



DISCOVER
THE
MONSTER
WITHIN

RITES OF THE STARLING

NO.1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
DEVNEY PERRY
AUTHOR OF SHIELD OF SPARROWS

Rites of the Starling

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DEVNEY PERRY



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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Writing in the romantasy genre has been a dream of mine for years, and the love for *Shield of Sparrows* continues to fill my heart each and every day. Thank you for going on this adventure with me.

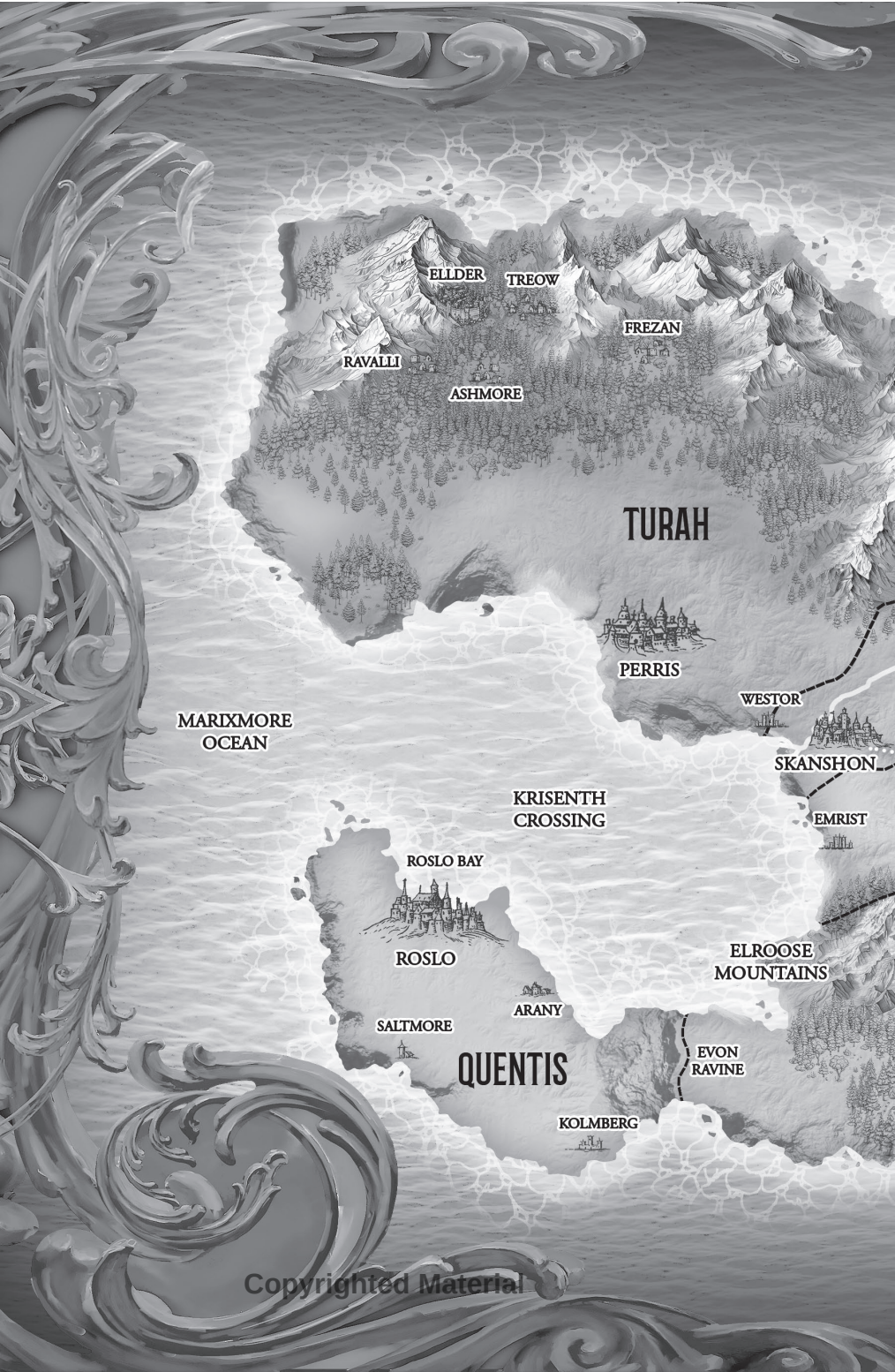
From the very beginning of Odessa's story, I had an idea of where I wanted to take this second book. It's one of those ideas that has been in the back of my mind for a long, long time, just waiting to be told.

You're going to meet some new characters in this book. I hope they steal your heart the way they've stolen mine. And I hope that a few of the twists and turns in this story are as unexpected for you as they were for me. The unexpected journeys are usually those I love most.

