

Chapter 1

Kaya—Six years ago

Disposable.

That's what we were. The lot of us. We were hundreds in number, but not one of us mattered. What mattered was protecting our secrets.

Protecting *their* secrets.

They had given us this power, and using it to protect them was the least we could do in thanks. At least, that's how we'd been trained to think.

Not everyone in Farehail was blessed with power. No. Only some of us were. The lower families who had children blessed with power were the unlucky ones. Those children were taken once they showed potential. They were ripped from their parents' arms and thrust into the bosom of the guild. They were trained not only in their abilities but in bloodshed and deception as well. The guild was ruthless.

The higher families, those with sway and money, were lucky. They were usually able to stay together, even with that power flowing beneath their skin. Especially with that power. They ruled this land.

It wasn't as cut and dry as that. Everyone did their part. Everyone valued the contributions put forth by others. Without one group, the other would fall. We needed each other, and we all knew it.

The rain was cold as it beat down on our heads. I was chilled to the bone, sopping wet and almost shivering. But I wouldn't show that weakness. None of us would.

We stood in rows, listening to the orders as they were shouted over the sounds of thunder reverberating off the surrounding wall. Lord Holden was demanding, but he was thorough. We had never been so safe as we were now with him as our leader.

Our scouts had sent word that there were intruders on the island, and they were to be found and dealt with. We were to be sent out in groups of four—our normal groups—to sweep through every inch of the island.

Nash, Finn, and I had been together for years—since we were children. We made the perfect unit, especially for how young we all were. Our mentor and superior, Shepard, was reserved and aloof, but he handled us well enough. He valued what each member brought and encouraged our independence as well as our teamwork.

"Shep!" Holden's growl caught me off guard. I turned toward Shepard, shooting him a confused look. He rolled his eyes and stomped forward to see what Lord Holden was on about. The rows dispersed, and Nash came to stand with me.

"What do you think he wants? Shouldn't we get going? We're losing valuable time," I ranted to Nash. I hated waiting. I was always biting at the bit to go out on these missions. It was the only time I felt like I actually had a purpose here. I loved being beyond the wall, surrounded by the trees.

“Finn’s sick. I assume we’re getting a stand-in until he gets over it.” Nash was so nonchalant as he spoke, as if his best friend being left behind was no big deal. Though, it wasn’t to them. They didn’t feel the same about these things as I did. They didn’t feel the pull that I often felt to scurry beyond the city. I was sure Finn was sound asleep right now, warm and dry, not a care in the world.

This was my entire life, though.

I smothered my annoyance. Water trailed down my cheeks, but the rain was beginning to let up. Shepard stood talking to Lord Holden, boredom almost leaking from his pores. I huffed a short laugh before noticing the silhouette standing off to one side.

Cillian.

Shepard turned and assessed Cillian, sensing where my own eyes had gone. The younger man was standing with his hands tucked into his pockets. He held himself in such an assured way that made me jealous. He was lethal—skillful—and he knew it.

The lower half of his face was covered by a piece of solid black cloth, as always. Only his striking gray eyes were visible beneath his charcoal hair and the barest hint of dark skin. Shepard gave him a curt nod, then inclined his head back to where Nash and I stood.

He couldn’t.

My heart skittered to a halt as Cillian fell into step behind Shepard—a shadow flitting in tandem with its owner. I felt Nash pull his pack from the ground and toss it over his shoulder. I dipped down to do the same, unable to take my eyes from Cillian.

“Since Finn’s out, we’ve been assigned Cillian. Let’s move.” Shepard always had a way with words. Straight to the point. I tried to ignore the delight emanating from Nash as we leapt from the rise and onto the sodden ground with little more than a splash.

Without a word, we moved as a unit through the archway of the city wall to the tree line just beyond the border. Under the canopy, we were protected from the pelting rain. I wiped the water from my face with the back of my arm, trying as I might to clear my blurred vision.

