



## CHAPTER 10 | CYRA

I DIDN'T EXPECT AKOS Kereseth to return, not without being dragged. But he was at my door the next morning, a guard lingering a few paces behind him, and he had a large vial of purple-red liquid in hand.

*"My lady,"* he said, mocking. "I thought, since neither of us wants to maintain constant physical contact, you might try this. It's the last of my stores."

I straightened. When the pain was at its worst, I was just a collection of body parts, ankle and knee and elbow and spine, each working to pull me up straight. I pushed my tangled hair over one shoulder, suddenly aware of how strange I must look, still in my nightgown at noonday, a sleeve of armor around my left forearm.

"A painkiller?" I asked. "I've tried those. They either don't work or they're worse than the pain."

"You've tried painkillers made from hushflower? In a country that doesn't like to use it?" he asked me, eyebrows raised.

"Yes," I replied, terse. "Othyrian medicines, the best available."

"Othyrian medicines." He clicked his tongue. "They may be the

best for most people, but your problem isn't what 'most people' need help with."

"Pain is pain is pain."

Still, he tapped my arm with the vial. "Try it. It may not get rid of your pain entirely, but it will take the edge off and it won't have as many side effects."

I narrowed one eye at him, then called for the guard standing in the hallway. She came at my urging, bobbing her head to me when she arrived in the doorway.

"Taste this, would you?" I said, pointing to the vial.

"You think I'm trying to poison you?" Akos said to me.

"I think it's one of many possibilities."

The guard took the vial, her eyes wide with fear.

"It's fine, it's not poison," Akos said to her.

The guard swallowed some of the painkiller, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. We all stood for a few seconds, waiting for something, anything, to happen. When she didn't collapse, I took the vial from her, currents shadows surging to my fingers so they prickled and stung. She walked away as soon as I did, recoiling from me as she would have an Armored One.

The painkiller smelled malty and rotten. I gulped it down all at once, sure it would taste as disgusting as these potions usually did, but the flavor was floral and spicy. It coated my throat and pooled in my stomach, heavy.

"Should take a few minutes to set in," he said. "You wear that thing to sleep?" He gestured to the sheath of armor around my arm. It covered me from wrist to elbow, made from the skin of an Armored One. It was scratched in places from the swipes of sharpened blades. I took it off only to bathe. "Were you expecting an attack?"

“No.” I thrust the empty vial back into his hands.

“It covers your kill marks.” He furrowed his brow. “Why would Ryzek’s Scourge want to hide her marks?”

“Don’t call me that.” I felt pressure inside my head, like someone was pushing my temples from both sides. “Never call me that.”

A cold feeling was spreading through my body, out from my center, like my blood was turning to ice. At first I thought it was just anger, but it was too *physical* for that—too . . . painless. When I looked at my arms, the shadow-stains were still there, under my skin, but they were languid.

“The painkiller worked, didn’t it,” he said.

The pain was still there, aching and burning wherever the currentshadows traveled, but it was easier to ignore. And though I was starting to feel a little drowsy, too, I didn’t mind it. Maybe I would finally get a good night’s sleep.

“Somewhat,” I admitted.

“Good,” he said. “Because I have a deal to offer you, and it relies on the painkiller being useful to you.”

“A deal?” I said. “You think you’re in a position to make deals with me?”

“Yeah, I do,” he said. “As much as you insist you don’t need my help with your pain, you want it, I know you do. And you can either try to batter me into submission to get it, or you can treat me like a *person*, listen to what I have to say, and maybe get my help easily. Your choice, of course, *my lady*.”

It was easier to think when his eyes weren’t bearing down on mine, so I stared at the lines of light coming through the window coverings, showing the city in strips. Beyond the fence that kept Noavek manor separate, people would be out walking the streets, enjoying the warmth, dust floating all around them

because the earthen streets were dry.

I had begun my acquaintance with Akos in a position of weakness—literally, huddled on the floor at his feet. And I had tried to force my way back to a place of strength, but it wasn't working; I couldn't erase what was so obvious to anyone who looked at me: I was covered in currentshadows, and the longer I suffered because of them, the more difficult it was for me to live a life that was worth anything to me. Maybe this was my best option.

"I'll listen," I said.

"Okay." He brought a hand to his head, touching his hair. It was brown, and clearly thick, judging by how his fingers knotted in it. "Last night, that . . . *maneuver* you did. You know how to fight."

"That," I said, "is an understatement."

"Would you teach me, if I asked you?"

"Why? So you can keep insulting me? So you can try—and fail—to kill my brother?"

"You just assume I want to kill him?"

"Don't you?"

He paused. "I want to get my brother home." He spoke each word with care. "And in order to do that, in order to survive here, I have to be able to fight."

I didn't know what it was to love a brother that much, not anymore. And from what I had seen of Eijeh—a flimsy wreck of a person—he didn't seem worthy of the effort. But Akos, with his soldier's posture and his still hands, seemed certain.

"You don't know how to fight already?" I said. "Why did Ryzek send you to my cousin Vakrez for two seasons, if not to teach you competency?"

"I'm competent. I want to be *good*."

I crossed my arms. “You haven’t gotten to the part of this deal that benefits me.”

“In exchange for your instruction, I could teach you to make that painkiller you just drank,” he said. “You wouldn’t have to rely on me. Or anyone else.”

It was like he knew me, knew the one thing he could say that would tempt me the most. It wasn’t relief from pain that I wanted above all, but self-reliance. And he was offering it to me in a glass vial, in a hushflower potion.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

Soon after that I led him down the hall, to a small room at the end with a locked door. This wing of Noavek manor wasn’t updated; the locks still took keys instead of opening at a touch or the prick of a finger, like the gene locks that opened the rooms where Ryzek spent most of his time. I fished the key out of my pocket—I had put on real clothes, loose pants and a sweater.

