



Fear the monsters
we make.

SHIELD OF SPARROWS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DEVNEY PERRY

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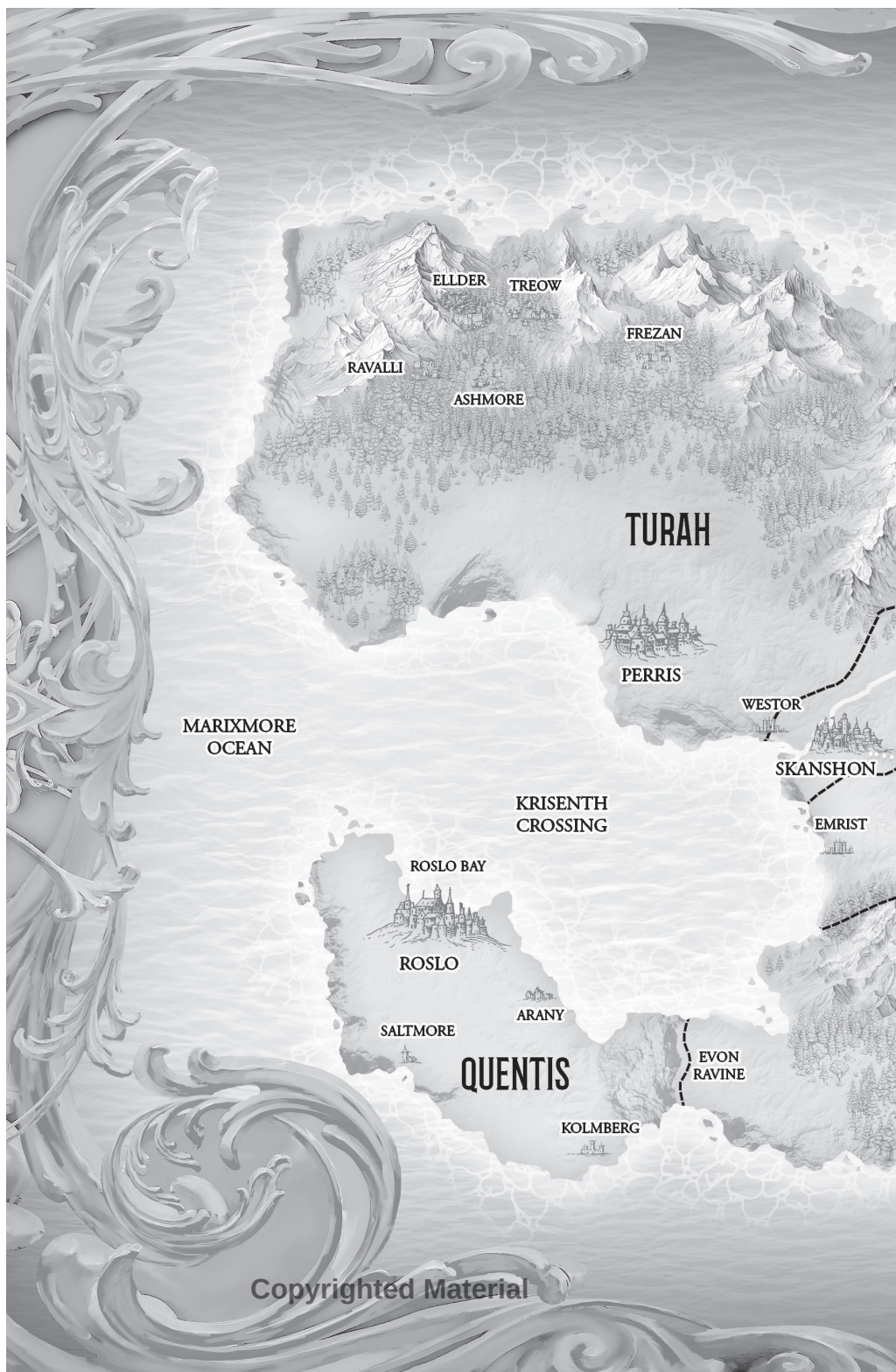
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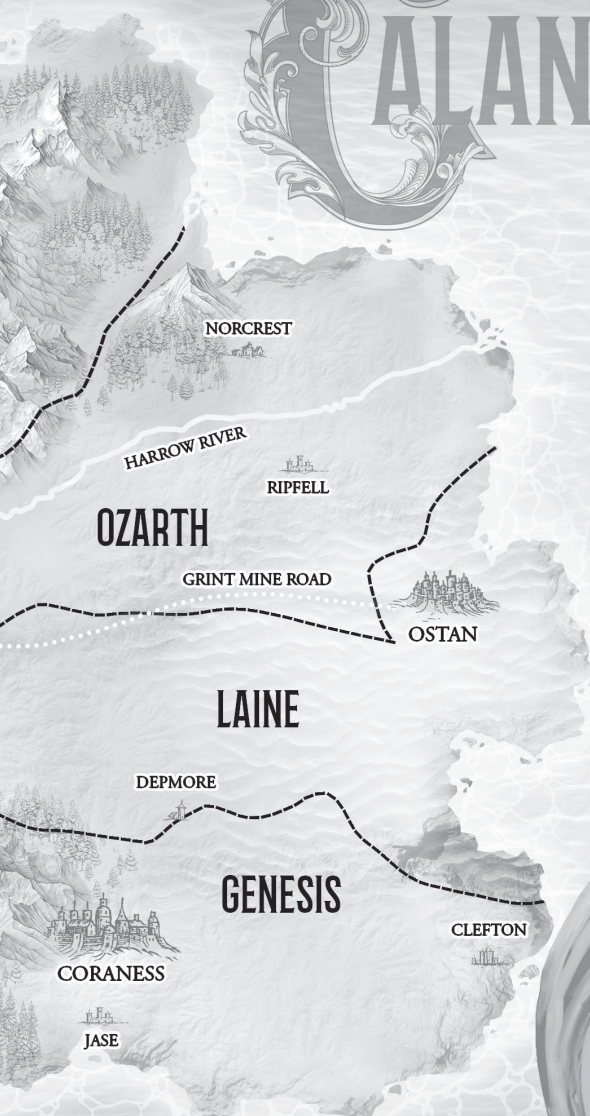
*To the characters who came before.
To the stories that led us here.
To the chances we take. To the dreams we chase.*

Trust your wings.

Shield of Sparrows is a heart-stopping romantasy set in a world of deadly monsters and even deadlier mysteries. As such, the story includes elements that might not be suitable for all readers, including combat, violence, blood, gore, death of humans and animals, injury, dismemberment, illness, hospitalization, arson, alcohol use, sexual activity, and graphic language, with mentions of poisoning and trafficking in backstory. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note. We invite you to grab a blade and prepare for a new world...



ALANDRA



NORCREST

HARROW RIVER

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GRINT MINE ROAD

OSTAN

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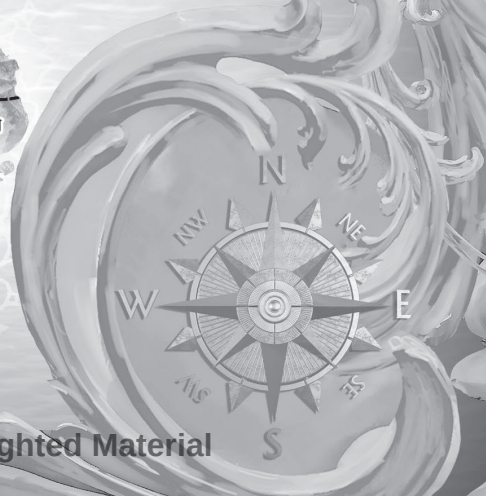
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GENESIS

CORANESS

JASE

CLEFTON



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I

What if I jumped?

Balanced on the edge of a sheer cliff, I stood at the mercy of this realm, wiggling my bare toes in the dirt beneath my feet. A strong gust of wind could tip me forward or backward. The slightest tremor in the earth, and I'd either fall.

Or fly.

What if I jumped? Would anyone care?

No. Not for me. Not for the wrong princess of Quentis.

Forty feet below, waves crashed against rock, the water's spray white as it broke against gray stone. I wanted to jump. I wanted to dive into that ocean blue. I wanted to be unshackled from everyone's expectations for just one godsforsaken moment.

Except if I jumped, I'd be late. And if I was late, I'd be in deep shit.

Margot would kick my ass if I missed this meeting with the Turan warriors Father had invited to Quentis, so there'd be no jumping. Especially not today.

I inched away from the edge. The temptation.

It wasn't like they needed me for this fiasco. Mae would charm our guests.

She was the right Quentin princess.

My half-sister had been groomed her entire life for this occasion. This performance. Sooner or later, she'd be the Turan queen, and today was her chance to meet some future subjects before her marriage to their crown prince later this year.

My attendance? Entirely unnecessary.

But I worked hard not to piss off my stepmother, Margot—and my father. I might not be his favorite daughter or the

cherished princess, but there was a crown in my bedroom. And today was all about showing the Turans exactly how sparkly our crowns could be.

My shoulders sank as I took another step away from the cliff, then another, the soles of my feet sinking into the grass as I walked over to the charcoal slippers I'd kicked off earlier. But before I could step into a shoe, the thunder of hooves drew my attention toward the road.

The noise grew louder—no doubt a rider coming this way, likely to fetch me.

“Damn.” Was I late?

Margot had prattled on and on at breakfast this morning, and I'd only half listened as she'd recited today's schedule of events before the introduction to the Turans.

The rangers had arrived late yesterday, after nightfall. The elite band of warriors had missed the window for dinner or meetings. On purpose? Probably.

I couldn't blame them. Nor could I judge them for sticking to their wing of the castle since, either resting from their journey over the Krisenth Crossing or avoiding the pomp of royal civilities. But whether I liked it or not, there would be a spectacle. A time for Mae to shine.

While the Turans were doing whatever it was that Turan warriors did when visiting foreign kingdoms, my sister was being primped.