“We’ve got the northern, outer quadrant. We’ll comb through slowly, double-checking the areas as we make our way out. We don’t want to miss anything.” Shepard disappeared into a tree, getting swallowed up by its dark void, and each of us followed in turn. Nash, then me, then Cillian taking sweep. Emerging somewhere it wasn’t raining, I gave thanks to the Wildewood for the small blessing.

“What are Ezra and Wren doing since you’re with us?” I asked Cillian.

“Well, Holden only sent the novices out today. So, I assume they’re somewhere warm.” Cillian sent me what I could only assume was a half smile. It was hard to tell beneath the mask, but his eyes sparkled slightly with playfulness. “I was just unlucky enough to be available as stand-in.”

“Lucky for us,” Nash practically sang. I shoved him in response.

“Your brother will be happy I was sent with you. You know how he worries.” Cillian stepped around me as he spoke, heading to where Shepard studied a map.

“Ezra needs to relax.” I grabbed Nash and pulled him alongside me, my fingers digging into his flesh slightly harder than necessary. We hovered over the map together as Shepard marked our destination.

“Kaya doesn’t need anyone’s protection,” Shepard mumbled, but he didn’t take his eyes from the parchment. I smiled, knowing this was likely the only compliment I would ever get from Shepard. Not that I needed it. As long as he wasn’t berating me, I knew I

was adept. He wasn't one to coddle his inferiors, and he did not hesitate to give us a good smack every now and again if we failed to follow his instructions. My corrections came fewer and farther between than either Nash's or Finn's, thankfully. Shepard had trained me well.

"Ezra still sees her as a child. I don't know if that will ever change." I watched as Cillian spoke, noting how his eyes darted to me sidelong.

"This wasn't his idea, was it?" I demanded, annoyed by the idea of Ezra sending a chaperone to look after me.

"No." Cillian didn't elaborate more, though I felt like it wasn't entirely the truth.

"I think the best approach is to split into groups of two. Our quadrant is one of the largest. Two of us need to sweep from the left while the other two come in from the right." Shepard dragged his finger along one of the many trails we'd traveled along countless times before. "We'll meet in the middle." Shep rolled the map up and shoved it back into his pack. "Nash, you're with me."

"Why can't Kaya go with you?" Nash almost whined as he said it. I rolled my eyes, knowing he just wanted to be alone with Cillian. His crush couldn't be more obvious.

"Because, as I said, Kaya doesn't need as much backup. She and Cillian together are as strong as me alone. You'd drag her down and probably get her killed, and he'd leave you tied to a tree."

I bit back a laugh. Cillian just stood there, impassively staring at Nash with his hands tucked into his pockets once more. Obviously, Shepard wasn't far off from how Cillian felt.

"We'll make our way to the edges tonight. Make camp and get some sleep. Once the sun is up, drag the area back until you hit the middle. It should be around early evening

at that point. If we find nothing, we'll head back and give the all clear." I nodded to Shepard, my silent acquiescence to his orders. The chances of the intruders being in our quadrant were slim. There was no port on the northern end of the island, and they would likely stick to an area they could easily board a ship and flee from.

Shepard and Nash parted from us, disappearing through a tree to their destination. Nash threw me a sullen glance before he sank through the bark, bitter about being stuck on his own with Shepard. He didn't enjoy Shep's tough love the way I did.

Cillian stood motionless, his eyes never leaving my face. I could feel my cheeks begin to redden under his gaze.

"He really didn't send you to keep an eye on me?" I asked if only to fill the silence.

"No."

"Good. Because I'm fine on my own," I snapped. "He needs to quit mothering me." Cillian didn't respond. He narrowed his eyes slightly, searching me for lies.

We set out in the opposite direction from Nash and Shepard. The trees allowed us passage, drawing us deeper into the forest. The sun was coming out, causing the birds to begin swooping down in search of a meal brought out by the rain. We were silent as we moved, staying hidden within the underbrush and branches. Our presence would easily go unnoticed by everything within the forest—especially someone who didn't belong here.

Cillian wasn't a talker. He never had been. Not even during our weekly family dinners. Ezra and he had been friends since childhood and made it a point to keep close into adulthood. My brother insisted I join them, even though my presence always seemed to make Cillian uneasy. He had been a recluse most his life.