The room held a long countertop with shelves above and below it, packed with vials, beakers, knives, spoons, and cutting boards, and a long line of white jars marked with the Shotet symbols for iceflowers—we kept a small store of them, even hushflower, though Thuvhe had not exported any goods to Shotet in over twenty seasons, so we had to import it illegally using a third party—as well as other ingredients scavenged from across the galaxy. Pots, all a shade of warm orange-red metal, hung from a rack above the burners on the right, the largest bigger than my head and the smallest, the size of my hand.

Akos took one of the larger pots down and set it on a burner.

“Why did you learn to fight, if you could hurt with a touch?”

he said. He filled a beaker with water from the spout in the wall, and dumped it in the pot. Then he lit the burner beneath it and took out a cutting board and a knife.

“It’s part of every Shotet education. We begin as children.” I hesitated for a moment before adding, “But I continued because I enjoyed it.”

“You have hushflower here?” he said, scanning the jars with his finger.

“Top right,” I said.

“But the Shotet don’t use it.”

“The Shotet’ don’t,” I said stiffly. “We’re the exception. We have everything here. Gloves are under the burners.”

He snorted a little. “Well, *Exceptional One*, you should find a way to get more. We’ll be needing it.”

“All right.” I waited a beat before asking, “No one in army training taught you to read?”

I had assumed that my cousin Vakrez had taught him more than competent fighting skills. Written language, for example. The “revelatory tongue” referred only to spoken language, not written—we all had to learn Shotet characters.

“They didn’t care about things like that,” he said. “They said ‘go’ and I went. They said ‘stop’ and I did. That was all.”

“A soft Thuvhesit boy shouldn’t complain about being made into a hard Shotet man,” I said.

“I can’t change into a Shotet,” he said. “I am Thuvhesit, and will always be.”

“That you are speaking to me in Shotet right now suggests otherwise.”

“That I’m speaking Shotet right now is a quirk of genetics,” he snapped. “Nothing more.”

I didn't bother to argue with him. I felt certain he would change his mind, in time.

Akos reached into the jar of hushflower and took one of the blossoms out with his bare fingers. He broke a piece off one of the petals and put it in his mouth. I was too stunned to move. That amount of iceflower at that level of potency should have knocked him out instantly. He swallowed, closed his eyes for a moment, then turned back to the cutting board.

"You're immune to them, too," I said. "Like my current gift."

"No," he said. "But their effect is not as strong, for me."

I wondered how he had discovered that.

He turned the hushflower blossom over and pressed the flat of the blade to the place where all the petals joined. The flower broke apart, separating petal by petal. He ran the tip of the knife down the center of each petal, and they uncurled, one by one, flattening. It was like magic.

I watched him as the potion bubbled, first red with hushflower, then orange when he added the honeyed saltfruit, and brown when the sendes stalks went in, stalks only, no leaves. A dusting of jealousy powder and the whole concoction turned red again, which was nonsense, impossible. He moved the mixture to the next burner to cool, and turned toward me.

"It's a complex art," he said, waving a hand to encompass the vials, beakers, iceflowers, pots, everything. "Particularly the pain-killer, because it uses hushflower. Prepare one element incorrectly and you could poison yourself. I hope you know how to be precise as well as brutal."

He felt the side of the pot with the tip of his finger, just a light touch. I could not help but admire his quick movement, jerking his hand back right when the heat became too much,

muscles coiling. I could already tell what school of combat he had trained in: zivatahak, school of the heart.

“You assume I’m brutal because that’s what you’ve heard,” I said. “Well, what about what I’ve heard about you? Are you thin-skinned, a coward, a fool?”

“You’re a Noavek,” he said stubbornly, folding his arms. “Brutality is in your blood.”

“I didn’t choose the blood that runs in my veins,” I replied. “Any more than you chose your fate. You and I, we’ve become what we were made to become.”

I knocked the back of my wrist against the door frame, so armor hit wood, as I left.

The next morning I woke when the painkiller wore off, just after sunrise, when the light was pale. I got out of bed the way I usually did, in fits and starts, pausing to take deep breaths like an old woman. I dressed in my training clothes, which were made of synthetic fabric from Tepes, light but loose. No one knew how to keep the body cool like the Tepessar people, whose planet was so hot no person had ever walked its surface bare-skinned.

I leaned my forehead against a wall as I braided my hair, eyes shut, fingers feeling for every strand. I didn’t brush my thick dark hair anymore, at least not the way I had as a child, so meticulous, hoping each stroke of the bristles would coax it into perfect curls. Pain had stripped me of such indulgences.

When I finished, I took a small currentblade—turned off, so the dark tendrils of current wouldn’t wrap around the sharpened metal—into the apothecary chamber down the hall where Akos had moved his bed, stood over him, and pressed the blade to his throat.

His eyes opened, then widened. He thrashed, but when I pushed harder into his skin, he went still. I smirked at him.

“Are you insane?” he said, his voice husky from sleep.

“Come now, you must have heard the rumors!” I said cheerfully. “More importantly, though: Are *you* insane? Here you are, sleeping heavily without even bothering to bar your door, a hallway away from one of your enemies? That is either insanity or stupidity. Pick one.”

He brought his knee up sharply, aiming at my side. I bent my arm to block the strike with my elbow, pointing the blade instead at his stomach.

“You lost before you woke,” I said. “First lesson: The best way to win a fight is to avoid having one. If your enemy is a heavy sleeper, cut his throat before he wakes. If he’s softhearted, appeal to his compassion. If he’s thirsty, poison his drink. Get it?”

“So, throw honor out the window.”

“Honor,” I said with a snort. “Honor has no place in survival.”