Mae would be bathed and pampered. Mae would be massaged with scented oils and treated with the finest skin tonics on the continent. Mae would be wearing a gown her seamstress had spent a month crafting for tonight's feast.

Mae. This was all about Mae.

I doubted the men visiting would care about the embroidery or lace, but what did I know? Mae was their future queen, not me. My only obligation was to appear.

On time. **Copyrighted Material**

In Margot's litany of instructions over this morning's meal, it was the only time she'd mentioned my name.

Do not be late, Odessa.

I wasn't always late. Usually, but not always. Half the time, no one even noticed.

Hopping into a gray slipper, I flicked away the skirts of my matching dress and shifted to pull on the other shoe. Both were firmly covering my toes by the time a familiar rider crested the hill to the cliffside.

Banner sat proudly in the saddle, his short, light-brown hair combed, not a strand out of place. His expression was blank.

Was that a good blank? Or did it mean that I was in trouble because my fiancé had abandoned his responsibilities as general to collect me?

Banner tugged at the reins, slowing his buckskin stallion to a stop. With a fluid swing, he was off the saddle and leading his horse my way with purposeful, intimidating strides.

"Princess." His tone was serious, his brown eyes never leaving mine, but a grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"I was just leaving." I held up a hand. "I swear."

"Before or after you heard me riding this way?" He arched an eyebrow. "You're going to be late."

Going to be late. Meaning I wasn't late. Yet. *Phew.*

"I promise to be on time," I said. "You didn't need to come fetch me."

"Actually, I came out for a ride."

"Ah." Maybe that meant no one knew I was even outside the castle's walls. I could slip back inside unnoticed and hurry to change clothes.

Banner was already dressed for the meeting, wearing his formal uniform. The gold buttons on his teal coat were as shiny as the castle's spires in the distance. His favorite throwing knives were attached to his leather belt. Father would be wearing much the same uniform, though he preferred

a sword. Mae's dress for tonight had been designed with layers of aquamarine and celeste. Margot would likely be in her signature blue.

My dress, like all of my dresses, would be gray.

Someday, when I didn't have Margot dictating my wardrobe or Father's scrutiny at every meal, I wanted to wear red. Or green. Or black. Or yellow.

Any color but gray.

"You know, you can spy on the city from your own window rather than hike all the way over here," he said.

"But this gives me a better view."

The sunlight caught the amber starbursts in Banner's eyes, the vivid color bright against the brown of his irises. That amber starburst marked all those born on Quentin soil.

His gaze drifted behind us to the castle, then shifted to the city that stretched along the coastline beside this cliff.

Roslo's white buildings practically glowed in the afternoon light. The capital city's streets teemed with people and carts. Boats crowded the harbor's docks, and the calm waters of Roslo Bay were a brilliant aquamarine beneath the sun's bright rays. Quentin flags of the same teal fluttered in the breeze from where they hung on the castle's towers, the largest of which were stitched with the royal crest—a crossbow woven with leaves and stalks of wheat.

Father considered the view from his throne room's balcony unmatched, but I much preferred my city from this spot.

That castle was my home, but this cliffside was my sanctuary. This was the one place where the air wasn't thick with judgment and guards weren't stationed at every corner, ready to report my mistakes to Margot.

From this vantage, I could smell the salt drifting off the water. The scents of food and spices carried on the wind from the markets in the square. On calm days like today, I could hear the noise from the docks and the clamor of the

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streets. And when I had time, I'd bring along a journal to sketch the various views.

Banner's gaze stopped on the three wooden ships docked in the bay, their forest green sails a slight contrast to the teal accents on the Quentin boats.

"Have you seen them yet?" I asked. "The Turans?"

"Not yet. But I just met with your father." His jaw clenched. "He informed me that the Guardian traveled with the rangers."

"The Guardian." My jaw dropped as my stomach twisted. "*The* Guardian. He's here? In Roslo?"

"Apparently," Banner clipped.

Oh, hell. This was bad. This was the reason my fiancé had come out for a ride.

We might not be in love, we might not even be considered friends, but there were a few things I'd learned about Banner during our engagement. He was unfailing in his loyalty to Father. He loved the status that came with his rank and betrothal to a princess. And he loathed the Guardian.

"I'm sorry." I reached for him, but he waved me off, raking a hand through his hair. "Will you be going to the meeting?"

"I'm the general of your father's legion. What do you think?"

Was it really so hard for him to just say yes?

Maybe after we were married, he'd stop treating me like a child. Though considering the fifteen-year age difference, I wasn't holding my breath.

Banner rubbed a hand over his jaw, smooth and set in an angry line. "Pray to Carine I'm able to keep my composure."

I'd pray for the Goddess of Peace to be with us all today.

"I will have my revenge," he said, more to himself than to me, and the cool, collected man who was to be my husband vanished. His frame began to vibrate with rage. His hands flexed at his sides, like he was itching to pull out a knife. "I vow it."

"Banner," I warned. "If the Guardian sailed with the

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Turans, he's here on Father's invitation. It's not the time. You can't go after him while—"

"Don't you think I know that?"

I flinched as he yelled into my face. It wasn't the first time a man had directed his temper my way. It wouldn't be the last. And I'd learned that it was easier to surrender than fight. "I'm sorry."

"I'm well aware that I have no choice but to stand aside and welcome these *guests* to our kingdom. That I must be in your father's throne room and meet the piece of filth who destroyed my family. I deserve to have that bastard's head on a platter, yet I can do nothing. Nothing. I know exactly what fucking time it is, Odessa."

I stayed quiet as he spat my name. "You're going to be late," he barked.

"Right." I nodded, dropping my gaze to his polished boots.

Banner exhaled, collecting himself. Then he hooked a finger under my chin, tilting my face upward until our gazes locked. The anger in his irises was fading slowly. "Sorry. I'm frustrated."

"It's understandable."

"Would you like me to take you back? I can skip the rest of my ride."

"No." I gave him a soft smile. "You go. I'll walk."

If I were wearing Banner's boots, I'd probably need to clear my head, too.

Why would my father force him to attend this meeting today? Father knew that the Guardian had killed Banner's brother. That they'd fought over a woman in Turah, and that fight had ended in death. When word of his brother's murder had reached Quentis, the news had irreparably broken Banner's mother to the point that the woman had taken her own life last year.

Apparently, Father could be as callous to his beloved general as he could be to his oldest daughter.

"I'll see you later," he said. "Don't be late, Princess."

Banner dragged a knuckle along my cheek, then retreated to his horse, swinging into the saddle and disappearing without a backward glance toward the sweeping hills and rolling fields that surrounded Roslo.

I waited until he was out of sight, then, on a sigh, I started down the trodden path that would take me to the rear entrance of the castle. From there, I could slip through a side entrance and climb the stairs to my rooms on the fourth floor.

My gray rooms.

Mae's suite was pale blue, for the virginal bride who would soon be married to a prince. Who would fulfill her role in accord with the Calandra trade treaty that kept the five kingdoms at peace.

She was the Sparrow.

But Mae was far from a sweet, delicate bird. She certainly wouldn't be a virgin on her wedding night. Funny how the guards never reported her comings and goings, not while she was screwing their captain.

I glanced over my shoulder, to the edge of the cliff and the open ocean beyond.

What was out there? Mae would find out. After the wedding, she'd set sail to Turah. "Lucky brat."

Not once in my life had I been jealous of Mae. She was Father's favored daughter. When the time had come for him to choose the Sparrow, it was no shock he'd picked Mae. And she was Margot's pride and joy. She had a mother while I had a ghost. Still, I'd never envied her, not once.

Until now.

Because soon she'd leave and discover the realm beyond Roslo's gates and Quentis's shores.

I was going to miss my half-sister. From the day Margot had placed her in my arms when I was five, Mae had been mine. She fought me on everything. She pestered me relentlessly. She wasn't kind or grateful. She was a massive pain in my ass, but she was my sister.

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I was going to miss her.

And I couldn't wait for her to leave.

Maybe when her shadow was gone, I'd have some freedom. Maybe not. Maybe the only moments of peace I'd find for the rest of my life were on this cliffside.

A breeze lifted my unruly hair, pushing a lock into my mouth. I spat it out, but not before the bitter tang of the brown dye Margot used each week spread across my tongue. The wild curls never stayed in their braid, no matter how hard my lady's maids tugged and yanked. The only time it cooperated was when it was wet.

The ocean beckoned. I stopped and turned.

What if I jumped? Would anyone notice?

No. Not for this princess. A smile tugged at my mouth.

I raced for the cliff. My drab, gray dress streamed behind me as I ran, faster and faster, arms pumping, legs pushing. I didn't think. I didn't falter. One moment, my feet were tethered to the earth.

The next, I was flying.

Water dripped from the hem of my soaked dress, leaving a dotted trail as I tiptoed through the castle's east-wing gallery. My heart raced, the rush from the cliff dive still coursing through my veins.

I'd been sixteen years old when I made that jump for the first time. A group of servant boys had hiked that hill on a scorching summer afternoon, and I'd followed them out of curiosity. I'd watched them from a distance as, one by one, they leaped off the edge.

By the time they'd all swam to the shore and retreated to the castle, I'd worked up the courage to approach the cliff. It had taken hours of assessing the drop before I'd finally made the jump. When I'd plunged beneath the cold water, kicking furiously for the surface, I'd vowed never again. But a week later, after a berating from the weapons master about my ineptitude at archery, I'd climbed that hillside.

I'd claimed it as my own.

In the moments when I needed to feel brave, to feel free and alive, that cliff was my salvation.

Today wasn't the first or last time I'd sneak into the castle waterlogged. My slippers were gone, stolen by the sea, and my bare soles squelched on the white marble floors as I crept through the deserted gallery.

My ears stayed trained for the slightest sound as I inched past tapestries and paintings. Sneaking was probably unnecessary. No one came into this hall, especially Margot.