The day passed with nary a word between us. Night fell, and he took the first watch while I slept. We were perched in a tree, my back resting against the trunk—legs tied to the branch so I didn't tumble out during my slumber—while Cillian's legs hung loosely over the branch. I trusted in the trees to keep me safe while I slept, though, that, and Cillian. Ezra would kill him if he allowed me to fall from this height.

My eyes grew heavy. I was being lulled to sleep by the music of the forest, the pulsing undercurrent emanating from the power here. The chirping of the bugs was rhythmic and soothing. My body went limp; then everything turned to darkness.

Sunlight pierced through my eyelids, and I awoke with a start. Cillian was still perched in the same space, alert as ever. He assessed me as I loosened my neck and yawned.

"Why the hell didn't you wake me?" I snapped, stretching my arms out to each side.

"You obviously needed the rest."

"Yeah, but so did you. You can't do that, Cillian."

"I'll be fine. I've lasted a lot longer than one night without rest." Cillian dropped from the branch and onto the ground. The movement made no sound, and I was a bit jealous. I untied myself and stowed away my rope, dropping after him and landing in a crouch at his side.

"Are you sure? We could always get a late start while you take a nap," I suggested.

Cillian walked off without sparing me a glance. I let out a groan and chased after him. It was almost as if his feet were floating over the ground with how silent he was. I felt like such a child following after him. Not that it was a far-off assessment. He was five years

my senior, but all that meant to me was that he had five years of training on me. I was a novice compared to him, and his abilities made that obvious. Made me envious.

“You’re trying to take care of me.”

“Why do you say that?” He still didn’t look at me.

“Because you let me sleep through the night.”

“Don’t read into it.”

“I am not a child.”

“I didn’t accuse you of being one.”

“You’re *treating* me like one.”

He sighed but didn’t falter in his steps. “No, I’m not.”

“You and Ezra don’t have any faith in me, do you?”

“Kaya, like it or not, he is always going to take care of you. Maybe that’s rubbed off on me in some way, but just know it’s for his sake, not yours.” He adjusted his grip on his pack, and I ignored the pang his words sent through me. “He doesn’t like you being put in dangerous situations like this.”

“Well, he can’t do anything about that. So, he needs to get over it and trust that I know what I’m doing.” I was practically running to keep up with him. He was fast, his legs much longer and more graceful than mine.

“He knows that, but he still feels helpless and protective. What’s wrong with that?”

“You know, Cillian, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk this much before. It is quite a nice change of pace.” Finally, he stopped and turned to face me. He shot me an annoyed look that made me laugh outright.

“Can you please stop talking? We’re supposed to be covert right now, and you’re doing a good job at blowing our cover.” I snapped my mouth shut with a bit too much force, almost biting my tongue in the process. He wasn’t wrong, but that didn’t quell my annoyance. Cillian rolled his eyes and continued walking.

“Sorry,” I whispered, scanning my surroundings. The forest was clear. There were animals skittering about, birds flying above. “I think we’re alone, though.”

Neither of us spoke again for hours. We walked on, then doubled back and retraced our steps, checking in valleys and caves, on riverbanks, the shoreline, and throughout the surrounding foliage. No space was left unturned in our search. The quadrant was clear.

I opened my mouth, ready to suggest we head to the meeting place since evening was closing in, when a twig snapped. The sound dried out my tongue and raised the hairs on the back of my neck. My eyes shot to Cillian instantly, hoping he heard the disruption as well.

He was frozen, eyes already scanning the surrounding trees, searching for the origin of the noise.

Nothing. There was nothing around us. We were alone. It must have been some animal passing by, though the hair on my arms began to stand on end.

Our eyes met. His held a question just below the surface, but before he could voice the words, his eyes flared in horror.

His dagger was flying at my face before I could suck in a breath or turn around. I was frozen in place, watching in terror as the blade soared directly for me. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for the slicing pain.

But it never came.

