nidan, smiling. "Show me."

Kiana handed him the copper pin, watching as he pressed it into the map just to the west of the city of Lorwick. She smiled. It *was* a new place.

She led him out onto the balcony so that she could feel the breeze on her face. It tousled her neatly brushed hair and playfully rippled through Nidan's short-cropped style.

"You'll have to tell me everything about your home and family. What does your father do? How many brothers and sisters do you have?" She paused as his gaze dipped to the floor. "I'm sorry. Did I say something that offended you?"

Nidan shook his head. "No." His voice was quiet.

"You've lost someone?"

Nodding, he stared up at the sky, avoiding her concerned gaze.

"You don't have to tell me."

Nidan sighed. "My sister. To the last age of Thanatos."

Kiana suddenly felt cold. She *had* said something wrong. She would never live through an age of Thanatos: her birth had ended the last one and her death would start the next. However, Marcas had told tales of the madness that gripped the people of Gettryne and of all the senseless deaths that occurred. Kiana often chose to forget that everyone around her had lived through the last age of Thanatos and most had lost someone dear to them.

"Nidan!"

They both looked up at the sound of Marcas' voice.

"I think she *likes* you." Marcas gave them both a knowing wink.

Kiana felt heat rise in her cheeks.

Marcas turned away to look back over the railing.

"You shouldn't pay any attention to Marcas. In a few days he'll..."

"Sound the...!" Marcas' booming warning died on the air as fire engulfed his body.

Kiana screamed as Marcas' face contorted in pain. The hungry flames devoured his body and charred his flesh. She tried to run forward, but was stopped by Nidan. He spun her round so that she could no longer see the horror behind her. But she could still smell the stench of Marcas' smouldering flesh. She could still hear his agonising screams and the shouts of her Guardians.

The terrible sound of Marcas' cries began to weaken, falling away from her. Kiana tried to turn round, but Nidan's strong grip stopped her. Marcas' screams faded to nothingness. There was a loud splash. Marcas was gone. Kiana tilted her face up to stare at the perfect blue sky and screamed.

*

Skaric stared at the thick walls that surrounded the tower, his brow creased and his eyes narrowed. In the forest behind him, dry twigs snapped under dozens of booted feet belonging to lightly armoured Wolves. They strained against their orders, waiting impatiently for the nyxii to provide a way into the tower. There was so much tension and anticipation in the air that it made the hairs on Skaric's arms rise. Any Guardian visible on the walls had

already been dealt with; the rest were hiding like cowards within the tower. With them was the Wolves' quarry.

The sound of heavy feet clomping across the bank to his right drew Skaric's attention. His skin crawled as he watched Berend, the war leader, pace up and down. Fourteen years Skaric's senior, he was a tall and brutally strong man, whose tanned, scarred skin and full beard made him look all the more fierce.

"She must die," Berend said.

Skaric hated him.

They had been searching for seventeen years—ever since the last period of Thanatos had ended. Finally, they had found Miale: thanks to the wagging tongue of a desperate man. He knew that Berend couldn't afford to let her slip through his grasp: the shame would be too great.

"We must avenge Ysia." Berend stopped beside Skaric and folded his arms across his broad chest.

Skaric glanced at the war leader and then took a half-step away; he had always felt uncomfortable in Berend's presence. Hopefully, Berend was too focused to notice the movement.

To their left, Vali, another nyxus, extended his hand towards the wall, his fingers tensed as fire leapt from them towards a Guardian who had dared to survey the scene. The man's screams rang in Skaric's ears. He clenched his teeth; he had never heard so much death.

"The walls are too strong," Vali said. He turned and stared at Berend with sharp green eyes. He had a lean pinched face and hooked nose, making him resemble a hawk.

Skaric could almost feel Berend's rage growing in seething silence. It was the first time in three incarnations of Miale that the Wolves had gotten so close to destroying the Goddess' body and bringing the time of Thanatos early.

"We have to make these bastards pay!" Berend said. "They deserve to suffer."

Do they? Skaric turned his attention back to the tower. His fellow nyxii had sent searing flames hurtling at the walls, but the strong stone had barely been scorched. There was only one entrance into the tower, but an iron portcullis barred the way.

"Our fire cannot destroy stone or iron," Vali said. "There's no way for our men to get inside."

Skaric bit into his lip. The sudden sharp pain helped to calm him. There was a way. He could see it. Fire didn't have to be the only weapon of the nyxii.

"*Nothing* is impenetrable," Berend said. "There has to be a way. *Miale must die.*"

Miale must die. They have subjected us to a thousand years of persecution. We must have our revenge. How many times had Skaric heard those words? *Too many, but I have to live by them.*

He forced his mouth to curl into the ghost of a smile. "There isn't a weakness," he said, his voice little more than a whisper. "Yet."

"Didn't you hear me?" Vali said. "Our fire cannot penetrate the walls."

Skaric rolled his eyes. The true joy of nyxii magic was that it had no limits other than the will of the caster; his mentor, Jakob, had taught him that. There was no *god* to impose rules upon the nyxii. He glanced down at the ground. All the grass in a circle around him had withered and was blanched of colour. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that the closest trees had also shriveled and died; their leaves, crumpled and brown, littered the ground. *I did that.* He looked up and down the bank. Wherever a nyxus stood, there was death.

Bracing himself, he whispered, "There is a way to weaken their walls."

He shivered as Berend's large, powerful hand curled around his shoulder. Vali opened his mouth to say something but was silenced with a look.

"What do you need?" The war leader's voice was teetering on the edge of excitement.

Skaric paused before replying. His plan would cause the deaths of Wolves, including himself. But the rest of their forces would be able to surge into the tower and flush out their quarry.

"Well?"

He squirmed under Berend's angry stare. *Why did I say anything?*

"Think of how proud it would make your father if *your* actions

allowed us to capture Miale. *You* would be responsible for our victory.”

Skaric balled his hands into fists. He was a Wolf. Cowardice wasn't an option. Nor was compassion. He shrugged away from Berend's grasp and looked him in the eyes. “Sacrifices.” He was certain that the war leader would comply.

Berend grinned grimly. He wheeled away from Skaric and cleared his throat, addressing all the Wolves within earshot in a loud, booming voice. “All those willing to lay down their lives for the glory of Ysia, stand forward!”

Skaric fixed his gaze on the tower. He didn't want to know how many Wolves were happy to place victory above themselves and allow him to take their lives. He didn't want to see their faces.

“Your sacrifices await,” Berend said as he returned to stand beside Skaric. Then in a more dangerous tone he whispered, “Make sure this works.”

Skaric nodded. “You'd best stand back.” He didn't allow himself to look at Berend.

Skaric stepped forward onto healthy green grass and waited for a count of ten, long enough for Berend to get out of the range of his magic. He began to concentrate, narrowing his eyes so that he could focus on the portcullis: their only way in.

He slowly exhaled and then began to pull power from the earth. Energy flowed into him, warming from within. It wasn't enough, but he had known it wouldn't be. Skaric gritted his teeth and reached out with his mind, grabbing energy from the men behind him, from the willing sacrifices.

He could feel their life energy throbbing within him—like a dozen hearts beating beside his own. But faster. More desperate. He heard them all scream—sounds of terror that he tried to block out. It was too late to save them. They had *wanted* to die.