She didn't like the artwork in this particular gallery. It was too gruesome for her tastes.

Every piece depicted the grief from generations past. The

largest mural had been crafted after their last migration, nearly thirty years ago, when the massive, eagle-like monsters had flown over Calandra and slaughtered our people.

In the painting, an auburn male crux had severed a man in two with its enormous beak. Entrails hung from its open mouth. Its talon, sharper than any blade, punctured the heart of a woman crushed beneath its weight. The male's thick, pointed horns dripped with blood and gore.

Margot wasn't wrong. This gallery *was* violent. And maybe once I lived through a migration, I wouldn't set foot in this hall again, either.

It was written that the old gods, Ama and Oda, created Calandra's animals as gifts to humans. As companions to share in this realm. The Mother and Father had been proud of their beautiful creations. They'd showered them with praise and glory.

But that pride enraged the gods' children, and in a fit of jealousy, the new gods—the Six—made animals of their own. The Six crafted predators in the image of Calandra's animals, though their variations were far more beautiful. Far more powerful. Far more deadly.

They birthed monsters to serve as a reminder to humans and animals alike that we were fragile and insignificant. And there was no monster more feared than the crux.

The first time I saw this artwork, that haunting mural, I'd gotten sick in a potted fern. But the next migration would be upon us soon, so I'd forced myself to return to this gallery, time and time again, until the scenes no longer made my stomach churn.

When I saw the crux fly for the first time, I would be prepared for the devastation our people would face.

The gods had truly outdone themselves with their creation. There were monsters.

And then there were the crux.

According to the scholars' predictions, the next migration could come as early as next spring. Less than a year from

now. I had the luxury of protection within these castle walls when so many did not.

Tearing my eyes from the mural, I rounded a corner, about to make a final dash to the stairwell, when I nearly slammed into a body, pulling back a fraction of a moment before we collided.

“I’m sorr—” The apology died on my tongue as I stared up at the Voster priest. My gasp echoed off the walls as I inched away from my father’s emissary.

He stared unblinkingly from his towering frame, a head and bony shoulders above my own height. He was dressed in burgundy robes, the fabric draped around his lanky body, pooling at his ankles and feet as bare as my own. The nails on both his fingers and toes were thick and grooved with a dark-green tint. He had no hair, no eyebrows, and his skin was a chilly, pale white. His hawkish nose rested sharply above his thin, colorless lips.

My favorite lady’s maid said the priest’s skin gave her chills, but it was his eyes that caused a shiver to race down my spine. They were solid, endless pools without pupils, the color the same deep green as his nails.

Nightmares were born in those eyes.

I didn’t care what anyone else said about the brotherhood. The Voster were terrors far worse than any monster roaming the five kingdoms.

Power radiated off his body, rocking me onto my heels. The Voster magic crackled around me like sparks. It was dizzying. Nauseating. It was like jumping off my cliff, only there was no bottom. No end to the spinning of my insides or the pit beneath my feet.

Humans weren’t meant to be this close to magic.

I swallowed the urge to cry out as his power scraped and scratched along the bare skin of my arms.

The Voster cocked his head sideways, like a bird, as he took in my wet clothes. He lifted a bony hand, holding up a

single finger. With a flick of his wrist, the water spun from my hair.

It swirled around my face, the droplets merging and lifting, until there was a ball of clear water spinning above my head. It stretched wider, thinning into a roped circle with a hollow center. Spikes stretched from the water, like it was being drawn toward the vaulted ceiling.

Around and around and around it spun until the priest had shaped the water into a crown that loomed over my head.

Father said the Voster brotherhood often used their fluid magic to deliver a message. That they manipulated air, water, and blood to make statements.

Well, whatever this crown of water meant, I wasn't going to ask the priest to spell it out. I bolted for the stairs, racing up the first flight, taking the steps two at a time with my soaked skirts balled in my fists. At the landing, I glanced back.

The priest's dark eyes were watching.

Another shiver chased over my shoulders before I gripped the banister and forced myself to climb. It took until the third floor for the sensation of spiders crawling across my skin to ebb.

I wiped at the sleeves of my wet dress, like I could brush the prickling feeling away.

Why couldn't the priest have dried my dress instead of my hair? *That* would have been helpful. I could practically feel the frizz radiating through my curls.

So much for braiding it wet.

The Voster was yet another reason I didn't want to go to this meeting with the Turans.

The priests rarely visited the castle, but six days ago, without warning, Father's emissary had arrived. Every encounter with him had left me queasy.

What was he even doing here? Maybe the brotherhood had gotten word that Father had hired the Turan rangers. Or maybe he'd come because of the Guardian.

The Voster were elusive and avoided most people. At least, that's what I thought, considering the only priest I'd ever seen was Father's emissary, and on his visits, he stayed close to the castle.

I wasn't even sure how many Voster made up the brotherhood. Hundreds? Thousands? There was one and only one book in the castle's library about the Voster, and it was short. Very, very short.

Father's emissary visited for important political events, significant weddings, and royal funerals. Probably to make sure we were all behaving and following the terms of Calandra's magical treaties.

I'd asked a tutor once what it was that the Voster actually did besides wield fluid magic and craft blood oaths for kings. If the priests were humans who'd inherited magic or if they were something else entirely. He'd told me it was complicated—which meant he didn't know, either.

Father seemed on good terms with his emissary, but they certainly didn't appear to be close friends.

Well, whatever the reason the priest was here today, I was more than ready to see him go. With any luck, he'd be gone the moment the Turans left Roslo, returning to wherever it was the Voster called home. Another mystery about their people. No one knew where they lived.

Just the idea of an entire town of Voster, streets and buildings festering in their magic, made me queasy.

A niggling feeling ran down my nape like I was being watched. I twisted, expecting to find the priest, but I was alone in the stairwell.

"And clearly paranoid," I muttered as I stepped off the last stair to the fourth floor's grand hall.

"Why is your dress wet?" Margot's question caught me by surprise, my hand slapping over my breastbone. "And what happened to your hair?"

I groaned. So much for sneaking in unnoticed. *Damn.*

“Sorry, Margot.”

This was the Voster’s fault—the creep. Normally, I’d check the hallway to make sure it was empty before I crossed the carpet to my room. Instead, I’d been too distracted by the spiny touch of the priest’s magic to pay attention.

“Odessa.” There wasn’t a person in Calandra who could infuse as much exasperation into my name as my stepmother.

“I’ll be ready in time. I promise.”

Her ocean-blue eyes with the Quentin amber starburst were as sharp as daggers as she pointed to my door. “You’re already late.”

“Not yet.”

My stepmother’s nostrils flared as I scurried past her for my rooms.

“Fine. I’m almost late.”

“Hurry.” She followed me inside and to my dressing room. As I pulled my hair—very dry, very curly, and very not-brown hair—over a shoulder, her fingers went to work freeing the buttons on my dress.

“You don’t have to stay,” I said. “Brielle or Jocelyn can help me.”

She yanked so hard on the last button it popped free and went skidding across the floor. “Do you see Brielle or Jocelyn anywhere?”

“Um, no.” My rooms were empty and the sleep clothes I’d shrugged off this morning still pooled on the floor beside the changing partition.

My lady’s maids either had been reassigned to Mae for the day or were off spying on the Turans. My guess was the latter.

“They’re busy in the southeast wing,” Margot said.

Ah. Wasn’t that where the Turans were staying?

“Those rangers have tracked filth into our halls.”

Filth? “Haven’t they been sailing on the Krisenth? Where would they get dirty?”

“Odessa.” There was that imitation again.

“Right. Ask questions later.”

“Please.” Margot nudged me forward, sending me scamp-
ering behind the screen with the bodice of my gown clutched
to my chest.

The garment landed with a plop as she thrust my new
gown around the screen’s edge.

The fact Margot had managed to find a shade of gray
drabber than the last was actually quite astounding. My lip
curled as I stepped into its skirts.

“We’ll have to dye your hair. Again. And we have no time.”
The tap of her foot was like being repeatedly slapped on
the hand. “Swimming. Fully clothed. Why are you this way?
Why can’t you have a normal hobby like archery or horse-
back riding?”

I loved to draw and paint, but did Margot appreciate my
artwork? No. Instead, she’d get irked whenever my fingers
were stained with charcoal or pastels.

She wanted me to be like Mae. To love swordplay and
sparring. Those were acceptable hobbies for *her* daughter, *her*
princess. But art and swimming, both relatively tame activ-
ities, were deemed troublesome and annoying.

Yes, I’d been swimming. Yes, it probably should have
waited until tomorrow. At least Margot didn’t know exactly
how I’d gotten into the water. No one did.

If anyone learned I’d been diving off that cliff, there’d be
hell to pay.

“I’m hurrying,” I promised. “I lost track of time.”

“Girl, you test the limits of my patience.”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry.” No matter how many times I apolo-
gized, it wouldn’t make a difference, but that never stopped
me from trying.

She was seething when I emerged donned in gray. “Turn.”

I gave her my back so she could fasten the gown’s buttons.

The fabric molded to my ribs and breasts. The neckline
left my collarbones and throat exposed while the sleeves

flowed to my fingertips. The skirts billowed around my hips, swishing and swaying with my movements.

In any other color, this would have been a beautiful dress.

In gray, I practically blended in with the stone floor. Maybe that was the idea.

“Hair.” Margot snapped her fingers and pointed to the vanity, standing behind me as I took a seat at the bench.

I hesitated to give her the comb. In her hands, it was a weapon she wielded often. My scalp would ache for hours after she finished with the torture. “You don’t need to do this. I can manage. I’m sure Mae needs you more.”

“She’s...occupied.”

Occupied. Meaning she was with the captain of the guard for their afternoon romp.

Why was it okay for Mae to fit in a little fun before this meeting with the Turans, but I was being chastised for a tiny ocean swim?

The double standards around this castle were stifling.

