

## Chapter 130

Adelaide

I groaned, pulling the sled I had managed to put together from broken branches and leaves. On top of it lay Alaric, still unconscious, as he had left me no choice.

It would've spared me a lot of time and strength if he had just listened to me—but at the same time, I understood I was probably the last person he wanted to hear from at the moment.

The path through the dark woods was rough, my arms burning—but I couldn't stop. Not until I knew he was safe.

By now, Mom and Esther's paralysis must've worn off, meaning I had to move faster.

Sighing deeply, I glanced up at the hill in the distance. At the top was the cave that led to Bloodstone Haven—the village of the children of blood. We weren't far now.

"Come on," I whispered, encouraging myself. "You're almost there."

The cave was my only option, and I was certain Mom wouldn't find us here. As far as she was concerned, I hadn't spoken to Grandpa Aelius in years and barely remembered the man. After all, she had brainwashed me all my life to believe he was some kind of monster.

I panted, pulling the sled with every bit of strength I had left. Just when I thought I had reached my limit, I finally made it to the entrance of the cave, fully out of breath.

Unfortunately, the cave was closed, and could only be opened from the inside.

"No, no, no!" I whispered hopelessly. Just as I was about to give up, a sound came from within the cave—and then it opened.

It was Grandpa Aelius.

He wore the same black cape as almost every elder at Bloodstone, and carried that same mysterious look as if he could see right through me—and I knew he could.

I hadn't seen him in over two years, but he hadn't changed much. He still looked old, his teeth still rotten, but he seemed to be in good health—and that was all that mattered.

He looked at me—just me, not Alaric—as he waited for the explanation he surely didn't need.

"Grandpa, I..." I gestured toward Alaric's unconscious body. "I don't know what to do."

He stepped aside. "Come, child," he said. "I've been waiting for you."

I wasted no time dragging Alaric into the cave, and a wave of calm immediately washed over me. A weight lifted from my shoulders. For now, Alaric was safe—and that was all that mattered.

Aelius took the sled from my grip and dragged Alaric through the cave, no questions asked. We continued forward, making our way out of the cave, and into a secret part of the woods—Bloodstone.

Although it was dark, the village was just as I remembered. The familiar scent of wood and herbs reached my nose. There were huts, tents, and lanterns scattered across the area.

Families lived here peacefully, something Mom had always despised. But to me, this place was everything.

This was what home should feel like.

"Come," Aelius spoke.

He led me inside one of the huts. It wasn't big, but it had everything it needed. It was cozy, warm, and had a kitchen, a bed, and everything else one would need to get by.

Just one glance told me he had prepared it for us in advance.

"Help me, child," Grandpa instructed, looking at Alaric.

Together, we lifted Alaric from the sled—which was now barely holding together—and placed his heavy body onto the twin bed.

As soon as he was settled, I took a good look at his face, and guilt washed over me again. He looked so innocent, so peaceful—but I didn't know how long that would last. I didn't even know what he would do once he woke up.

After all, I had been lying to him for years.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, gently brushing his blonde hair away from his face.

How had it come to this?

How had I convinced myself that lying to him, dragging him into something he could've never prepared for, was the best option?

How could he ever forgive me?

Grandpa Aelius cleared his throat softly, pulling me from my thoughts. I turned to face him.

"I suppose I don't have to tell you what happened," I mumbled.

Aelius slowly shook his head. "No," he replied. "I know—"

"Everything. I know," I finished.

At times, I didn't understand how he could live like this—seeing the past and the future, knowing things no one should. Grandpa was strong enough to handle it. But me?

Ever since I had that vision of Alaric, I refused to live that way.

Many children of blood saw these powers as a blessing. To me, they had become a curse.

"It's not me who needs your explanations," Aelius said, flicking his gaze toward Alaric. "You should save them for the boy."

Grandpa turned to leave.

"Wait!" I called out.

"Yes?" he answered, not bothering to look over his shoulder.

"Thank you," I said, grateful. "For letting us stay...for preparing all of this."

"You do not need to thank me," Aelius replied. "You are a child of blood—my blood—and you are always welcome here."

Grandpa, who had never been the best at expressing emotions, left quickly before I could thank him again.

An uncomfortable lump formed in my throat. I was supposed to be at the dance with Alaric. And now, we were here...hiding from the woman who had never cared about anything but her own agenda.

I took a seat in the chair beside the bed, my fingers reaching for Alaric's warm hand.

My eyes softened, looking at him. I loved him more than I had ever loved anyone, and I didn't want him to hate me.

He had to know, had to see, that everything I had ever told him, everything I had ever felt—had always been real.

None of it was pretend.

I wanted him to see the truth. All of it.

With a shaky breath, I placed my free hand above his head, knowing I was about to do something I really shouldn't.

But I couldn't help myself...again.

I let the glow take over.

"See through my eyes," I whispered.

A soft groan left his lips, and he began stirring slightly. My throat tightened as his fingers twitched in mine.

Was I hurting him?

"I'm so sorry," I breathed, resting my forehead against his hand.

As I leaned into his touch, my eyelids grew heavier. Only then did I realize just how exhausted I truly was.

I had pushed myself too far—overused my eyes, built a sled from God knows what, and dragged him all the way here.

Even after all those years of training, it was still too much, and now I felt it. My head throbbed, my vision blurred, and I didn't know how much longer I could keep going.

But there was no time to rest.

I didn't deserve to rest.

A guilty yawn escaped my lips.

Don't you dare fall asleep, Adelaide...

Those were the words I kept repeating to myself, but it was only a matter of time before my eyes betrayed me—and everything faded to black.