Again, thank you for reading. I am beyond grateful for your trust in telling this tale. Now I invite you to turn the page and return to Calandra for *Rites of the Starling*.

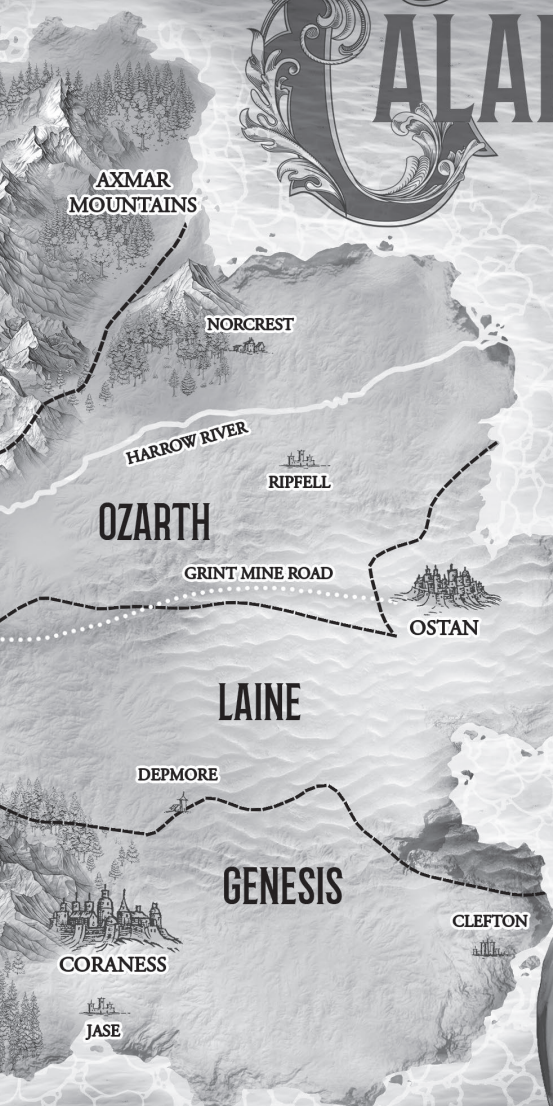
Devney

Rites of the Starling is an epic romantasy set in a world of monsters and 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, poisoning, trafficking, threat and mention of rape, graphic language, and sexual activity. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note.



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CALANDRA



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Prologue

Sparrow Wolfe's fate rested in the hands of five men.

The five kings of Calandra.

They stood around an oval table, their focus on the treaty splayed across the grooved wooden surface. The ink on the parchment was still wet. The cleric who'd penned the document hurried to collect his belongings, then scurried out of the room now that his task was complete.

The underground cellar was cloaked in shadow. The scents of dank rock and acrid smoke filled the air. One of the lamps was sputtering out, the oil in its reservoir nearly gone after hours and hours of negotiations.

Sparrow stood against the stone wall as a silent observer of the discussion. A fire crackled in the hearth, but its heat could not chase away the cold that had crept into her bones. She clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering.

A numbness was taking hold of her body, creeping into her fingertips and toes. With the Goddess Daria's luck, that numbness would soon dull the ache in her heart.

Not one of the five kings paid her any attention, not even her father. They were too busy debating who she would marry.

The Voster High Priest hovered behind the men. His bare feet hadn't touched the floor since he floated into the cellar. The dim light leached any hint of color from his pale white skin.

His eyes, those solid, dark pools, stayed locked on the treaty. The moment the kings came to an agreement, he'd seal their oaths in blood.

The priest's hands were clasped in front of him, and the

thick, dark-green nails protruding from his fingers were so long they curled into his robes, the burgundy fabric as dark as the storm cloud over her heart.

The kings were dressed in bold fabrics, reds and greens and blues and teals, each proudly representing their respective kingdoms in color and the emblems stitched into their clothes.

Sparrow was dressed in gray, a shade as empty as she was of hope.

This treaty was a necessity. She'd told herself that countless times. It would end the wars that had plagued their continent for generations. It would bind the five kingdoms of Calandra together forever.

Either they would find a way to live together. Or they'd die trying.

The logical princess her father had raised, the fledgling politician, knew this was essential for survival. But the young woman with dreams of finding love had begun to wither the moment marriage stipulations had entered the conversation.

There was a reason Sparrow was in this cellar, something she hadn't realized until it was too late. She was not here as her father's heir. She was not here to observe and learn.

She was a token to be traded in the name of peace.

These kings of men were worried that exchanging goods alone was not enough to maintain the accords. What better way to tie kingdoms together than to bind them by blood? By future generations. By the children she would someday bear. Children tied to two kingdoms.