Margot ripped the comb from my grasp and dragged it through my curls, pulling so hard I had to grip the bench’s sides to keep from toppling to the floor. Once she’d worked through most of the snags, she snapped the fingers of her free hand. “Powder.”

I stretched for the opal jar on the vanity, pulling off the lid and choking on the dye’s pungent odor. The smell would fade within a few minutes, but gods, that first inhale burned my throat.

She shook the powder into my roots until my natural color was muted. Until the orange and red and copper and caramel strands were gone. Not a single curl was missed, and when I looked into the mirror, the familiar shade of brown stared back through the glass.

I didn’t mind the brown, not really. Margot said that it suited the coloring of my face. That it brought out the freckles across my nose and the gold striations in my eyes.

Mostly, I think the red reminded her too much of my mother.

I was too much of my mother.

“I have never in my life met someone who has such a penchant for finding trouble.” Margot tossed the comb aside and began tugging the locks into a braid. “You could have been eaten by sharks.”

“There are no sharks this close to shore.”

“Oh? And I suppose there aren’t any marroweels, either. Have you forgotten the reason the Turans are here in the first place?”

“No,” I mumbled.

The Turans were here to kill the monsters that had wreaked havoc on Father’s trade routes over the past year. What had started as sporadic attacks from the beasts had escalated, and as of this summer, only one in three ships made it to their destination. With every attack, the marroweels left no survivors.

Before this past year, before they’d started attacking our ships, they’d only been known to live in the deepest waters of the Marixmore Ocean, far from where our Quentin ships sailed. Why had they changed habitats? Had the monsters moved inland for food? Was there a new predator driving them toward Roslo’s shores?

Had the gods created monsters more terrifying than even the crux?

Not only were our shipments being lost, but Quentis’s best sailors were being drowned and eaten by the marroweels. It was becoming impossible—and expensive—to convince anyone to make the voyage over the Krisenth Crossing.

The trade routes had to be secured. The grain we harvested and sold to Laine, Genesis, Ozarth, and Turah had to be delivered before another king took these missing shipments as an insult. As a default on the treaty. As an invitation for war.

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No one could afford a war, not when the crux migration was coming so soon.

We needed to stockpile our resources. To have weapons, food, and supplies at the ready for when the monsters came. Gods only knew the destruction they'd bring. Our ships loaded with wheat, corn, and barley couldn't go missing, especially when those crops had already been bartered for weapons and lumber.

The Quentin soldiers had tried to slay the marroweels, but the monsters were as vicious and cunning as any warrior. They moved with lightning speed, and the rigid bone that protruded from their skull could ram through a ship's frame. Our men had managed to kill some monsters, but not enough. The terrors continued to sink our ships.

So Father had hired the Turans to purge the Krisenth Crossing of the marroweels. How? I hadn't a clue.

"Do you think they'll be able to kill them?" I asked Margot.

"Well, if the six dead beasts hanging in the docks this morning are any indication, then I'd say yes."

"What? They already killed the marroweels?" I sat up straighter. "When?"

"They brought them as they arrived last night."

Had I known, I would have skipped the cliffside and headed straight for the docks. I'd never seen one of the fabled marroweels in anything but books. "How big are they? Are they blue?"

Margot scoffed. "You're more excited about six dead monsters than you are for your own wedding to Banner."

She wasn't wrong. I'd missed more planning meetings than I'd attended.

I twisted around. "How do you think they killed them?"

"Odessa," she snapped, forcing my head to the mirror. "Hold. Still."

Who cared about my hair? I wasn't the woman on display

today. No one cared about me. But I kept my mouth shut and let Margot keep braiding.

Before my mother's death, Margot had been her lady's maid, and since I had Mother's hair, Margot was well practiced at taming the curls.

"I saw Banner earlier." I waited until Margot's blue eyes met the gold of mine in the mirror. "He told me that the Guardian arrived with the Turans."

"Yes." A crease formed between her brows.

The Guardian.

A man rumored to be more vicious and deadly than any creature crafted by the gods.

News of the Guardian had reached Quentis's shores three years ago, and since, countless tales had been spun about his origins.

Some believed he'd crawled out of a grave in Turah. That he was more ghost than mortal being. Some said he was Izzac incarnate. That the God of Death had grown tired of his throne and disguised himself as a man to torment humankind for amusement. And others were certain he'd been gifted his powers by the old gods themselves.

He was more myth than man, and stories about him had swept across the continent like wildfire.

"What does it mean that he's here?" I asked Margot.

"It means you should not go wandering without your guards. It means we should not be late." She worked with furious fingers, pulling each lock into a thick plait. Yet today, even my hair seemed to protest this charade. When the third piece came loose around my temples, she threw up her hands.

"I don't have time for this. Finish and get to the throne room." She marched for the door, sending the skirts of her cobalt dress into a flurry.

As she passed a window, sunlight refracted through the jewels in her crown. Her silky golden hair fell in sleek panels down her shoulders and spine. She floated more than walked,

her chin held high. She might not have been born royalty, but Margot Cross was every bit a queen.

Her daughter would be, too.

With my stepmother gone, I faced the mirror and slumped.

At times like this, I wished I was younger. That I was a child like Arthalayus. My half-brother spent his days in the nursery, blissfully unaware of his obligations. *Good*. As heir to my father's throne, Arthy would someday sign a blood oath of fealty to Father, like most royal heirs in the five kingdoms of Calandra, and soon have more obligations than I could stomach.

Poor kid.

Despite the twenty-year age difference between us, I hoped he'd come to me if he ever needed a reprieve from Father and Margot's demands. Until then, Mae and I would bear that burden.

My hair was a mess, despite Margot's attempt at a braid, but I wrestled it into feeble submission, leaving a few errant strands to frame my face. With the end tied in a satin ribbon, I plucked the crown that had been left on the vanity, fitting it to my head.

It was heavy, the metal cool and unforgiving. Inlaid into the gleaming gold were hundreds of sparkling amber jewels.

This crown was the only thing on me that wasn't gray.

Gods, I hated gray.

I straightened my spine and assumed the posture my refinement tutors had drilled into me from the age of three. I stared into the mirror, and a princess stared back.

A princess who was late.

I slipped through the side entrance of the throne room, breath held as I moved on silent feet to join Margot and Mae to the left of the royal dais.

“Welcome.” Father’s voice was as cold as the large, echoey space. He preferred an icy atmosphere, probably because it so often matched his mood.

Light poured through stained glass windows, casting the marble floor with different shades of blues and greens and yellows. Everyone was gathered in the center of the space, Father’s golden throne empty on its dais. There were more guards than normal. Four instead of two stationed at every door.

Father’s gaze didn’t shift from the men standing in front of him, but without a doubt, he knew I was sneaking in late. Something I’d be berated for later.

Margot and Mae were removed from the group of men, standing side by side a few paces back, crowned and polished. Daughter as beautiful as mother. While my sister was a copy of Father in their stubborn, iron wills, Mae was a near replica of Margot in appearance, from the classic line of their noses to the tapered point of their chins.

Did I look like my mother? I wished I had a reminder of her face. She died when I was a baby, and Father had her portraits removed from the halls. The only reason I knew I’d inherited her hair was because of how often Margot cursed it. But otherwise, I had no idea if we had the same nose or chin or mouth.

As I came to a stop at Margot’s side, she shot me a look of disapproval, then returned her attention to the men.

Five Turans stood shoulder to shoulder, their broad frames forming a wall. Each was a pillar of honed muscle and brute strength. Gods, they were huge.

Banner stood over six feet tall, but compared to these men, he was lean and gangly. Even Father, who was the largest man I'd ever seen, was no match for Turan stature and brawn.

No wonder they'd been able to kill the marroweels.

The Turans weren't dressed in finery, not that I'd expected tailored coats or shining boots from a band of warriors. They wore leather pants that molded to thick thighs. Their brown, tooled vests were worn over ivory cotton tunics that strained against corded biceps. Each wore leather cuffs at his wrists. Two of the men had intricate, dark tattoos covering their forearms.

Every Turan was armed with knives or swords strapped across his back. One man carried three daggers on his belt. They looked prepared for war, not a dinner with royals.

It was surprising that Father even let them into the throne room the way they were armed. Normally, guests were stripped of their weaponry before an audience with the king. Had the Turans refused? Or had the guards even bothered asking?

"Before we begin the introductions." Father's deep voice echoed through the room. "I would like to extend my gratitude for your services. My men tell me that six marroweels were brought in with your ships last night. I hadn't expected you to act so quickly. For that, you have my thanks."

The man with the daggers crossed his arms over his chest. He had a bushy bronze beard, braided beneath his chin. "We've only done what you've hired us to do."

There was something in the man's tone. A note of condescension that made Father's jaw flex as he raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

The same side door I'd snuck through moments ago flew open, and two guards carried in a chest so large I could have

curled up inside and taken a nap. They set it in the center of the throne room, then unlatched the lid, flipping it back to reveal hundreds of Calandran coins.

It was more wealth than I'd ever seen. Enough gold and silver to feed all the mouths in Roslo for months.

A Turan warrior with smooth brown skin and deep-set dark eyes walked to the chest, crouching to inspect its contents. His black hair was braided in long rows, and the cords were tied at his nape. He picked up a single coin, flipping it in the air. It landed on the others with a *clink*.

Was that the Guardian?

"Should I count it, Highness?" he asked as he stood and rejoined the others.

Wait. What? Who was he calling Highness?

The warrior in the center of the line shook his head.

Except he wasn't a warrior, was he? Was that the crown prince?

I'd never seen the Turan prince before, but he must be Xavier Wolfe.

The heir to the Turan throne.

Mae's soon-to-be husband.

Okay, *that* was a surprise. If Margot was shocked, too, she didn't let it show. Neither did Mae. Clearly, I'd missed something by being late.

Prince Xavier was in Roslo. The Guardian was in Roslo.

What was going on? This was supposed to be a quick meeting and a chance for Father to pay the Turan rangers he'd hired. Now it was a royal introduction? Had everyone but me known about this? That explained why the Voster priest was here.