Power sizzled beneath Skaric's skin, so intense that he felt his head would burst. He pushed it all towards his hands, readying himself to release it. He just needed a little more. Behind him, the screams died out as the body of each sacrificial Wolf thudded to the ground.

Skaric waited. He waited until he could no longer draw any more power, waited until he couldn't bear the heat beneath his skin. Then, with a cry, he thrust his left hand towards the tower. Pure, deadly, devastating energy darted from his hand, stronger than a tumultuous wind. As it struck, the portcullis shattered into hundreds of lethal pieces that went flying in all directions.

Skaric heard the Wolves cheer, but it was distant, as though he was underwater. For all Berend's strength and physical might, he couldn't match the power that Skaric had just wielded. Not ever.

Unbearable pain coursed beneath Skaric's skin. The sickening stench of smouldering flesh stung his nostrils. His flesh. Pain like he had never known devoured him from within. At the edge of his vision fire leapt hungrily. The price for his arrogance. His death didn't matter. He was a hero. His name would be remembered amongst the Wolves.

The horror of watching Jakob die flooded into Skaric's mind. He heard his mentor's manic laughter, which had quickly turned to tortured screams of despair.

Fear gripped Skaric. It paralysed him. He could hear the rush of water in his ears. The moat. Skaric staggered towards the welcome darkness of the water. He fell, but the icy shock did nothing to quell the fire.

It's too late. I've destroyed myself! For what?

If he could have screamed he would. He was going to die and he was afraid. The water engulfed Skaric, wrapping him in its deadly embrace as it swept him away.

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"Switch clothes."

Kiana blinked at Finn. It was such a simple order but she couldn't make her arms move to obey him.

"Now!"

Slowly, Kiana turned to look at her handmaid. Erynn's eyes were red and puffy, her face smudged with dirt from the tunnel and her blonde hair dishevelled. The girl's shoulders shook as she pulled the plain brown surcoat over her head and held it out to Kiana. Like Kiana, she also wore an undyed woollen underdress that preserved modesty.

Kiana stared at the surcoat and then at Erynn. Her lower lip trembled and a lump formed in her throat that threatened to choke her.

"Now, Kiana!" Finn kept glancing towards Ciall, who was standing at the tunnel entrance.

Sunlight filtered in, providing enough light to see by deeper in the tunnel. Kiana could hear the sounds of fighting in the distance. Swords clanged against each other, feet thundered over wood and men screamed. She clamped her hands over her ears and sank down so that she was crouching.

Finn was shouting at her. Kiana shook her head and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She wouldn't listen. How could he ask her to send Erynn out to die?

A pair of hands closed over hers and pulled them away from her ears.

"Kiana."

Kiana couldn't immediately put a name to the gentle voice. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Nidan was crouching in front of her, eyes alert, body tense, but there was a kindness in his face.

"We don't have time to think," he said. "You need to do as Finn says."

"But..."

"Don't think." He was right. "You *have* to live."

Right again. She stood and pulled her surcoat off with numb fingers. Erynn helped her into the rough wool garment. It irritated the nape of her neck. *It doesn't matter!* She watched as Erynn pulled on the golden surcoat. Kiana had always wondered why she and Erynn looked so alike. Now it was clear: Erynn was the perfect decoy. Kiana shivered violently. Her stomach lurched. She turned away and threw up. Once she had recovered, Nidan offered her a scrap of cloth. She cleaned her mouth and then managed to force a grateful smile to her lips.

"We split into two groups," Finn said. "Bran and Coran will take Erynn." He looked at Nidan. "You're with me and Ciall."

Kiana had enough wits to see Nidan's eyebrows raise as his mouth dropped open. Under different circumstances, his expression might have been comical.

"Let's go!"

She forced herself to follow Finn out of the tunnel, expecting to see Wolves at any moment.

Finn must have sensed Kiana's nervousness. He paused and glanced at her. "From what we could see, the Wolves are concentrated around the moat. It's unlikely they'll find this entrance."

Kiana nodded. They had run through the tunnel for what felt like an eternity, and the fighting sounded so distant. Despite Finn's assurances, Kiana stared after the other group as they vanished into the forest. They had to stay safe. They *had* to.

They ran at the edge of the river across wet, slippery pebbles that threatened to send Kiana crashing to her knees. It took all her concentration to stay upright. She kept looking round. Every sound she heard sent shivers of fear through her body.

A burnt body swept past, carried by the fierce current of the river. Kiana paused, trembling, even though she knew it was insane to stop. "Why?" Her eyes felt heavy under the weight of unshed tears.

"Because the Wolves are monsters," Nidan said as he stopped beside her.

"We have to keep running!" Finn said. "We don't know how long it will take the Wolves to realise you're no longer in the tower."

Kiana swallowed back her tears. "It's my fault. Everyone is dead or dying because of me."

Nidan took hold of her hand. His touch felt warm against her cold skin. "No. They are dying because of the insane hatred of the Wolves. It isn't your fault."

Kiana's legs felt like lead. She couldn't control them or make herself move. She started to sink towards the ground.

"What are you doing?" Finn said. His grip tightened on the pommel of his sheathed sword as he glanced up and down the bank.

Gently, Nidan held Kiana by the shoulders, forbidding her from collapsing completely. "We have to escape." He looked her directly in the eyes as he spoke. "*You* have to escape."

She stared at him, blinking to stop her tears from falling.

"If you don't, the Wolves will win." His voice sounded cracked

and his hands were trembling on her shoulders. "People have sacrificed themselves for you and for Miale, but that was our choice, not yours. We all chose to become servants of Pios. We chose to become your Guardians."

"Why? Why would you sign up to die?"

"Because defending you prevents the time of Thanatos coming early. That's what matters."

She nodded slowly. "Your sister." She drew in a shuddering breath. "What's happening... what the Wolves are doing... it's so horrible."

"I know. It *is* horrible. We'll have time to grieve when we reach Valgate, I promise you. But not now. Now we have to run."

Kiana nodded again and righted herself. At the same time, she heard the sound of footsteps crashing through the undergrowth. Finn and Ciall both drew their swords, but when Nidan went to draw his own Finn stopped him.

"Take Kiana and run. We'll follow you when we can."

Nidan opened his mouth and then shut it again. Kiana cried out as he grabbed her hand and pulled her away. She'd already lost Marcos and now Finn was going to vanish too. Even though it made her footsteps clumsy, she looked back over her shoulder until Finn and Ciall had vanished out of sight. Soon after that, all she could hear was the ringing sound of steel clashing against steel. Unchecked tears fell down her cheeks.

They ran past more bodies, some still being carried by the current, others trapped on the bank. All were burned. All were dead. Kiana tried not to look, but it was almost impossible not to. She wondered if it would be possible to rid herself of the horror of the burnt corpses and twisted faces.

As they ran, Nidan kept glancing over his shoulder at her. He looked lost and frightened, but every time he caught her gaze, a confident smile broke onto his face.

