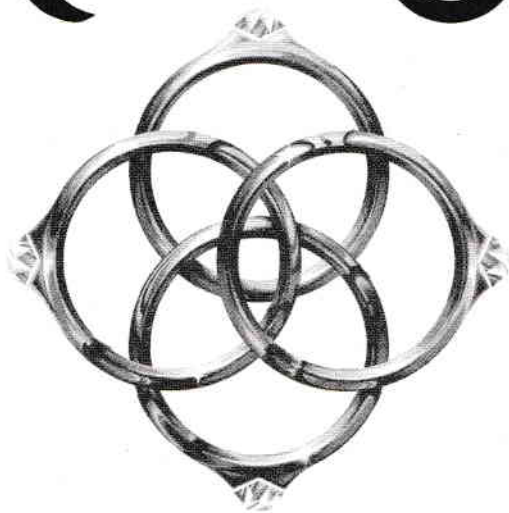


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THE BLOOD TRAITOR



By Lynette Noni

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PRESENT DAY



CHAPTER ONE

Kiva Coarentine was on fire.

Flames scorched her body, and blood boiled inside her veins, causing her to moan and thrash and shove at the hands holding her down.

“She’s burnin’ up,” came a gruff male voice. “Get her some water.”

The smell of vomit overwhelmed Kiva’s senses, close enough to make her realize it was hers, causing her to gag anew.

She was sick.

No — not sick.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she wasn’t suffering from an illness.

A haze of memories came to her: blue-gold eyes and kiss-swollen lips, deadly shadows and broken glass, caramel dust and iron bars. But then her thoughts scattered, the images seared from her mind, the unrelenting heat all that she knew, all that she *was*.

“Gods, she’s a mess,” said a female voice, full of disgust.

A wooden tumbler was forced between Kiva’s lips. Water trickled down her parched throat and sloshed over her chin.

“She is,” agreed the man. “And she’s *your* mess. I don’t got time for the dead.”

The hands holding Kiva disappeared. She tried to sit up, but flames twisted around her torso. Her eyelids fluttered open for the briefest of seconds, but she could see no fire. It was her — the inferno was *inside* her.

“She’s not dead,” argued the woman.

“Give it time,” said the man, his voice further away, as if he was leaving. “She’s had too much of the good stuff to survive without it. Best

leavin' her to her fate. Or give her a mercy killin', if you can stomach it." A snort. "I doubt you'll have any issues doin' that."

"You're the prison healer," the woman said angrily. "It's your job to help her."

Another snort from the man. "No one can help her now."

Kiva barely heard his departing footsteps over the pounding in her ears. Her heart was beating unnaturally fast. *Dangerously* fast.

Part of her knew she should be concerned about her state, but that part couldn't do anything, couldn't even *think* beyond the all-consuming agony blazing throughout her body.

A stream of curse words penetrated her pain, followed by a calloused hand snaking behind her neck and hauling her roughly upward, the tumbler pressing to her lips once more.

"Drink," ordered the woman, forcing water into Kiva's mouth. "If you want to live, you need to drink."

Kiva tried to follow the command, choking on the liquid, all the while wondering why. If this was living, surely she was better off dead. A mercy killing, the man had said. Kiva wanted that—a quick end to the flaming hell, the gaping hole in her heart gone forever.

A hole she knew had nothing to do with her current state.

Blue-gold eyes flashed across her mind once more, the fleeting image spiking a different kind of torture, before it was gone again.

"Damn it, Kiva, *drink*," came the angry female voice.

But Kiva couldn't drink any more. Shivers began to rack her frame, fire warring with ice. Sweat coated her skin even as she trembled from the sudden cold, but when a blanket was thrown over her, she whimpered and begged for it to be taken away.

Too hot.

Too cold.

Too much.

"Please," she rasped out, unsure what—or who—she was asking. "Please."

"You don't die like this," the woman said firmly. "Not like this."

But Kiva didn't believe her. Because she wanted it to end—all of it.

And when she could no longer stomach the torment, she welcomed the blissful embrace of oblivion.

When Kiva opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the snake.

The room around her was spinning, the poorly lit space full of empty pallets and threadbare blankets, a familiar acrid smell tugging at her memory.

She was in the infirmary, whispered some distant part of her mind. Zalindov's infirmary.

A warning bleated through her, but she couldn't summon any real concern, not with the taste of caramel coating her tongue, not when the snake opened its mouth to speak.

"*Snap out of it!*" the serpent hissed, shaking her roughly. It sounded a lot like the woman who had shoved water down her throat.

Kiva giggled and reached out to touch it.

Her hand was slapped away. "You need to follow me down to the tunnels, or they're going to kill you. Are you listening? If you don't work, you'll be dead."

At the snake's urgency, Kiva sat up, her head lolling to the side. Through blurry eyes, she saw that she wore a soiled gray tunic, the smell of her own sick making her nose wrinkle.