Good thing Margot had insisted on all of that grooming for Mae earlier, if this was her first face-to-face with her betrothed.

"There is no need to count the coin." Father spoke in his cool, indifferent manner, yet the fire in his caramel eyes

betrayed his appearance. “Every ounce of coin we agreed upon is there.”

The warrior who’d spoken earlier, the bearded man with the daggers, gave Father an assessing look. “And what if the price we agreed upon is no longer enough?”

It was rumored that Prince Xavier didn’t speak. If the gossip was true, then maybe that warrior spoke on his behalf, like an advisor. Or a general.

Father’s eyes blazed hotter, the amber starbursts like twin flames. “And what, exactly, is your new price?”

Before the warrior could answer, the main doors opened, capturing everyone’s attention.

The Voster priest I’d collided with earlier entered the throne room. His bare feet poked out beneath his robes, those gruesome green nails on display. But he wasn’t alone this time. Two paces behind him came another member of the brotherhood in the same burgundy robes.

This priest didn’t walk. Instead, he floated slightly above the ground like he was being carried on an invisible wind. Like gravity didn’t weigh as heavily on his body as it did everyone else’s. The nails on his hands and feet were so long they curved and curled like ribbons.

The sting of their magic was instant. The power zinged over my shoulders and down my spine. It took every bit of control not to squirm.

One Voster priest was uncomfortable. But two? It was nearly unbearable. I fought the urge to rub my arms and sprint for the door.

If Margot or Mae felt the discomfort, neither let it show.

Who was that second priest? Had he come here with the Turans? Or had he accompanied the Guardian?

The Voster couldn’t shake the earth or throw balls of fire, but they could bend and twist air and water at their will. Their blood magic was used to form unbreakable bonds.

But I'd never seen one levitate before. This priest's power felt stronger, sharper, than that from Father's emissary.

Both Voster looked the same, hairless with that translucent skin, but this other priest seemed older. His attention, those green-black eyes, drifted to me, lingering for just a moment, before he shifted his focus over his shoulder to the doors.

Tension coiled in the room, and as my gaze followed his, my heart climbed into my throat.

The man who entered next didn't look like a god incarnate. He didn't appear to be a ghost. He was tall and broad, like the other Turans. Muscled to the point of distraction. His chocolate-brown hair tickled the tops of his shoulders, and his chiseled jaw was covered in a short beard of the same shade.

At first glance, he was just a man. Striking. Intimidating. But still, just a man.

Yet his irises did not have the typical Turan green starburst. They were solid, molten silver. Liquid metal. Colorless, like my dress.

The Guardian.

The pounding of his boots matched the rhythm of my thundering pulse as he followed the Voster. Unlike the Turans, he wore no weapons, no sword or knives. Maybe Father had insisted he come to this meeting unarmed, yet I had a feeling he could kill us all with his bare hands.

The way he'd murdered Banner's brother. Hands tight around a throat until the windpipe was crushed.

My eyes darted to my fiancé's. There was murder in Banner's gaze. His hatred of the Guardian was as potent as the scent of my hair dye. But Goddess Carine must have heard our prayers for peace, because he kept his temper leashed, standing stoically at Father's side like the dutiful general he was.

I wasn't in love with Banner. I wasn't particularly excited about becoming the wife of a man under my father's thumb. But I didn't want to see him hanged for treason, either.

The Voster priests came to a stop, together and apart from everyone else. They were their own group in this strange ordeal, like Margot, Mae, and me.

The Guardian did not join them. Instead, the Turan line parted as he approached, making space for him beside Prince Xavier.

The room stilled and quieted. The tension was so thick it was difficult to breathe. The magic made my head ache.

One meeting. We only had to survive this one meeting of nonsense. Then Banner could excuse himself before that throbbing vein at his temple popped. And I could sneak away to my rooms, where I'd stay until the Turans and Voster left Roslo.

I leaned forward, risking another glance at my sister.

A smile toyed on her pretty lips. From the outside, it appeared modest and sweet. I knew better. There was cunning in her blue eyes, like she was in on a secret no one had bothered to share with me.

Mae loved secrets. Add in a solid dose of conflict and a dash of bloodlust, and she was happy.

Was it her nature? Or was it her upbringing?

As a child, Margot had given me dolls to celebrate my birthdays. When Mae had turned five, Father had gifted her a set of gilded blades.

She'd fit in with these Turan warriors, wouldn't she? With this prince? Mae had inherited Father's strong frame and Margot's height. Eighteen years of training had sharpened her into a weapon. The Turans wouldn't break Mae.

Perhaps Father was counting on it being the other way around.

"Where were we?" Father asked. "You had a concern about your price? How can we resolve this?"

Um...

Was he pandering to the Turans? Because that sounded like pandering. And my father did not pander.

He'd let that ranger's comment about counting the coin slide without a sharp retort. And now he was asking how he could *resolve a concern*?

Mae had learned her cunning from his instruction, so what was really happening? There was more going on here than a king hiring mercenaries.

"Introductions. Before we continue." The levitating Voster priest spoke, his voice like silk.

I'd never heard a priest speak before. I'd expected a grating noise, a tone as spiky as their power. But it was like music, soft and entrancing. The sound of a siren singing you to sleep before they swallowed you whole.

At his command, the attention of the men shifted in our direction. Five pairs of Turan eyes with green starbursts in their irises dragged over Margot and Mae while the Guardian's silver gaze locked on me instead. It was as uncomfortable as the Voster magic.

Father gave Margot a nod.

She put her hand on Mae's lower back, and together, they walked toward the Turans with me trailing a step behind.

The Turan in the center of the group wore a circlet across his forehead. The band wasn't inlaid with jewels or gems. It was a twist of metal threads, woven together to form a line of silver.

His brown hair was shorter than any of the others', the soft waves pushed away from his face, the ends curling slightly at his nape. The sides of his crown disappeared beneath the strands at his ears. A small scar cut through one of his eyebrows. His eyes were the color of moss on a stormy day. The shade nearly swallowed the green starbursts in his irises.

Prince Xavier was handsome. Stunning, really, with a robust masculinity. And he was bored. There wasn't a hint of interest at meeting his future bride.

At any moment, I expected to see him yawn.

The Guardian, however, looked amused, like this was all a joke. His eyes crinkled at the sides as he smirked.

What was funny? What was I missing?

“Prince Xavier, I present to you my daughter Mae,” Father said. “In accord with the Shield of Sparrows, she is to be your bride on the autumnal equinox in three months’ time.”

Zavier studied Mae for a long moment, then glanced to the Guardian.

An unspoken conversation passed between them. Was that one of the Guardian’s powers? Could he read minds?

Well, if he could read mine...

Go away. Please and thank you.

The Guardian gave the prince a nod, then spoke in a gravelly voice that gave me goose bumps. “Not her.”

Margot blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Her.” The Guardian’s eyes flicked in my direction, and the whole room followed his gaze.

To me.

“Prince Xavier will marry *her*,” he declared. “Tonight. As the bride prize for killing your marroweels.”

The silence in the throne room was as thick as billowing smoke, sucking the air from my lungs. The floor began to spin and tilt, my balance faltering.

Margot's hand wrapped around my forearm, and for a moment, I was grateful for her steadying touch. But then her fingernails bit through the fabric of my dress so hard they almost punctured my skin.

Yet even as the pain zinged from wrist to elbow, I didn't move. Couldn't move.

Her.

Me? Prince Xavier wanted to marry me?

No. Absolutely not. This wasn't happening. I was hallucinating. The ocean water had gone to my head. That, or Ferious was playing one of his tricks. This seemed like something the God of Mischief would enjoy. Maybe it was the Voster. That priest who had yet to touch the floor had planted this nightmare in my mind.

This was not real. Could not be real.

I was engaged to Banner. Mae was marrying the Turan prince. Mae. Not me. Mae.

Margot squeezed tighter, her fingertips digging into my flesh. Thankfully, I didn't bruise easily. Otherwise, there would be five round circles by morning.

But I didn't try to shake her loose. I was too busy listening to the Guardian's word screaming in my mind.

Her.

Her. Her. Her.

Me.

The silence built higher and higher and higher. The tension

doubled. Tripled. The explosion was inevitable. And when the quiet finally cracked, the room erupted at once.

“There must be some mistake.” Margot spoke through gritted teeth. Every syllable was punctuated by her nails digging deeper into my arm.

“No.” Father’s voice was a boom, rattling the walls.

A growl, raw and ravenous, ripped from Mae’s throat.

Then came Banner’s declaration of the obvious. “She is *my* fiancée.”

And a laugh. Gravelly. Low. Dry and humorless.

I blinked, forcing my vision into focus, homing in on that laugh.

The Guardian. He was laughing. His silver eyes flashed white like lightning, and the smirk on his mouth stretched.

Jackass.

Margot gasped.

Father’s jaw clenched.

Damn. I guess I’d said that out loud. Well, he was a jackass for laughing.

I opened my mouth, not to apologize but to say it again, this time more clearly, but a slice of my father’s hand through the air brought back that crushing silence.

Every man in the throne room seemed to stand taller. One of the warriors lifted his hand, just slightly, like he was readying to wield the sword on his back.

“Prince Xavier,” Father said. “Mae is my daughter intended to be your bride. If you wish to forgo the planned festivities of the equinox, then we will arrange for your union tonight.”

My gaze bounced around the room, hopping from Turan to Voster to Father to Banner and back around again.

The prince was still bored. The Voster seemed comatose. Banner looked lethal. Father’s expression was too guarded to discern. Mae and Margot were livid. At. Me.

And the Guardian was still smirking.

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I hated him instantly. Maybe I should have wished for Banner to cut his throat.

Shades, I needed to get out of this throne room. Immediately.

Father wouldn't allow this, right? He'd tell the prince exactly what he thought of a bride prize—whatever the hell that was.