Suddenly, Kiana pulled him to a halt. He turned round as she dragged her hand free of his and knelt down beside yet another corpse. Except it wasn't a corpse—not yet. She could see the faint rise and fall of the man's chest and hear his ragged breathing. The

sight was hideous. Glistening red welts covered his exposed skin, slowly oozing clear fluid. His face had not been burnt as badly. It was a dark shade of red that looked painfully tender, but there were no open wounds. His dark hair, beard and eyebrows were only a little singed. A revoltingly sweet, acrid stench rose up from the burns, so overwhelming that Kiana could almost taste it in the back of her throat. She clapped her hands over her nose and mouth and tried to breathe calmly. Beside her, Nidan gagged as he crouched down on the pebbles.

Kiana forced her hands away from her face, as she looked at Nidan. "Heal him?"

Nidan didn't move. "He's a Wolf."

Nidan was right: he was her enemy. His hands had probably killed her Guardians. Her friends. Her family.

Kiana's mouth quivered. She was sure of one thing: too many people had already lost their lives. "He's dying."

"He's a Wolf. We need to keep going," Nidan said, tugging at her hand.

Kiana pulled away from his touch. "We can't just leave him." She didn't look at Nidan as she disobeyed him.

"Yes we can."

"No! He's in pain! How can you be so cruel?" She breathed in and out heavily. Her throat felt sore from shouting.

Nidan sighed and pulled a dagger from his belt before holding it over the man's throat. Kiana placed her hands over his, forbidding him from delivering the killing blow, even though her hands were trembling violently.

"He's a Wolf! It's no less than he would do to us." Nidan's voice dripped with venom. "Besides, look at him. Killing him is probably a kindness."

"You can't." Kiana's breath caught in her throat. It seemed that it wasn't just the Wolves who were controlled by hatred.

The Wolf made an odd whistling sound as he suddenly sucked in a large gulp of air. Kiana turned her attention back to him, knocking Nidan's hands and the knife aside without resistance.

The Wolf's eyes opened slowly, revealing cold, light eyes that

were full of pain and anger. He stared directly at Kiana and his eyes widened slightly.

He knows who I am. "Can you talk?"

He did not respond. Kiana wasn't even sure that he *could* respond. She reached out a hand but hesitated, unable to actually touch him. His mouth twisted into a faint grimace.

She looked up and stared at Nidan. "Please? Please heal him."

"Even though he's a Wolf?"

Kiana dipped her gaze and looked the Wolf in the eyes again. His stare dared her to kill him. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it's wrong to leave him in pain. And Pios teaches us that *all* human life is sacred. Even if he is a Wolf, he's still human."

Nidan rubbed his face with his hands. "He would kill us without hesitation."

Did he really think she didn't know that? Fresh tears welled in Kiana's eyes. "I don't want anyone else to die because of me." She drew in a deep breath. "As a Guardian, you have the power to heal him. As a Guardian, you must do as I say and I am *ordering* you to save him." Despite the stern words, she could feel herself trembling.

Nidan looked from her to the Wolf and then back again. "You're so naïve." He shook his head, muttering something under his breath. "Keep watch. If you hear or see anything, I stop and we run, understand? Nothing is more important than keeping you safe."

Kiana nodded and stood. Water had seeped into her clothes, and the woollen cloth clung to her legs, making them feel heavy and cumbersome. She watched as Nidan laid his dagger within reach but away from the injured Wolf. Then he placed both hands over the Wolf's chest and closed his eyes.

At first nothing seemed to happen. Kiana did her best to keep watch. She glanced up and down the bank and tried to gaze into the forest, listening to the distant sounds of fighting; it sounded more like swords clanging in the practise yard than a heated battle. The trees that Kiana had longed to see seemed to be working against her, as their deep shadows provided a multitude of hiding places for the Wolves that wanted her dead. She couldn't see or hear the

birds that woke her every morning with their song. Every living animal in the forest seemed to be hiding from the destructive force of the Wolves. Kiana wished she could join them.

She kept finding her gaze drifting back to Nidan and the Wolf. Nidan's brow was furrowed and his fingertips were twitching. Kiana laced her fingers together and glanced around again. Now that she was further away from the Wolf, her stomach was no longer churning at the sight and smell. She heard the sound of a twig snapping behind her and spun round. An animal? A man? She held her breath and stared. *I should tell Nidan.*

Kiana turned back to face Nidan. His face had become slack, peaceful, and all the tension had drained from his shoulders.

There was no more sound from the forest. It had to have been an animal. Ducarius had told her that there were deer in the forest; his books had contained drawings of the timid animals.

Suddenly, Nidan looked up. "He's one of their cursed mages."

She looked at the Wolf. His eyes were still open, staring and unreadable. "How do you know that?"

Nidan twisted so that he could look at her. "The damage started *inside* him. That's the cost of their repulsive magic. Use too much and it kills them." His mouth curled into a snarl. "I should have known."

"How could you?"

Nidan gestured to the Wolf. "He's not carrying any weapons."

Kiana's brow puckered in thought. The Wolf's weapons could have been swept away by the river. However, if Nidan said the Wolf could cast magic, she believed him. A mage had killed Marcos. Countless other Guardians had burst into flames. *I should hate him. I should want him dead.*

"Can you save him?"

Nidan shrugged. "If the damage is too great, no amount of healing will help him." The corners of Nidan's mouth tugged down. "Why hasn't he killed us?"

Kiana looked at him, puzzled. Surely the Wolf was too injured to harm anyone, least of all her.

"I was taught that a Wolf mage could cast their magic no matter how badly injured they are, even if doing so kills them," Nidan said.

Kiana shuddered and regarded the Wolf. It was a good question, but she doubted he would give them an answer.

The Wolf's brow furrowed and he closed his eyes tightly.

Kiana didn't need to know why the Wolf hadn't tried to kill them. "Will you try to heal him?" She expected Nidan to argue.

He didn't. Nidan puffed out his cheeks and closed his eyes again. This time he relaxed almost immediately. Kiana made quick glances around, watching for danger. When she looked back at the Wolf, his eyes were open again and his expression was less pained. Physically, he looked the same.

Eventually, Nidan rocked back onto his heels and looked down at the Wolf. "He won't die."

"But..."

Nidan snapped his head round to look at her. "I've set magic in place so his wounds will heal quickly. There won't even be any scarring. It's a damned sight more than he deserves."

A smile of relief touched Kiana's lips. She had been wrong to doubt Nidan. "Thank you." She looked down at the Wolf. "Try not to get yourself killed." She began to turn away, but paused. "If you want to thank us, then don't kill another soul tonight."

She held a hand out to Nidan. "We should go."

The nervous expression vanished from Nidan's face. He stood and accepted her hand. As they moved away, the Wolf painfully propped himself up on one elbow. Kiana froze and stared at him.

"Run." The Wolf stared directly at her, his eyes were cold and piercing.

Kiana shuddered.

The Wolf's eyes narrowed in an expression of anger. "Run."

Nidan's grip tightened on Kiana's hand and he pulled her away from the Wolf.

Chapter Two

Nidan dipped his flask in the cool river, took a swig and then stood and faced the imposing cliff that towered above them.

"What are you thinking?" Kiana was watching him intently. The shine had gone from her eyes, and her shoulders sagged under the weight of the day's events.

Instead of replying, Nidan looked at the uneven surface of the dark rock, searching.

"Nidan?" Kiana's voice had risen in pitch.