"Gods, you have no idea what's happening, do you?" muttered the snake. It coiled around Kiva's back and pulled her to her feet. "They dosed you with too much angeldust on your journey here, and now you can't function without it." The serpent dragged her through the infirmary. "I managed to get my hands on some, enough to help you through

the next few days. We have to wean you off it slowly, or your organs will shut down. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Talking snakes," Kiva said dreamily, stumbling as she was towed out into the sunshine. She raised her hand and grinned at the rainbow colors all around her. "Pretty day."

The snake spat a nasty word, then said through clenched teeth, "Kiva, it's me, Cresta. Pull yourself together."

Cresta.

Not a snake, then.

But close.

Cresta Voss. The name elicited feelings of resentment and fear in Kiva, accompanied by images of a muscular young woman with matted red hair, hazel eyes, and a serpent tattoo inked down the side of her face. She was a quarrier at Zalindov, someone Kiva had known for over five years. Someone who had openly despised Kiva for those five years. Someone who was the leader of the prison rebels, loyal to Kiva's sister, Zuleeka Corentine, the now-queen of Evalon sitting atop a stolen throne after having taken everything from Kiva. Everything—and everyone.

"Bad snake," Kiva mumbled, trying to free herself from Cresta's arm. "Go 'way."

"Stop that," Cresta said, tightening her grip and guiding Kiva off the gravel onto the dead grass, heading toward the domed stone building at the center of the grounds. "You won't last the day without me."

"Will too." Kiva stumbled again as she navigated the dried clumps underfoot, the colors continuing to swirl in her vision, bouncing off the limestone perimeter walls surrounding them in the distance. "Or won't. Doesn't matter."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Cresta asked as they skirted a large crater dug out of the earth, something that snagged Kiva's hazy attention. It took effort to summon the memory, how the watchtower had

exploded and crumbled down on itself. There was nothing left of it now but the ghost of where it once stood.

“Mot.” Kiva breathed the name of the man who had destroyed it, a moment of clarity gripping her thoughts. “Where’s Mot?”

“Dead,” Cresta said flatly. “By the Warden’s own hand, right after the riot—the one you used to escape.”

Sorrow touched Kiva’s chest as she thought of the morgue worker who had cared for her and helped her survive the Trials, but she couldn’t hold on to it for long before it vanished like the wind. She shook her head, trying to clear the spinning colors, trying to remember what the snake had said. “No one escapes Zalindov.” A manic laugh slipped out. “Not even when they do.”

Cresta was kept from responding by the approach of more gray-clad prisoners moving stiffly across the dead field, their faces lined with fatigue as they too headed toward the domed building.

“You need to get it together before we reach the tunnels, or the guards will send you to the Abyss,” Cresta warned under her breath. “They might not even bother with that.”

“Don’t care,” Kiva mumbled, dragging her feet.

The quarrier’s grip turned painful as she hissed, “You once told me I was strong and powerful and I could survive anything. That I owed it to myself to find a reason to live. Now I’m telling you the same, Kiva Meridan.”

Slumping in Cresta’s hold, Kiva said, “That’s not my name.”

“It is.”

“It’s *not*.”

“You are who you choose to be,” Cresta declared in a hard voice. “You are *what* you choose to be. And right now, you need to choose to live. You can figure out the rest later.”

Even in her sorry state, the words left a mark on Kiva. The idea that

anything was her choice was laughable. For ten years in Zalindov, she'd lived by the choices of others, fighting to survive, day after day. When she'd finally tasted freedom, the decisions she'd made had done nothing but lead her right back to where she'd started, after losing more than she'd ever imagined possible.

The hole in her heart gave a pang; not even the angeldust could mask it completely.

"Make no mistake, I don't care about you," Cresta went on mercilessly. "But you saved my life once, and because of that, I owe you a blood debt. So you're going to survive today, and you're going to survive tomorrow, and you're going to keep on surviving until those godsdamned drugs are out of your system. After that, you can decide what the hell you want to do with yourself. Live or die, you'll be out of my hands. But until then, you'll listen to me. And I'm telling you to buck up and prepare yourself for the worst day of your life."

Kiva was so distracted by Cresta's speech that she hadn't realized they'd arrived at the domed building and were lining up with the other inmates, all readying to descend the ladder shaft down into the tunnels.

Struggling to maintain a steady stream of thought, Kiva murmured, "Why are you here?"

Cresta made a frustrated sound. "I just told you."

Kiva shook her fuzzy head. She must not have been given the same amount of angeldust that had kept her mostly unconscious for the last few weeks, the lower dosage affording her enough lucidity to ask, her words heavily slurred, "No, why aren't you in the quarry?"