Except Father stayed quiet. His mouth pursed into a thin line as he kept his steady gaze on the Turans, waiting for their reply.

Did he even care that they were asking me to be used as payment for a debt? That they were asking to trade his daughter like that coffer of coin? Or was the anger simmering in his caramel eyes simply because his orders were being questioned?

I didn't want the answer.

When I tore my eyes from Father, the Guardian's gaze was waiting.

It wasn't the same silver as it had been a moment ago. His eyes darkened, silver bleeding away to gray and brown and green. A hazel as hard as stone.

Gone was his laughter. His humor had given way to a cold, cruel malice.

My heart was beating so fast it hurt. The pulse pounding in my ears was deafening. But I didn't look away from his changing irises. From that glare. I would not wither under that murderer's stare.

Father had taught me a long time ago that only fools cowered.

I might not be his favorite daughter, but I tried not to be a fool. So I held the Guardian's stare, my will as unbendable as Ozarth iron. Mae and I shared that stubborn streak.

The corner of the Guardian's mouth turned up.

Yep, still a jackass. Glad I could be his source of amusement

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today. I curled my lip and shifted my attention, this time to Prince Xavier.

He was unreadable. No hint of emotion. No sign of interest or indifference. His was the most intimidating stare I'd ever seen in my life, more so than even Father's.

A shiver rolled down my spine.

If the Guardian's glare had been a test, the prince's was a promise. I was going to be his wife.

The floor beneath my slippers tilted sideways again.

"She is not yours to have." Fury crackled off Banner's frame, his body practically vibrating. "She is mine."

It might have been romantic. Except Banner wasn't mad because another man was stealing the woman he loved. No, Banner was furious to be losing his link to the royal family.

I might not be the favored princess, but I was *a* princess. A gift for his service. A symbol of his status.

The Guardian met Banner's sneer with one of his own. "She was yours. Now, she belongs to the prince. She'll satisfy both the bride prize and the treaty. She'll be our queen."

Queen.

That was laughable. I hated wearing shoes and dresses and being trapped indoors. I loathed the monotony of lessons and lectures. I wasn't meant to rule or lead. Politics were boring and regal parties overrated. I was not a queen.

The crown on my head began to itch.

"I will not stand for this," Banner announced. "You are to wed Mae."

Prince Xavier turned his chin and gave that impassive stare to my fiancé. A dare to defy royalty. A challenge to the oldest known treaty in Calandra.

Banner gulped.

Xavier dismissed him with a blink and faced Father.

"The prince will have who he desires." It was as if the Guardian were inside Xavier's mind, speaking the words the prince could not. And he desires her.

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Her. There was that word again.

Oh, gods. I was going to be sick.

“The Shield of Sparrows treaty stipulates a daughter of the king’s choosing. As I am the only king in this room, the choice is mine.” Father pointed to Mae. “You will wed Mae. She is the Sparrow. And you will be given the gold we have promised for your assistance with the marroweels.”

These men were bartering for us like we were crops.

Mae preened, seemingly honored to be chattel. She stood taller, her shoulders pinned, as a smug smile stretched across her mouth.

My molars ground together, nearly cracking, but I managed to keep quiet. Nothing would come from my protest. No one in this room gave a damn about my opinion. My fate was not my own, and my future would be determined by these *men*.

Zavier sighed, like this argument was cutting into his afternoon nap time.

I hated him. All of them.

“King Cross is correct.” Father’s Voster emissary spoke with the same smooth voice as the priest. “The daughter to be offered through the Shield of Sparrows is of the king’s choosing.”

The air rushed from my lungs. Who would have thought a Voster would be my salvation?

“The treaty only requires a daughter be given to another kingdom each generation. Her father has the right to choose which daughter,” the priest continued. “Though there is still the matter of the bride prize for the marroweels.”

Father shook his head. “There is no bride prize. We will pay in gold.”

“He doesn’t want gold,” the Guardian said.

Right. *Her.* He wanted me. Why? I was not special.

The other priest, the Voster still hovering above the floor, raised a hand, and before he spoke, I knew I’d loathe every word from his mouth. The prince has slain seven female

creatures on your behalf, per your request, King Cross. If he demands a bride prize, it must be paid. And for that, the bride is of *his* choosing.”

“Six,” Father corrected. “There were only six marroweels.”

Six or seven. Who cared about some random number of monsters? So what if Xavier was good with a sword or crossbow or whatever he’d used to kill those beasts? Could we please get back to this bride-prize thing? Because I really wanted to know if I was or was not going to be married before dawn.

“Your informants were wrong, Majesty.” The Guardian’s cruel smile widened. “*Seven* female marroweels were slaughtered in the Krisenth Crossing. All by the prince himself. According to the Chain of Sevens, the prince can demand a bride prize.”

The Chain of what? I glanced at Margot, and the pit in my stomach doubled as the color drained from her face.

“The Chain of Sevens is nothing more than a children’s legend.” Banner scoffed. “It is not enforceable. So take your gold and leave. Come back when you’re ready to marry Mae and sign the Shield of Sparrows.”

“The Chain of Sevens is no legend,” the Guardian told Banner. “Your request to dispatch the marroweels should have been more specific.”

Specific about what, exactly?

“What are you talking about?” Everyone seemed surprised that I had a voice. “The Chain of Sevens? What is it?”

“Seven lives in a chain.” Father’s emissary spoke gently, like he was pulling a punch. “Long ago, before the five kingdoms, the lands and seas were overrun by monsters. To regain control, the ruling lords made a decree. Any warrior who risked their life against the beasts would be granted a prize of their choosing if they returned with the heads of seven slain females from the species. As with all treaties, the Chain of Sevens was sealed with our magic.”

Meaning death to any who violated its terms. If Father was indebted to the prince and refused to pay, the Voster's magic would steal his life.

Was that why the Turans had brought this other priest along? To enforce the decree? Well, if he had the power to seal the agreement, couldn't he overrule it, too?

"Why seven?" My voice wobbled. "Why is that number important? And why females?"

"To alter the chain of life," the floating priest said. "Killing seven females will break the chain. Break it in enough places, and it holds no strength."

It wouldn't be easy to kill that many monsters and survive. So the ancient rulers had given them a boon for such feats? Those who prevailed would earn a prize.

Even a bride.

Banner was right. This sounded like a story in a children's book.

"The Chain of Sevens is not real. It is nothing but a legend." Father raised his chin. "The only bride Prince Xavier will be given is Mae to fulfill the Shield of Sparrows. I will not send Odessa in Mae's place because of an archaic myth like the Chain of Sevens."

The levitating Voster leveled Father with his stare. "What you call an archaic myth is old magic. And old magic is still magic, boy. It is quite real." On the priest's final word, an icy wind blew through the throne room. It whipped the skirts of my gown around my ankles and blew a lock of Margot's hair into my face.

Then, like it had never blown in, the wind stopped. The hems of my dress fell in a whoosh across my slippers.

Margot straightened, her grip finally loosening from my arm.

The relief was short-lived. The Voster dropped to his feet, his soles finally resting on the floor. It must have grounded his magic, intensified in some way. The prickling of my

skin penetrated deeper, sharper as his magic permeated the room.

The wind was gone, but the cold remained, plummeting lower and lower. Crystals formed on the windows. Frost coated the floor. My shallow breaths were wisps of white. My teeth chattered.

Time slowed to a crawl, minutes passed in silent agony, and still the temperature did not rise. If he kept us here, if he trapped us in this room, we'd all freeze to death.

As if the Voster hadn't made the threat clear enough, the temperature dropped again, turning so cold that the metallic tang of blood spread across my tongue. The taste of frozen lungs. My nostrils burned with every inhale.

Beside me, Margot began to tremble. Mae, for once, looked terrified. Even Father blanched.

The Turans stood as still as statues, seemingly unaffected. For a moment, I wondered if the Voster had spared them from his display, but frost was spreading over the prince's circlet. Xavier and the Guardian shared a look, not of worry but of warning.

Father had gone too far by questioning the Voster's magic.

"I sealed the Sevens with my own magic and the blood of ancient kings." The Voster's voice was as lethal as the shards of ice forming on the ceiling. "Mind what you call an archaic myth."

Father bowed his head. It was the first time in my life I'd seen him bow to another. He didn't even do that for his own Voster emissary. Granted, this priest was about to kill us all, so now was the time to show a little humility.

"I'm sorry, High Priest," Father murmured.

High Priest? *The* High Priest? I was about done with surprises for today.

My mind was running out of places to keep all of this newfound information. This meeting was only supposed to

be a formality. Had I known the High Priest of the Voster would be in attendance, I would have kept swimming.

According to that one book about the brotherhood, the Voster were long-lived but not immortal. Since the High Priest hadn't been seen or heard from in decades, most believed he'd died.

No, he'd just been hiding out with the Turans. Was he Prince Zavier's ambassador? Did he live in Turah?

"She is your daughter, yes?" the High Priest asked.

"Yes." Father nodded.

"Then she will be the prince's bride for both the Shield of Sparrows and Chain of Sevens."

She. Her.

Me.

The air warmed with the High Priest's declaration.

Margot exhaled, her body swaying as she breathed, her breath no longer a cloud. She hated the cold because it hurt her knees.

The ice melted as the temperature returned to normal. The plop of water droplets falling on marble echoed through the throne room.

Father's emissary raised his hand and, just like he'd done with my hair, spun his finger in a circle. Streams of water rushed for the closed front doors, escaping through its cracks.

As quickly as it had started, the show of Voster magic was finished. Other than its irritation against my skin, every trace was gone as if ice and wind had never touched this place.

Prince Xavier nodded to the Voster brothers, then turned and stalked for the exit. His rangers formed a line and followed close behind.

I guess they were done? He'd come for a bride prize—I gagged—and he'd gotten his way.

The Guardian left next, not sparing anyone a parting glance.

The High Priest lifted off the floor and floated at the Guardian's side.