It was the first rest Nidan had allowed them to have since they had fled the tower. Throughout the day, they had heard Wolves in the distance and caught the occasional glimpse of men through the trees, but by Pios' will they had managed to evade detection.

"We need to find somewhere to hide," Nidan said. He could just make out several gashes and fissures gouged into the rock in the gathering darkness.

"Can't we keep running?" Kiana raised her hand to point downstream. Almost immediately she allowed her arm to drop limply by her side.

"You're exhausted. I'm exhausted. Besides, the Wolves will expect us to head for the main road to Valgate," Nidan said.

Arms crossed, hands resting on opposite shoulders, Kiana moved to stand beside him. "They'll send more men there, won't they?"

Nidan nodded. "But if we head north, we can reach Valgate by going across country *and* avoid the main road." He looked down at Kiana's face, which was cast in shadows in the failing light. Her

eyes were wide and fearful.

"There isn't anywhere to hide," she said. "I can keep going." She sounded so defiant that Nidan wanted to believe her.

He narrowed his eyes, stepped up to the rock and used his fingertips to explore the tallest fissure; it was longer than the height of an average man. Already, the shadows were making it look smaller and less significant, but Nidan could see that it extended back into the rock face. It was just wide enough for a person to squeeze through; at least, he hoped it was wide enough.

"I think there's a cave here." Nidan glanced at Kiana; her expression was doubtful.

"Won't the Wolves see it?"

"It's almost fully dark. *If* they're searching for us by night they'll need to use brands. That will limit their vision. They'll never be able to tell this is a cave entrance."

Kiana tilted her head to the side as she gazed at the entrance. "Can we fit?"

"I hope so!" Nidan forced a grin to his lips.

Kiana paused for a moment. "We'd better get going then," she said bravely. "Before those bastards find us."

Nidan raised his eyebrows.

"What? Haven't you ever heard a girl curse before?"

He shrugged. "Several times. I just haven't heard *you* curse before."

Kiana laughed, though the sound was strangled and forced and the humour didn't reach her eyes. "Even the incarnation of Miale is allowed to use bad language, you know."

Nidan laughed with her; only *his* laughter was real. Despite their desperate situation and everything that had happened, she could still make a joke.

Taking a long deep breath, Nidan pushed himself into the narrow entrance. He had to keep his breathing shallow, and there was a section that was so narrow it felt like he would become trapped. He was glad that Kiana was considerably slimmer than he was. His face scraped against the unforgiving rock, grazing his cheek.

Nidan froze, holding his breath as an unwelcome sound filled the forest: the unmistakable snap of twigs under boots. There was

too much noise for it to be Finn and Ciall. Nidan caught his breath and offered a silent prayer to Pios. He made himself carry on. Behind him, Kiana had stopped and he could hear that her breathing had become faster.

"You have to move," Nidan said through gritted teeth.

Kiana didn't respond and seemed to be frozen with fear.

After two more paces, Nidan broke free of the narrow entrance and stepped into a pitch-dark space. He turned round but Kiana was blocking any remaining light from outside the cave. Feeling the wall carefully, he found the entrance and managed to locate her hand. Her soft skin felt cold to the touch.

"You have to move. If you don't, the Wolves will find you. You *have* to move."

Nidan tugged gently and let out a sigh of relief as Kiana responded. As she stepped into the cave beside him, he heard the sound of strangled sobs escaping her control. He pulled Kiana close and gently covered her mouth, willing her to be silent.

He listened. The footsteps were closer. He could hear the sloshing sound of at least, two men tromping through water. Three more walked across the rocky ground. Through the narrow entrance, he could just see the flickering orange glow of fire. Briefly, he was able to see Kiana's unusual amber eyes, wide with terror, and the fine features of her pale, untanned face. Then the fire moved away and the cave was once more plunged into darkness.

An age seemed to pass before Nidan heard the footsteps moving away in the direction that he and Kiana had been travelling. His heart thudded against his chest. The Wolves had been too close. If Kiana had dallied any longer, they would have been captured and killed. But they still weren't safe. They had to stay silent so their hiding place wasn't discovered. His tongue suddenly felt like a lead weight. Visions of nyxii fire blazing through the narrow entrance plagued his mind. He could feel the torture of imagined heat on his skin.

Nidan did not let go of Kiana until he was convinced that the Wolves had moved away. As soon as he did, he felt her sink to the ground. He wanted to find some way to reassure her but didn't

dare speak. Instead, he explored the cave. It was deeper than he had expected.

"Let's go further in." Nidan kept his voice low.

He helped Kiana to her feet and, stooping, led the way through the dark until his hand hit the back wall of the cave. Exhausted, Nidan dropped down to the ground. He wrinkled his nose against the stale musty smell. The walls and floor were damp. No sunlight was able to filter in to warm the rock, so the cave was cold. It didn't matter. It was somewhere to rest. Somewhere to close his eyes for a few moments.

Nidan was shocked into waking when Kiana spoke.

"The Wolves don't take prisoners, do they?" Her voice sounded miserable. Even though she had spoken quietly, her words echoed softly around the cave.

Nidan shifted uncomfortably. Water had seeped through his clothing, chilling him. "No, they don't." There was no point in lying to her.

"Everyone will be dead. Everyone." Her voice quavered as though she was about to cry again.

"You should get some sleep." He didn't know how to comfort her; words would do little to console her.

"You should sleep too."

"I will, when you're safe." Nidan had to stifle a yawn with the back of his hand. Pios! He was tired.

He felt Kiana shift her position slightly as she affected a cough.

"You said the Wolves wouldn't find us here. Sleep while you can. You're no good to me if you're exhausted."

Nidan raised his eyebrows at her authoritative tone; it was a shame his expression was lost in the darkness. He *was* exhausted, but that didn't mean he was going to obey her. "I'm trained to stay awake. Besides, it's safer if one of us does." *I only hope that I can.*

He felt her become tense.

"Are you trained to *die*?" Kiana drew in a ragged breath. "Were you all trained to *die*... for me? Was Marcas trained to *die*?" An anguished sob escaped her. "Were Finn... or Ciall... or the other Guardians?" She paused to sniff. "Were Erryn... and Ducarius?"

What... about... everyone else who lived and... and worked in the tower?" She inhaled sharply.

Nidan hesitated. What could he say or do to ease her grief? Everyone in her life was probably dead. *Except for me and I barely know her.*

When he did speak, his voice came out as a strangled whisper. "Guardians are trained to defend you. We are... were... all prepared to die for Miale."

Kiana grabbed his hand. She was shaking.

"The souls of the Guardians and servants that the Wolves cut down will already be with Pios," Nidan said.

"I wish the Wolves hadn't come." She began to sob bitterly.

"So do I."

Slowly, Nidan pulled his hand away from Kiana's and wrapped his arm around her, drawing her closer. Under the circumstances, it was the only thing he could do. She needed to be comforted. Kiana began to cry more freely. Although she made very little sound, her entire body shuddered violently. She buried her face against Nidan's side, and soon his black tunic was soaked with tears.

Like him, Kiana stank of sweat, smoke and river water, but there was also the faintest scent of lilac in her hair. Nidan's sister had worn a similar perfume. He tightened his grip. He had never been able to comfort Brid; he had only been a child when she had died. *It was my fault. I failed her.* He wouldn't fail Kiana.