There was a moment of hesitation before Cresta answered, "Rooke changed my work allocation after the riot. He didn't like that I'd survived for so long, so now I'm a tunneler, facing an exhausting and inevitable death."

Six months Cresta would have. A year at the most. That was the fate of a Zalindov tunneler.

A fate Kiva shared, now that she was no longer the prison healer.

She should have been terrified, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

For some reason, she didn't think the angeldust was to blame.

"Next," came a bored-sounding male voice, causing Kiva to look up from the dead grass to see that they'd reached the mouth of the building, where a pair of guards were ushering prisoners toward a set of ladders poking out from a rectangular hole in the earth.

"I know you're messed up right now," Cresta said urgently as the inmates in front of them disappeared into the shaft. "But whatever you do, don't let go of the ladders." At the blank look on Kiva's face, she hurried to add, "Think of something important to you. The boy—the one with the stutter. You love him. Hold on for him."

Tipp.

A foggy memory of the freckle-faced, gap-toothed boy blazed across Kiva's mind, causing the pain in her heart to throb anew.

"Next," repeated the guard, waving toward Kiva and Cresta.

"One rung at a time," Cresta said. "Do it for the boy. I'll be right beside you."

Kiva nodded dully, her head feeling too heavy for her shoulders, but at the same time, impossibly light. She tripped over her own feet as Cresta prodded her forward, the guards watching with amusement. They knew who she was, how far she'd fallen. They were *enjoying this*.

Fire rose within her, but it didn't last, the angeldust sweeping it away by the time her hands reached for the metal rungs.

There were two ladders bolted side by side, and as Kiva began to descend the first, Cresta kept her promise and remained with her, all the way down to the first platform, then on to the next set of ladders. Down they stepped, rung after rung, platform after platform, with Cresta murmuring quiet encouragement. Kiva watched her hands as if they belonged to someone else, feeling nothing, only vaguely aware that she

was moving downward, that her muscles were burning, that the air was becoming stale and chilled.

Tipp. She would hold on for Tipp.

Even if, after what he'd discovered, after what she'd *done*, he surely hated her now.

An agonized sound left Kiva, and Cresta looked over in alarm. But then they stepped off the final ladder, causing relief to flood the other girl's expression.

Safe. They were safe.

But they also weren't.

Because before Kiva could catch her breath, she was being pushed down a luminiium-lit tunnel after a line of prisoners, all shuffling along like ants. A distant feeling of panic hit her, the claustrophobia familiar but muted by the angeldust.

The last time she'd been here, she hadn't been with other prisoners. But she hadn't been alone, either.

Blue-gold eyes. A hovering, magical flame. A perfect snowblossom.

This time the drugs didn't force the image away—Kiva did.

She couldn't think of what had happened then.

She couldn't think of *him*.

A sloshing sound caught her attention and drew her gaze downward, the earth turning to mud, then shallow water, becoming knee-deep the further they walked. When the prisoners were ordered to halt by one of the supervising guards, Kiva found that a pickaxe had been shoved into her hands somewhere along the journey. She tested the weight, waving it before her like a sword.

Caldon had shown her how to do that, training her with a wooden practice blade.

Kiva closed her eyes and forced that memory away, too, allowing the angeldust to subdue her reignited pain. She dropped her arms, trying to remember where she was, why she was there, what she had to do.

She was a tunneler now, tasked with digging for water and creating passageways for it to flow into the aquifer.

It was the worst of Zalindov's work allocations. The hardest, both physically and mentally. The quickest death.

"Think of the boy," Cresta commanded from Kiva's side. "Don't stop thinking about him."

The sheer authority in her voice had Kiva obeying, and when the guards ordered them to begin digging into the hard limestone walls, Tipp's face remained front and center in her thoughts.

Kiva swung the iron axe into the unyielding rock, over and over again. The movement jarred her arms, the sound set her teeth on edge. She welcomed the burn that grew with every thrust, her vision turning hazy as dust clouded around her, her hearing overwhelmed by the clash of hundreds of axes meeting solid stone. She was vaguely aware of Cresta working at her side, reminding her about Tipp, telling her to keep digging. She couldn't stop—if she stopped, the guards would come. They were patrolling freely, whips and batons at the ready. Don't give them an excuse, Cresta told her. Don't stop. Don't stop. *Don't stop.*

There was blood on Kiva's axe, dripping down the wooden handle, from split blisters and cracked calluses. She felt the pain, but it was muted, just like everything else around her.

Until it wasn't.

Because as seconds turned to minutes, and minutes turned to hours, the angeldust's effects began to fade.

It started with a low, persistent headache at the base of her skull. Next came the taste of copper on her tongue, followed by a tremor in her fingers, making it difficult to keep hold of her blood-slicked axe. When the guards finally announced the end of the workday, Kiva was chilled despite the arduous labor, and finally cognizant enough to realize that what she'd survived was nothing compared to what was ahead.