Only when the doors thudded closed behind them did I risk a breath.

"Brother Dime." Father's eyes were pleading as he addressed his emissary. "There must be something we can do."

Dime. Strange that I'd never known his name.

He wasn't a regular visitor at the castle, but he'd been around on a few occasions in my lifetime. Grandfather's

funeral. The feast of kings that Father had hosted five years ago. Arthalayus's presentation as heir to the Quentin crown.

I should have introduced myself before. Maybe Brother Dime would have spoken for me, stood up to the High Priest, if I'd bothered to learn his name.

"Mae is to be the Turan queen," Father said. "It cannot be Odessa. She is not capable."

Ouch. Okay, so I wasn't the chosen daughter, but was the idea of me as a queen really so inconceivable?

Not that I wanted to be queen. At. All.

"Oh, gods." I pressed my fingertips to my temples, rubbing at the ache blooming in my skull.

This wasn't happening. This wasn't real.

Brother Dime walked toward me, his nearness making the throb in my head worse.

My hands flopped at my sides as I met his fathomless gaze. "Please."

"This is your fortune, child." He reached for me, long, spindly fingers extended.

But before he could touch my face with his bony fingers, I shied away, leaning closer to Margot, hoping her body would absorb the sting of his magic.

Dime studied me for a long moment, his head tilting to the side like it had earlier. He blinked those creepy eyes once, then swept out of the throne room, disappearing to wherever he stayed when he was visiting Roslo.

Did he have a castle wing? Or did he stay in the city? Maybe I should have asked about that, too.

Without having to fight against the irritation of his magic, the last shards of strength leaked from my body. I collapsed to the floor, knees landing with a crack on the marble. My stomach churned, and the meal I'd eaten hours ago threatened to make a reappearance, but I swallowed the urge to retch.

"Gods." I signed the Eight, circling my hand around my face and around my heart. I doubted the Eight gods were

listening, but if Ama, Oda, and their six children had a hint of divine intervention to spare, I'd take it.

"Odessa is to be my wife." Banner stomped a boot on the floor.

"You heard the High Priest." Father tore the crown from his head and dragged a fair hand through his golden hair. The strands at his temples appeared more ashen than they had before this debacle.

People called him the Gold King. His hair was the color of ripened wheat. His caramel eyes were flecked with the same golden shade as the coins in that chest. With the amber starbursts, Father's gaze always had a glow.

The magic rooted deep in Calandra's land tinged our irises at birth with those starbursts, linking us forever to a place. No matter where we lived, where we moved, that one color was unchanging. Every Quentin had an amber starburst.

Every Quentin except me.

My eyes were solid gold. Not a starburst in sight.

When I was a child, I used to ask Father why I was different. After he'd ignored the question countless times, I'd stopped trying to understand.

When Mae and I were girls, when the time had come for him to choose the Sparrow and he'd picked her instead of me, even though I was his eldest daughter, he hadn't explained that, either.

The Gold King owed no one an explanation.

Father's nickname was mostly due to the incredible wealth he'd brought to our kingdom since he'd been passed the crown from my grandfather.

Quentis hadn't been wealthy prior to his reign. My grandfather's passion had been women and parties and spending his people's money on extravagance. He was the reason this castle had been plated in gold.

My father had chosen to use our resources more wisely. His fortunes were lodged beneath the castle, not on its

walls. Yet even the Gold King couldn't pay this debt with riches.

"There must be another way," Banner said. "The Turans cannot take her from me. This cannot be—"

"Banner." Father's voice cracked off the walls. "Leave us."

"My king—"

"Leave. Us."

Banner, the ever-faithful general, left without delay, his bootheels sharp as he crossed the floor.

"Out," Father commanded to the guards. Unlike Banner, there was no argument.

With them gone, it was only us. Family.

A blade being unsheathed sounded a moment before a knife was pressed against my throat.

"What did you do?" Mae seethed.

"Get that knife away from me." On top of everything else, I didn't have the energy for my sister's antics. I was moments away from throwing myself off another cliff, and she thought *now* would be a good time to test the sharpness of her knife? Really?

I pushed at her hand, forcing the blade away from my neck. Though not before she flicked her wrist, just enough to break the skin and draw a bead of blood.

"Shit," I hissed, pressing my fingertip to the nick. "Did you really just cut me? Shades, you're a demon."

"Tell me what you did," she snapped.

"Nothing. I did nothing."

Her beautiful features contorted in rage. "Then why does Prince Xavier want you?"

"How should I know?" I wiped the blood from my neck, glaring up at her as I smeared it on the underside of my sleeve. "Maybe he doesn't like blondes."

My sister lunged, her other hand balled into a fist, ready to slam into my nose, but before she could get close, Father's hand clasped around her wrist, halting her momentum.

He ripped the knife from her grasp and flung it across the floor. It skidded to a stop at the stairs of his throne's dais.

"Mae," Margot chided. "You are not helping this situation."

"She did something, Mother. Tricked him or—"

"Enough." Father's command left no room for disobedience. He released Mae and lowered to a crouch in front of me, his caramel eyes searching mine. "Tell me honestly. Have you met Xavier before this day?"

"No." I shook my head. "Never."

"Have you crossed paths with any of the Turans since they've arrived?"

"Not once."

"Where were you today?"

Nothing good would come from the truth. Father didn't know about the cliff diving. Banner only thought I went up to the overlook to sketch, get a better view of the city, and escape the castle's walls. And Margot and Mae thought I loved to swim off the coast.

There was no chance that Father would see my beloved pastime as brave rather than reckless. "I went for a hike outside. Then I went swimming."

His eyes narrowed as if he could sense the half-truth. "And?"

"When I came inside, I bumped into Brother Dime outside a gallery."

"Which gallery?"

"The, um...crux gallery."

"Damn your curiosity with that hall," he snapped, nostrils flaring.

I winced. "I'm sorry."

He'd told me on more than one occasion it wasn't a suitable place for me to spend my time. Father didn't understand my interest in the migrations. He also didn't realize today hadn't been about the art or monsters. That gallery was simply the easiest way for me to sneak in unnoticed.

Father sighed. "What else happened today?"

"Nothing. After I saw Brother Dime, I ran upstairs to change my gown. Margot helped with my hair." Father didn't move. He didn't speak. Suspicion filled his eyes, like he knew I hadn't given him the whole truth.

This silence was one of his favorite tactics. He liked to see who would break the quiet first.

Usually, it was me. I'd confess to hiding from my tutors or slipping table scraps to his hunting dogs. I'd admit to sneaking into the kitchen for treats or running away from my guards when I visited the docks.

But the truth about that cliffside was mine. I wouldn't give in, not with this. If by some miracle he found a way to get me out of this mess with the Turans, I wasn't going to lose that one freedom.

"Gods." Father sighed, dragging a palm over his jaw. "I'm sorry, Dess."

My entire body jolted. When was the last time he'd called me Dess? It had been years. And I'd never heard him apologize.

The gentleness in his eyes was so foreign that my heart clenched. He hadn't looked at me like that in, well...a long, long time. Since I was a child. Since I'd wake in the middle of the night, screaming from a nightmare, and Father would hold me until sunrise. "I'm sorry that you must do this."

"I can't, Father. Please don't make me."

He brushed his knuckles across my cheek. "You must."

"I don't want to marry him. There has to be a way to undo this."

He leaned back and gave me a sad smile. "The bride prize aside, we cannot afford to anger the Turans with a refusal. And we cannot break the Shield of Sparrows, not with the crux migration upon us. Mae was to go to Turah. You must take her place. You must be the Sparrow now."

It was another treaty signed in blood and sealed with magic.

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If a king refused to give his daughter to another king, then the father would die. To my knowledge, no man had ever chosen his daughter over himself.

I certainly didn't expect that sort of sacrifice.

Beyond the stipulations of arranged marriages, the Shield of Sparrows was a trade treaty at its core. It kept all five kingdoms alive. Equitable-*ish*. It provided us all with the necessary resources to thrive. And when the crux migration came, survive.

We traded the resources we could reap—crops and cattle—for those we couldn't. The iron Quentis needed to forge weapons came from Ozarth. The lumber we used for buildings from Turah. Laine gave us spices and gold. And Genesis mined the oil we burned in lanterns and stoves.

From the day the Shield of Sparrows was formed, the wars that had once been commonplace across the continent had come to an abrupt halt. But our ancestors had feared that trading goods alone wouldn't be enough to keep the fragile peace, so they'd also decided to bind nations with blood.

Every generation, before every migration, a daughter would be married off to another royal family so that their children had ties to both countries.

The most recent arranged marriage had been between Laine and Ozarth.

The weddings were lavish affairs. Every kingdom was invited to celebrate, as the unions were to remind us all of the greater good. That peace must be preserved at all costs.

We could not war with ourselves and the crux. For the monsters did not care which lands they attacked. And they gave no mercy.

The crux would black out the skies for months, the sun blocked by thousands upon thousands of beating wings. Livestock would be slaughtered. Crops and harvests annihilated. Buildings razed and capitals destroyed.

Since the Shield of Sparrows, the five kingdoms had endured, surviving nine migrations.

Celebrating nine marriages.

Mae's would have been the tenth.

If not for the fucking Chain of Sevens.

"I can't believe this," I whispered. "This isn't happening."

"Listen." Father placed his hands on my shoulders and gave me a shake, the gentleness from a moment ago gone. "There is much to be done before tonight. Much you must learn."

"Isn't it a bit late to start preparing me to rule a foreign kingdom?"

"Odessa." Father shook my shoulders again. "You must find the way into Allesaria before summer's end. Then send word of how I can find and infiltrate the city."

I gaped, replaying his demand. "Wh-what?"

Did he want to send a legion to the Turan capital? There was a clause in the Shield of Sparrows forbidding invasion of one kingdom by another. Disobedience came with the same price as refusing to deliver a daughter for marriage.

A king's death.