Nidan leaned his head against the damp rock and stared into the darkness. With luck, all of the Wolves would pass them in the night. With luck, he would be able to deliver Kiana safely to Valgate.

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Berend felt the shame of failure burning in the pit of his stomach. It didn't matter that they had defeated the Guardians; Miale had slipped through their grasp. After overrunning the tower and rounding up any survivors, the Wolves had turned the drafty eating hall into a war room. Outside, darkness wrapped around the tower whilst inside, the only light was provided by a dozen flaming brands seated in sconces around the hall.

He hovered at the shoulder of the Alpha, Adalric, as they slowly circled a pack of grim-faced men. Adalric's height and cold blue stare made him look impressive as he prowled around the men. Adalric's arms were folded across his chest; a stern expression his lined face as he listened to the pack's report, or rather their excuses.

Berend was sick of hearing about failure. With every new report, his shoulders got more hunched and his forehead more creased. His brows hooded his eyes and his mouth was tight, hiding clenched teeth. Was it really so difficult to hunt down one naïve girl who had never left the tower before that day?

"We tracked down a fleeing group of Guardians," one of the men said. He stood completely still, head bowed in subjugation.

Berend didn't know the pack leader's name, nor did he care. The pack still wore their leather armour; the proud image of a wolf's head was etched into each breast plate. It was a shame the pack had nothing to be proud of.

"There was a girl with them wearing Miale's colour, but they were obviously a diversion," the man carried on. "If they knew anything about the direction that Miale had gone, they didn't say."

Adalric leaned forward. "You're sure that the girl was *not* Miale?"

The pack leader nodded. "Her eye colour was completely normal. Besides, if she had been Miale, we would have been plunged into the time of Thanatos as soon as we slit her throat."

Berend narrowed his eyes as he remembered the last period of Thanatos and the madness that had gripped people. Alive, Miale balanced people's minds just as Pios balanced the physical body and Ysia *had* provided balance for the dead. The Darkness only knew what happened to the souls of the dead now that Ysia was gone.

"You tortured them?" he asked, though it wasn't really a question.

The man nodded. "But they wouldn't talk. The girl just cried and screamed until we killed her."

"The Guardians are all well trained," Adalric said grimly. "We know that. Thank you for your report, Osgar."

"What should we do now?"

Adalric looked down at the map that was pinned out on the long wooden table in front of him. Berend followed his gaze. The

areas that had already been searched and secured had been marked by ugly iron pins.

"Rest for tonight," Adalric said.

"We already have more men resting than we can afford," Berend said. If he were in charge, no one would rest until Miale was found. He was not afraid of exhaustion, suffering or death. He would give anything to avenge Ysia, even the lives of himself and his men. It was in their blood.

Adalric's lips grew taught. "Our men are useless to us if they are fatigued, Berend." He addressed the pack before him again. "In the morning, head north and scout along the main road to Valgate."

Berend scowled. "We already have packs searching that route."

Adalric glanced angrily at the war leader. "I'm well aware of that. I sent them there."

Berend growled in his throat but said nothing. He watched as Osgar and his pack stood to attention and then left the room, their footsteps echoing over the pale flagstones. Another pack stepped forward. More failure. More excuses.

"Raynar, what news?" Adalric said.

After bowing deeply, Raynar opened his mouth to speak. He barely got a word out before the door to the hall opened and one of their chief apothecaries entered.

Adalric immediately held up his hand to silence Raynar. "Brokk?"

"Your son is awake, Alpha," Brokk said from the doorway, where he stood fidgeting.

Adalric nodded and began to walk away from the table.

Berend's mouth briefly relaxed into a smile. He was looking forward to this.

"Alpha, we should hear Raynar's report first," Berend said. Not that he wanted to, but he had to keep up appearances.

"It can wait, can't it, Raynar?"

Raynar bowed his head and nodded. "Of course, Alpha."

Berend followed Adalric out of the hall. The Alpha's shoulders were tense, and Berend hadn't missed the look of concern on Adalric's face. It made him sick.

As they walked across the courtyard, Berend surveyed the dev-

astation. The stonework was blackened, and almost all of the wooden buildings in the courtyard had been burnt. Now only charred skeletons remained. The bodies of horses lay in the ashes of the old stable block. The only outbuilding that was still standing was the barracks, which they had turned into a makeshift infirmary.

Inside, apothecaries were working tirelessly to patch together warriors and those nyxii that could be saved. Bowls of sweet incense were burning, making Berend's nose wrinkle. The incense did little to deter the flies that buzzed irritatingly as they searched for festering wounds to settle on, but it did mask the stench of bitter herbs, blood and death.

Brokk led them to the final bed where Adalric's son lay. His face was turned from them, his breathing brisk and obviously pained.

"His burns are healing far faster than natural," Brokk said without looking at Adalric. "But at the moment, the damage is still deep and he is in considerable pain."

Adalric took a hesitant step closer to the bed. "But he'll live?"

Brokk nodded nervously. "Yes."

"Thank you." Adalric dismissed Brokk with a vague wave of his hand.

The apothecary nodded, bowed and then quickly scuttled off to tend to another patient. The man was a coward. It was obvious what he was thinking: Skaric's burns were being healed by the magic of Pios; there was no other explanation. It would have been better if Skaric *had* died.

"Skaric?" Adalric said, his voice unusually gentle.

Berend curled his upper lip. How could Adalric show his coward of a son any compassion? He watched as Skaric slowly turned his head to look at his father. The boy's face was slightly red with traces of peeling skin on his nose and cheeks. The rest of his body was wrapped in clean bandages, making it impossible to see the true extent of the damage caused by the fire that should have killed him.

"Did we find her?" Skaric's voice was barely more than a whisper.

"No," Adalric said. "But that isn't your fault."

Berend held back a growl. *It was your fault.*

Adalric stepped closer to the bed. "You did well. Without your bravery, we would never have breached the walls."

Bravery? Skaric was a coward. Everyone knew it, yet Adalric wouldn't admit it.

Skaric stared at his father with a blank expression. There was no pride in the young man's face. Berend couldn't wait to see what happened when Skaric owned up to his dishonourable actions.

"But afterwards..." Adalric's voice was hesitant.

Berend suppressed a smile. He waited, hoping.

"...Afterwards you acted like a coward." A coward had no business living, let alone being the Alpha's heir. "Why? Why didn't you accept your death?"

Skaric closed his eyes. "Would you rather I had died?"

Yes, you should have died.

Adalric sighed heavily. He looked like he was about to shake his head.

"Better to die a hero than live a coward," Berend said quickly.

Skaric opened his eyes and stared at Adalric. "I'll accept any punishment you think fitting, father."

Berend looked to the Alpha, waiting to hear the coward's fate. Lashings would be a good start. Serving the women folk would bring shame upon him. Death would be preferable, but Berend knew that wouldn't happen; they had lost too many nyxii in the assault on the tower. That would be the excuse.

"There will be no punishment," Adalric said. "Rest. We can talk again when you are fit and healthy."