Instead, I heard a guttural noise and felt the ground rumble at my feet as something heavy fell there. Prying my eyes open, I looked toward the dirt.

Blood pooled around my boots, leaking from the body now lifeless beside me and seeping into the ground. A sword was discarded just out of reach of the corpse's hand.

He had meant to kill me, the fucker.

"You thought I was throwing that at you, didn't you?" Cillian's voice held a hint of amusement. "Pee yourself a little?"

"Shut up." I kicked the body over, unveiling his face. His features were ruddy and plain. It wasn't anyone I knew. "Well, I think we found our intruder." I looked back at Cillian just in time to see someone lunging at him, emerging straight from the tree just to his left and into an attack.

I didn't think; I just moved. Cillian dug for his dagger when he saw me careening toward him, unaware of the person intent on maiming him. He would be too late. The assailant had his sword raised, a dagger poised in his second hand. I slammed my body between them, bringing my blade up and connecting with the sword, the force reverberating down my arm. Without any other choice, I threw my other arm up, blocking the dagger from piercing into Cillian's skull.

The sharp pain pulled a deep grunt from my throat, but I didn't relent. I punched my blade forward, knocking his sword to one side. Before he could steady his arm, I plunged my dagger into his throat. Ripping the blade sideways, crimson began pouring from his neck. His grip fell from the dagger still embedded in my arm as he brought both hands to

clutch at his wound. I dropped my blade so I could pull his free from my flesh. It seared as I slid it free, the flesh pulling against the metal.

Arms wrapped around me from behind—nearly cradling me—hands began clutching my wound together. I heard shouts from above, then the clashing of metal as I was dragged backward toward one of the trees. Before darkness enveloped me, I glimpsed Shepard and Nash slicing down more assailants. Where they had come from, I couldn't begin to guess. They had been silent in their assault.

When I emerged from the darkness of the tree, I was dropped gracelessly onto the dirt—far away from the chaos. Sounds of ripping cloth greeted the ringing in my ears, and then Cillian was kneeling before me, wrapping my forearm in a makeshift bandage. The fabric from his shirt was tight as he wrapped it around my seeping wound, and I winced from the pressure. Cillian tied it off and grabbed my face harshly between his hands.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere else?” I could only see his eyes, but they held so much worry within them. I watched as his pupils bounced across my face, searching for something in a panic. His fingers tightened, digging into the flesh of my cheeks. His heat sank into me through the pads of his fingers.

“I'm fine. It's not that bad.”

“Can you heal yourself?” His hand was like a vise under my chin.

“It's not that bad,” I repeated.

“Kaya. You need to try and heal it.” It was useless telling him my power didn't work like that. The cut was too deep, and my power only worked so well on myself, not like it did on others. I humored him, though, placing my palm over the wrapped wound. The cloth

was already soaked through with blood. I reached into myself, searching for that power lying within.

Heal.

I felt the light tingle of my power, searching for the wound. The heat was soothing, though I could tell it only partially healed the gash. It was good enough for now until I could find another healer within the city to tend to it.

"Better?" I asked, annoyed.

"Yes."

Shepard and Nash appeared from a tree a heartbeat later, blood spattering their clothes and skin. Shepard assessed me, his eyes lingering on the wrapped wound. He gave me a curt nod. The only praise I'd receive. I glanced away, my gaze landing on Cillian, who was still crouched on the ground beside me. Beneath the torn section of his shirt, I could make out a section of dark, muscled skin on his lower abdomen. My cheeks heated.

"There were five in all. We finished them. We'll need to double back just in case, but I think that was it," Nash said, surprising me with how well he was taking charge. A slight smile played at the edges of Shepard's lips in pride. Nash asked, "You good, Ky?"

"I'm fine. Just a scratch." Cillian was still holding my face. He must have realized it a moment later because he abruptly released me. Getting to his feet, he offered me his hand. I allowed him to pull me the rest of the way up.

"Let's go home. We stick together, and we'll make camp once we get far away from this place," Shepard said.

"The bodies?" I asked.

“Let them rot where they lie. The ground will claim them soon enough,” said Cillian.