Not only would invading the Turan capital start a war, it would cost Father his life.

He couldn't be serious. Was he?

"Your lady's maids will accompany you on the journey to Turah," he said. "Invent a reason to send one or both of them back to Quentis with whatever you learn."

"Brielle and Jocelyn?"

"Allesaria is your priority. Understand? It's crucial to my plans. We cannot delay. But you must also learn everything you can about the Guardian and his powers. Find a way to kill him."

My jaw dropped. "You want me to kill the Guardian?"

A murderer. A man who was rumored to slay the legendary monsters in Turah. Possibly the best fighter in Calandra. That Guardian?

"Yes," Father said. "You must try. At the very least, find

out what he is capable of. No matter how many spies I've sent to Turah, none have been able to learn the extent of his powers or their source."

"Powers? He looks...normal." Well, mostly normal.

The rumors about the Guardian said he was as fast as a viper. That he had the strength of ten men. But his gifts weren't like the Voster's. He didn't seem to have fluid and blood magic. He certainly hadn't demonstrated any power today.

Except his eyes. He had no starburst, like me. And his eyes had changed colors—unless I'd imagined it. I wasn't sure what was real at this point. An hour ago, I hadn't known there was such a thing as the Chain of Sevens or a bride prize, but here I was, about to pay it to some bored, brooding prince.

I glanced toward Margot, hoping for a shred of compassion.

Nope. Not a bit. She was still irate.

Mae kept inching closer to her discarded knife.

And Father looked, well...peevied. Like his marionettes weren't obeying the tugs on their strings.

That's all we were. Puppets. The spinning in my head came to a sudden stop as realization dawned.

"D-did you plan this?" The marroweels and the mercenaries and whatever else he had in his head?

He frowned. "Did you really believe that Banner's legionnaires couldn't kill a handful of marroweels?"

So yes, he had planned this.

"People died. Did you send soldiers into the Krisenth, knowing they wouldn't return?" *Say no. Please say no.* I would not be able to look at him again if he'd willingly used his people as bait for some political scheme.

"The marroweels *have* been attacking along the trade route. Every life lost has been a tragedy. Once we realized it was no longer safe, we staged the disappearance of a few ships. All the soldiers aboard came home. But the Turans don't need to know that." **Copyrighted Material**

My frame sagged. Well, that was something. “I don’t understand. Mae was to marry him in three months. Why not just wait for the equinox? Why bring them here now?”

“I can’t wait three months. We’ve tried for years, decades, to find the way to Allesaria. From everything we can assume, the capital is deep within the Turan mountains. If so, it may be impassable for an army come winter. I wanted Mae to have enough time to find a way to breach the city and for a legion to make the journey before the snows. Otherwise, we’ll have to wait until next spring. If the crux migrate earlier than the scholars predict, I will lose my chance.”

“Chance at what? At conquering Turah?”

His jaw flexed. “They have something I want in that city.”

“What?”

“The details are not important for you to know. But it is crucial I find a way into the city before the migration. It is our only chance at stopping the crux.”

Time stilled. So did my heart.

Stopping the crux. Was it possible? Was there really a way to keep the monsters from destroying Calandra? A way to prevent the horrors shown in the castle gallery?

“How?”

“That, I cannot explain. Not yet. But for the good of our people, you must do this. You must trust me. Find me a way into Allesaria.”

“But the treaties. What about—”

“Treaties can be broken, Odessa. Remember that.”

The spinning in my head was back with a vengeance. “How? That would mean you’d die.”

“Not necessarily.”

What was he talking about? “I don’t understand.”

He placed his crown back on his head. “You don’t need to.”

It didn’t matter if I comprehended the subtle details. Father would keep me in the dark unless he had no other

choice. He would tell me only what I needed to know to do his bidding, apparently.

“How did you know that Prince Xavier would come when you hired them to kill the marroweels?” I asked.

He sighed, clearly annoyed with my string of questions, but answered anyway. “We’ve gathered from different sources that he’s been traveling more frequently with his rangers. It wasn’t a guarantee but worth a chance. When we learned that the Guardian and High Priest were spotted with their group, I assumed Xavier was among them, too.”

“But you didn’t anticipate a bride prize?”

“That was...unexpected.”

I rubbed at my temples again, the ache returning as I tried to make sense of this conversation. “So you hired the Turans to kill the marroweels and brought them here so they could collect payment, knowing that Xavier would likely tag along, all in the hopes that the prince would, what? Take one look at Mae and fall desperately in love and demand they marry months earlier than planned?”

Father scoffed.

Silly me. I’d forgotten that Father didn’t believe in love.

“I had hoped that he’d be open to shifting the wedding date,” he said. “That if he came here, I could persuade him to marry her sooner under the guise of strengthening our trade routes. We have worked hard to build up stores in preparation for the crux. Turah has suffered two years of drought. Their production has not been enough to sustain them through the migration. I was hoping to accelerate the wedding in exchange for increased grain shipments. Then Mae would get to sail with them this summer. She’d have more time to gain knowledge of Allesaria.”

“What if the prince hadn’t come? What if he hadn’t wanted to move the wedding?”

“Worst-case scenario, they’d take our gold as payment and she’d marry Xavier at the equinox.”

Except this was the worst case. I was the worst case.

“Why would he choose me?”

A crease formed between Father’s eyebrows. “I don’t know.”

“Does he suspect Mae was going to be a spy?”

“He’d be a fool not to. It’s no secret every kingdom in Calandra is curious about Allesaria’s whereabouts. But this is the only opportunity where they cannot refuse us.”

An opportunity that only came with this marriage.

“I didn’t think he’d dismiss Mae entirely,” Father said. “A fault in my plan.”

Planning, plotting, was how his mind worked. He trusted no one. He expected betrayal. And he was rarely surprised.

Mae’s lip curled. “We should have left her out of this.”

“You’re probably right,” he murmured.

But there had been no reason to exclude me today. I was a nothing princess content to blend into the walls and stand a pace behind my sister. I was Father’s insignificant oldest daughter born to his dead wife. I was already engaged to his general and in no way competition to Mae’s beauty or charm.

There had been no reason for anyone in my family to suspect I’d catch Prince Xavier’s eye.

My hands began to shake. “I’m not a spy. I’m not a warrior. I’m sure as hell not an assassin. I can’t do this.” The last time I’d held a sword, the weapons master had shuffled me off to the infirmary because I’d sliced open my own palm.

“You will,” Father commanded. “Repeat your orders.”

I swallowed hard. “I am to find the way to Allesaria. Then I’m to learn about the Guardian’s powers. And if I have the chance, you want me to kill him.”

Another person.

He was asking me to take a life.

“Yes.” Father’s relief was palpable. “You can do this. You *must* do this. Then I will bring you home.”

Impossible. Once I sailed away from Quentis, I doubted I'd ever return.

Especially if—when—the Turans realized I was a spy.

Or when the Guardian killed me first.

“You must trust me,” Father whispered. He brushed a kiss to my forehead, then stood and nodded to Margot. “Get her ready.”

For my wedding. Tonight.

Margot's growl filled my rooms. "Bring. Me. Blue."

"I'm sorry, Majesty." Brielle's cheeks were flushed, sweat beading at her temples and coating her brown hair. Above her upturned nose, her honey-colored eyes were panicked as she darted into the closet for the fifth time to trade the three gray gowns in her arms for three other gray gowns.

For the past four hours, Brielle had been racing around the castle, obeying each of my stepmother's sharp commands without fail. But finding a blue dress in my wardrobe? Impossible. We both knew that. Brielle was simply too sweet to stand up to Margot.

If Jocelyn were here, she would have told Margot from the beginning that I didn't have a stitch of blue. Except Jocelyn had been sent to the apothecary to collect contraceptive tea for us to take on the journey.

Since we'd left the throne room, Margot had done exactly as Father had instructed. With Brielle and Jocelyn's help, she'd prepared me for both a wedding and a cross-continental move.

I might not have a dress in the traditional wedding shade, but otherwise, they'd turned me into a bride.

All that pampering Mae had received this morning, they'd expedited for me this afternoon. A scalding hot bath had been drawn in my bathing chamber—I might not be able to justify my grandfather's extravagant gold plating on the castle, but I certainly enjoyed the interior plumbing. My skin was exfoliated, oiled, and scented.

Greenery was woven into my hair. Brielle had pinned it into an elaborate tangle of thick braids and twists that draped down my spine. Jocelyn had powdered my cheeks with peach

rouge and stained my lips pink. There was shimmer on my lids and kohl lining my lashes. Bracelets adorned both wrists, and golden floral cuffs trailed along the shells of my ears.

In my twenty-three years, I'd never looked more beautiful. More like a princess. Yet each time I caught my reflection in the mirror, the sinking dread of what was to come would hit so hard I had to turn away again.

"You'll run out of this eventually." Margot stuffed jars of hair dye into one of three trunks stacked against the wall. "You'll need to find a market in Turah. Until then, wash your hair sparingly."

Prince Xavier had bargained for a brunette wife, so a brunette I would remain.

Margot slammed the lid of the trunk closed so hard I jerked in my seat at the vanity. With it closed and latched, she stood, surveying the room for anything she'd missed.

But all that remained was the furniture. My jewelry had been wrapped and stowed along with my soaps and creams and skin tonics. She'd sent me with three purses of gold coins. Jocelyn had packed away my sketchbook and favorite pencils. Brielle had folded my favorite dresses and stored them away with my intimates and slippers.

Was it good or bad that everything I owned fitted into three trunks? One steward could move them all to a carriage in less than an hour.

There were a handful of books I would have liked to have taken, but they were in the castle's library, and when I'd asked to get them, Margot had told me there wasn't time. There were libraries in Turah, right?

Brielle rushed out of the closet with my palest gray dress. "This is the closest thing she has to a blue."

It wasn't even close to blue. Certainly not the bold, vibrant colors that most brides wore on their wedding days. The dress was almost white.

The color we clothed the dead.