Berend gaped open-mouthed as Adalric turned to leave the infirmary. He quickly clenched his teeth and began to follow, but then paused and looked back at Skaric. Adalric had to be shown that he was making a mistake.

"Given what Brokk said, that shouldn't be long. He did say that your wounds are healing unusually fast. Do you know why?"

Skaric didn't deign to give any reply.

"It seems unnatural to me," Berend said. "I'd wondered if you had found some way to make the fire heal rather than destroy. But as we all know, only Pios has any power over healing."

Adalric grasped Berend's arm tightly. "You should watch your tongue. Be careful with your accusations."

"I'm not accusing him of anything, Alpha. I'm simply curious."

Adalric's moustache bristled. "Keep your curiosity to yourself."

Berend bowed his head. "Of course, Alpha." He tugged his arm away from Adalric's grasp and continued to walk towards the exit. The sound of Skaric's weak, pathetic voice stopped him.

"I forced a wounded Guardian to heal me. I promised him his life, and then I killed him." Skaric's voice was flat and expressionless as he spoke.

Liar. "Yet he left you with considerable wounds." Berend glanced back in time to see Skaric grimace.

"He obviously misjudged the strength of a nyxus." Finally there was a hint of emotion creeping into Skaric's voice. "He probably thought that if he left me wounded I wouldn't be a threat. He was wrong."

Adalric laughed. "A mistake the fool will never make again! See," he said, punching Berend lightly in the arm. "There is an explanation for everything. We must go. Raynar will still be waiting."

Berend breathed in and out deeply, but he said nothing as he followed his Alpha. He risked one parting glance at Skaric. If the Alpha of the Wolves had one weakness, it was his compassion for his son. Skaric should have died.

Chapter Three

Everyone within the remains of the tower seemed to have a task to do: looking after the horses, tending the wounded, burning the dead on both sides or readying provisions for the next set of search parties. Everyone except for Skaric.

His wounds were almost fully healed, even though only one night had passed since he had been consumed by fire from within. He stood in the shadow of the tower, watching as his father stood talking to Brokk and Berend in the centre of the courtyard. The apothecary was moving his arms in an animated fashion. Skaric was trying to feign disinterest in their conversation, but the surreptitious glances they took in his direction made it clear they were talking about him. He doubted he would ever be made privy to what they were saying.

Skaric forced himself to look away, turning his attention instead to the jagged remnants of the portcullis. He stared at it, unable to tear his gaze from the destruction. It was suddenly painful to breathe as he took in the damage that *he* had caused. *My magic. Power I dragged out of the earth... and my own people.* The memory made his healing skin itch, and he suddenly felt deathly cold.

Again, he forced himself to turn away and look at the handful of nyxii that hadn't been sent out with packs. They were doing exactly what he should have been: training and honing their talents. He watched as the ground around them died a little more with every spell they cast. All fire. Fire hadn't destroyed the portcullis.

"You should be with them."

Skaric lurched round and came face to face with Vali, who wore a loose-fitting grey woollen shirt and breeches. He wasn't carrying any weapons; the nyxii didn't need knives or swords, and they didn't get close enough to combat to warrant wearing armour.

Skaric pushed the panic from his face and clenched his hands.

"At least, you should be helping to deal with the dead. You look fit enough for *that* task." Vali's mouth twisted in disgust as he contemplated the unpleasant task.

There were still plenty of dead bodies that needed to be burned. They were stacked up in piles in the courtyard, and the cloying, stomach-turning odour of burnt flesh hung in the air. Skaric resisted the urge to scratch the scars on his arms. No one in the tower had been spared. Those that hadn't died in the fighting had been rounded up and slaughtered. Wolves didn't take prisoners.

"Why aren't you training?" Skaric hoped his tone sounded casual.

Vali's thin lips relaxed into a grin as he nodded towards a pack that had just returned. "I've been out hunting for Miale since last night." He looked Skaric up and down; his grin melted into a smile. "It's good to see you on your feet."

Is it? Skaric searched Vali's face for a moment; his smile looked genuine enough. He wanted to believe that Vali's words were sincere.

"People are talking about you," Vali said quietly, whilst maintaining a casual expression on his face. "They say you've lost your nerve."

Skaric felt the muscles in his face tense at the accusation. The worst part was, the rumours were right.

"Add to that how quickly you healed..." Vali shook his head. "By the Darkness, Skaric, I thought you would be the last person to bring shame on yourself, let alone your father."

Skaric clenched his teeth. "Just what are people saying?"

"That you made a deal with Pios." Vali's gaze bored into Skaric's eyes as though he would find an answer there.

Skaric forced himself to laugh; it sounded hollow, even to him. "I forced a Guardian to heal me and then I killed him." How many times would he have to repeat the lie before he believed it?

Vali continued to stare at Skaric for a moment longer. He sighed heavily, shrugged and threw his hands up in a submissive gesture.

“Don’t blame me. I’m just letting you know what the others are saying. Look, do yourself a favour and get over there, and show everyone that you aren’t scared of casting magic.”

Skaric couldn’t make himself nod and move towards the nyxii. *Vali is right. I am afraid.*

Vali took a step closer, his expression serious. “You know as well as I do that failure isn’t an option for us. People should be hailing you as a hero, but instead, they’re calling you a coward and insinuating that you might be a traitor.”

Skaric ran his hands over his face and shook his head. He didn’t understand what was so cowardly about wanting to live, but he knew he would be damned for it. He *should* have killed Miale. That would have saved him from humiliation. She had been right there in his grasp. Skaric pressed his lips together to stop himself from grimacing. He had let her walk away because he was afraid to die. No one knew about his missed opportunity. No one could ever know. He had to find a way to prove himself again. In the meantime, he hoped his father’s status would protect him.

“If you don’t want to find a knife in your back, you’d better do something to stop their wagging tongues.” Vali’s expression hadn’t changed, but there was concern in his eyes. His words destroyed Skaric’s hope.

“What does it matter to you?” Skaric only managed to stare at Vali for a heartbeat before he looked away. Adalric wouldn’t protect him; if anything, being the son of the Alpha would bring death on him even faster. He tried not to wonder who would be sent to kill him.

Vali pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes slightly. Then he forced out a laugh and slapped Skaric on the top of his arm. “If you’re not around, who else am I going to compete against? There’s not one other nyxus that can match either of us in skill and you know it. So stop being a coward!”

Vali wouldn’t be the one to kill him.

Skaric didn’t watch his friend walk away. He felt torn between anger and gratitude. Eventually, he made himself look back to the nyxii and tried to gather up the courage to stride over to them and show off, as he would have done only days before. He took the

first steps but stopped as he left the shadow of the wall. The morning sunlight struck the skin on his face and hands. Fresh pain made his skin tingle and become unbearably itchy. He stared down at the pale pink remains of the burns that covered his hands.

Curse the Guardian that had healed him. Curse Miale. Skaric's chest tightened as a flood of confusion crashed into his mind. It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. He tugged his sleeves over his hands, bowed his head to shield his face from the sun and strode quickly towards the makeshift infirmary.

*

During the night, Nidan had heard two more groups of Wolves passing by the cave entrance. Eventually, he had fallen into a fitful but necessary sleep. When he woke, his joints were stiff, cold and aching. He had a parched mouth and growling stomach. Light filtered into the cave, though it brought no warmth with it.

They had to get to Valgate quickly.

Nidan glanced down at Kiana. Her face was smudged with grime, but there were clean streaks where tears had washed the dirt away. Asleep, she looked peaceful. Nidan wished she could stay that way for longer, but it was too dangerous. He slowly moved his arm from around her shoulders, disturbing her slumber. He saw her eyelids flutter open, and she stared up at him. Kiana's brow furrowed and her lips parted slightly in an unspoken question. Then she sat up abruptly, letting out a soft cry as her elbow struck rock. Breathing quickly, she stared at the interior of the cave and then at him.

"It wasn't a dream!"

Nidan's lips shrank into a solemn frown. He shook his head.

Kiana wiped her hand across her forehead and then tucked rogue strands of blonde hair behind her ears. "We need to get moving, don't we?"

Nidan hesitated, wondering if she was all right to travel. Not that it mattered: they had to press on if they had wanted any hope of escaping the Wolves.

After leaving the safety of the cave, Nidan insisted they walk in the river itself so that they couldn't be tracked. The river didn't

hamper their movements too greatly because it was shallower than it had been closer to the tower. They were exposed, but hopefully, the Wolves were satisfied the area had been thoroughly searched during the night and previous day.

At first they walked in silence, keeping up a relatively brisk pace throughout the morning. Nidan tried to watch Kiana and keep a look out for any sign of the Wolves but was hampered by the rock face to his left and the dense trees that lined the river on the opposite bank. The constant babbling of the water tumbling over rocks and pebbles made it hard for Nidan to hear anything more than a stone's throw away. Kiana looked like she was on the verge of tears. She didn't cry. She just clenched her teeth in a determined fashion and stared fixedly ahead.

"Tell me about your family," she said suddenly. "I know about your sister but... I just want to... please tell me about your family."

It was probably close to noon. Nidan was tired, hot and hungry. The desperation behind her question took him by surprise and reminded him of the first time he had met her. Less than a day had gone past. It felt like weeks.

"My father is a messenger for the church of Miale. He taught me about tracking while we travelled together, but that was before I joined the church of Pios." Remembering didn't cheer Nidan up.

Kiana increased her pace. "I don't know what my father's trade is."

Nidan turned his full attention to her and immediately saw that her eyes were red and her face was puffy. Her hands were tightly clenched.

"I don't remember my parents at all," she said in a quieter voice, bowing her head. "The only family I've ever known are dead. Why do the Wolves hate me so much?" She sobbed and stared at him with desperate eyes filled with tears.

Nidan drew in a deep breath and shook his head. He couldn't answer her question. No one knew why a Wolf had killed Miale a thousand years earlier. Since then, the goddess had been trapped in a mortal body. Living. Dying. Being reborn.

"I didn't ask to be the incarnation of Miale." Kiana stopped and

pressed her fists to her eyes. "Is it wrong of me to hate the fact that I am?"

Nidan pulled her into an embrace, allowing her to weep into his shoulder. He felt tears soaking through his tunic again. Her sobs were more desperate than they had been the previous night and were completely unrestrained. He hoped that the babbling of the river and the occasional cry of birds would hide the sound of her grief.

Kiana pulled away and used her dirty sleeve to wipe her eyes and cheeks. "I'm sorry." Her tone was oddly formal. She looked away from him. "I shouldn't be ashamed of what I am, much less hate it."

"It's all right..."

Kiana shook her head. "No, it isn't. I have been blessed. I shouldn't be acting like a child."

"Kiana..."

She ignored him and began walking again. "And it isn't my fault that Marcas and the others are dead. The Wolves did that because they are consumed by hate. It wasn't my fault." She drew in a shaky breath. "Besides, this isn't the time to grieve. Not when we're still in so much danger."

Nidan stared after her. *There has to be something I can say.* But no words came to him.

*

Skaric welcomed the dark shadows that were starting to stretch through the forest; they were a welcome relief from the torture of the sun. Was that why Berend had ordered him to go on patrol? Did the war leader want to see him squirm? Throughout the afternoon, Skaric had clenched the horse's reins to stop himself from scratching his itching skin; his need was made worse by Berend's proximity to him. All the time, Berend was watching, scrutinising and silently accusing him.

Several deer trails cut through the forest, making it was easy to find routes for the horses. Overhead, the canopy was thick but dappled light still streamed through, creating shimmering pockets of light. It was almost beautiful, almost peaceful.

Until the sounds of other Wolves moving through the forest reached Skaric's ears. None of them were making any effort to be quiet. It was in the moments when he couldn't hear boots breaking twigs that he realised how eerily silent the forest was. There were no birds chirping, no rodents rustling, and the deer had all fled as soon as they had sensed the presence of Wolves the day before. The only sound he heard was the delicate rustle of the breeze disturbing the leaves above his head and the thump thump of two sets of hooves. Sometimes, the horses stumbled over a stone that clicked against their hooves or snapped a twig, but there were no other natural sounds, not even the sound of the river.

They had found no sign of Miale, only the myriad of tracks created by Wolves on foot or on horseback, which had resulted in the forest floor becoming a churned up mess.

"This is hopeless." Skaric frowned and chewed on his lower lip as he realised they were approaching the same twisted tree for the fourth time since setting out from the tower. The thick trunk rose to half a man's height and then split in two. Both sections spread out almost horizontally in opposite directions before curving up again and splitting into branches and leaves. The dark bark had been rubbed off in several places, leaving cream scars; it was probably a favoured scratching post for the elusive deer.

"Yes, it is." Berend jabbed on the left rein to force his horse to turn abruptly so that he was facing Skaric. "But you know we aren't really out here to look for Miale, don't you?"

Skaric's mouth suddenly became dry as Vali's words flooded back into his mind. He tried to dismiss them. Berend could have killed him at any point during the afternoon, but he hadn't.

"It would have been better if father had punished me." Skaric looked up in time to see a thoughtful expression cross Berend's face, but the war leader said nothing. "Anyone else would have been." He had seen men lashed or hung for cowardice.

"Perhaps your father thinks the pain you endured then and the humiliation you are feeling now is punishment enough."

Skaric's hands tensed, causing his horse's head to toss angrily. He quickly dismounted, trusting the well-trained horse to remain

close by, nibbling idly on grass and twigs. The twisted tree provided a good leaning post for Skaric. The rough bark pressed through his thin shirt into his back. He stared up at Berend and focused on calming his breathing, attempting to hide his emotions. Skaric didn't want to look more cowardly than he already did. Emotions were for women—or the weak-willed followers of Pios and Miale.

Berend dismounted with a thud. He began to walk towards Skaric, looking down his nose as he spoke. "You must know how much you have disgraced your father."

Skaric hunched his shoulders and bowed his head. Berend began to walk around the tree, never taking his gaze off Skaric. Skaric's breath caught in his throat. He fought against his desire to move; he was already showing enough weakness as it was.

Berend's hand curled around his shoulder. Skaric had to stop himself from shivering and twisting away. His heartbeat increased and he felt slightly light-headed.

"I need you to help me understand something, Skaric."

Skaric curled his hands around the thick branch. Sweat was beginning to make his hands slippery.

"When you were healed..."

"I didn't make a deal with Pios." Skaric closed his eyes briefly. The speed of his response had made him sound guilty.

Berend laughed but at the same time, he tightened his grip on Skaric's shoulder. "I had heard that rumour."

Skaric clenched his teeth and cursed the frailty of his body, compared to the strength of Berend's. His shoulder was aching under the war leader's grasp.

"However..."

Skaric held his breath, waiting.

"The Guardians aren't completely stupid. Certainly not stupid enough to believe that you would let one go in return for healing you."

Skaric couldn't force words into his mouth. No one was stupid enough to expect mercy from a Wolf.

"Did you know that I was the one to find you?"

Skaric's eyes widened. He shook his head.

"Of course, you didn't. You were unconscious. Do you know what else I found?"

Skaric stared directly ahead.

"Two sets of footsteps, leading away from you."

Skaric felt himself shaking. Berend's grip on his shoulder tightened again.

"The tracks belonged to a man and woman. There wasn't the body of a Guardian anywhere near you."

Skaric whimpered softly as Berend's fingertips sunk into the flesh around his shoulder joint. "I dragged myself away... I tried to return to the battle, but my strength failed me and I blacked out." His lie was unraveling and he felt powerless to stop it.

"I think you're lying, Skaric."

Skaric shook his head defiantly. "I'm not."

The memory of the compassion in Miale's amber eyes slipped back into Skaric's mind. He couldn't block it out. There had been more compassion in that one look than he had felt in his entire lifetime. *Curse her.*

He heard the whisper of metal being drawn across leather. He couldn't move or think. Suddenly, he felt Berend's warm breath against his ear and face.

"Despite all your pathetic lies, you are right about one thing. You *should* be punished."

No. Skaric lurched round, wrenching his shoulder from Berend's grasp and swung his clenched fist at the war leader's face. The bones in Skaric's knuckles crunched as his fist impacted against Berend's jaw. Pain flowed through his fist, eclipsed by a sharp throbbing sensation in his side. He choked on pain and glanced down to see a dagger protruding from his torso. The hilt was already slick with blood. His blood.

Berend stumbled back, wrenching the dagger cruelly from Skaric's side as he did so. The war leader used his off-hand to nurse his jaw while he opened his mouth wide, testing the joint.

"There's only one way you can beat me," Berend said, staring at Skaric.

Magic. Skaric bit his lower lip, trying to block out the pain that was smothering his thoughts. He could feel the warmth of blood trickling down his side and leg. He tried to open his left hand, but the broken fingers refused to respond.

Berend began to laugh. Energy flowed around Skaric's body, lending him a strength he had never believed he was capable of. Anger fuelled Skaric's actions as he ignored the pain in his fingers and punched the war leader in the face again. The blow impacted on Berend's nose with a sickening crunch. Blood smeared across the war leader's face. Berend dropped to his knees. Seizing the opportunity, Skaric slammed his foot onto the war leader's hand. Pain tore through his side. He fought through it and applied pressure until Berend released the dagger. Skaric quickly kicked it away.

"Did my father order this, or are you acting alone?"

Berend laughed even harder as he stood. Skaric failed to see the punch until it hit him. Pain slammed into his face, knocking him off his feet. He landed hard on his back, gasping. Loose dirt billowed up in a cloud, making him cough as it settled in his nose and mouth. Winded and with the wound in his side hurting ever more fiercely, Skaric could only stare as the war leader moved with frightening speed. He cried out as Berend's knee thrust into his stomach, robbing him of his breath. Then Berend's hands curled tightly around his throat, slowly squeezing the life from him.

Skaric choked as he clawed desperately at Berend's hands. They were painfully strong and he was pathetically weak in comparison. Berend was still laughing; the sound cut through Skaric's mind like a knife.

"Did... my... father... order... this...?"

Berend responded by tightening his grip on Skaric's throat. He dug his knee deeper into Skaric's gut. Bile rose up into Skaric's mouth. He couldn't breathe. Or choke. Or swallow. He slammed his right palm into Berend's already broken nose and applied as much pressure as he could. The mocking expression on Berend's face was replaced by one of anger, and a hint of the pain he must have been feeling crept into his eyes.

"Why... won't... you... answer... me?" Skaric's voice was barely audible.

With his left hand, he began to grope desperately for the knife. It was his only chance. He managed to force his broken hand to close around the blade. It bit into his skin but he didn't care. He clumsily turned the knife round and took hold of the handle.

Berend loosened his grip slightly and leaned down so that he could whisper in Skaric's ear. "You are a miserable wretch who has brought dishonour on our Alpha. That *cannot* go unpunished."

Black spots were beginning to form before Skaric's eyes. The last of his energy was being choked out of him. His body was becoming numb. Even though his muscles were barely responding, Skaric somehow managed to find the strength to thrust the dagger towards Berend. The blade sank into the soft flesh of the war leader's armpit; it wasn't a deadly blow but it was a painful one. The war leader cried out and fell back, the dagger tearing free from his flesh, his hands pulling away from Skaric's throat. Skaric gulped in precious air quickly, making his body tingle and his head buzz.

Berend closed his left hand over the knife wound and glowered at Skaric. "You little..."

Still gasping for breath, Skaric moved before Berend could finish and plunged the knife into the war leader's right hand. It burst through flesh and bone and became lodged in an exposed tree root that snaked across the forest floor. Despite the sickening light-headedness that plagued him, Skaric staggered to his feet. The forest span and his body swayed. He risked pausing long enough to take a deep breath in an effort to steady his senses and then sprinted towards the horses.

Skaric glanced back in time to see Berend pull the knife from his hand and cast it aside. Fear pulsed through Skaric's veins. Berend didn't need a weapon to kill him. He couldn't let the war leader get close to him again.

Standing, Berend lurched towards him. "It's my duty to ensure that you pay for what you have done."

With violently shaking hands, Skaric grabbed the reins of his horse and pulled it round so that the animal stood between him and Berend.

"Did my father order this?" *I need to know.*

Berend's only response was to continue forward.

Skaric waited, holding tightly onto the horse until Berend was within reach. Then he fought through the ache in his throat to scream as loudly as he could in the animal's ear. Terrified, the horse whinnied and bucked. One of its hooves clipped Berend's knee. There was a loud pop and the war leader collapsed to the ground, writhing in agony, screaming as he gripped his knee.

Skaric's stomach lurched but he wasted no time in mounting the horse, despite the pain tearing through his cut, broken fingers and side. He whipped the reins at Berend's mount, which took fright and galloped deeper into the forest. After urging his horse a safe distance away, Skaric paused and allowed himself to look back. To his alarm, Berend had managed to drag himself upright. The war leader tried to put pressure on his injured leg but howled in pain. Blood poured freely from Berend's nose, drenching his heavy, dark beard and neck with a scarlet river.

"Did my father order this?"

Berend smiled at him, though it quickly turned into a snarl.

"What are you going to do, Skaric? Run? Like a coward?"

Skaric gritted his teeth together and urged the horse forward.

Berend's voice roared after Skaric. "That's all you'll ever be! A coward! I'll hunt you down!"

Then the only sound was of hooves pounding on the forest floor, and the only thing Skaric could make himself think through a haze of dizzying pain was that he couldn't go back.

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