A silence settled around the table, making the hairs on the back of Sparrow's neck stand on end. She stood taller as the kings nodded.

"Do we have agreement?" the High Priest asked, his voice as silky as her chestnut hair.

Every king, including her father, murmured, "Yes."

The moment this treaty was signed, each king and their

future heirs would be expected to maintain its stipulations. To break their oaths would mean death.

It went against her nature as a Turan to give up her free will. Her father likely felt the same. Yet Turah had no choice but to participate. Their kingdom was strong but not strong enough to stand against the rest of Calandra. Especially while they were trying to recover from the crux migration.

Her father couldn't stop this treaty, but that fact didn't make her fate any easier to accept.

One by one, each king drew a dagger or knife from a sheath. They sliced open their palms, dipped their quills, and scrawled their names in blood.

Her father went last. With his pen poised over the treaty, its tip glistening in red, he cast her a long look. The pity and apology in his steely gray eyes made it hard for her to breathe. The green starbursts in his irises flared for a brief moment before he dropped his gaze to the parchment. The harsh scratch that came with his signature was quick, like an arrow through her heart.

Sparrow dropped her chin so the kings would not see the tears in her eyes.

Done. It was done.

Calandra was in ruins from the crux migration. Now the kingdoms would rebuild together. Trade together. Live together.

Breed together.

Tonight, Sparrow had become a brood mare like her favorite horse, Helena.

Would she ever see Helena again? Would she ever return to Turah? Or would she be taken directly from this miserable cellar in Ozarth to a city in Genesis, where she'd be paraded as their new queen?

Would the people of Genesis hate her the way their king, Tanis Oak, hated her father?

The idea of spending the rest of her life tied to a man

who loathed her family, her people, made her stomach drop. Would Tanis take his anger out on her? Would she be made to suffer for a rivalry that went back far beyond her years?

The treaty forbade him from killing her, but there were fates worse than death.

Tanis, at least ten years her senior, was the only unwed king in this room. And she was the only princess in Calandra of age to bear children. Maybe after she birthed him a son he'd forget about her. If the gods were merciful, she'd be left alone.

Sparrow squeezed her eyes shut as dread and sorrow threatened more tears. No doubt Tanis would not take kindly to a simpering wife. And she was a Turan.

She would not cry.

The gods were to blame for this. *Bastards*. The Six had cursed Calandra with their monsters. With the crux. She'd survived this past migration only to trade one nightmare for another. The gods could rot in their shades. And so could the Voster, with their oaths and magic used to manipulate men.

With her teeth gritted so hard they cracked, she steeled her spine and lifted her chin.

The High Priest's gaze was waiting.

She loathed him more than anyone else in this room. He would trap her in this treaty without remorse. She could taste the hate for his magic on her tongue, like the coppery tang of blood.

With a slight incline of his head, he summoned her to the table. "Your name?"

"Sparrow Wolfe." Her voice was steady and calm, not betraying her racing heart.

He stared at her for a long moment. "This treaty shall be known as the Shield of Sparrows."

Another princess might have appreciated having a treaty named in her honor.

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Sparrow swallowed a scream.

“Do you, Sparrow Wolfe, princess of Turah, vow to uphold the Shield of Sparrows with your union to Tanis Oak, king of Genesis?” the High Priest asked.

Every king in the room seemed to hold their breath, waiting for her reply.

Tears filled her father’s eyes as he gave her a nod.

“I, Sparrow Wolfe, make this vow,” she whispered.

Without meeting her gaze, her father passed her his knife.

She opened a palm, refusing to wince as the blade cut through her flesh. Signing her name in blood was done with a quick flick of her wrist.

Then Tanis’s name was beside hers, his own vow spoken aloud. His voice was smooth and deep. Emotionless and cold.

A shiver raced down Sparrow’s spine.

The High Priest placed both of his hands on the treaty, closing his eyes.

There was no sensation. No visible hint of his fluid magic. But when he opened his eyes and lifted his hands, there was no doubt in her mind that she was now bound to this treaty.

The Shield of Sparrows.

“It is done.” The High Priest’s declaration stole the air from her lungs.

Tanis marched out of the cellar.

The other kings swept out after him, climbing the stairs that would take them away from this secret chamber beneath Ozarth’s capital city.

The High Priest pressed both of his hands over his heart and gave her a slight bow.

She bit her tongue to keep quiet.

Then he rolled up the treaty into a neat column. The ink, her blood, had barely dried as he left.

Her father deflated once they were alone. A breath rushed

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from his lungs as his shoulders curled inward, his broad, towering frame shrinking before her eyes.

It cleaved her spirit in two.

None of this would have happened if there were no crux. If there were no more migrations.

“Why have the Six cursed us with these monsters? Why do they hate us?”

“Because they are petty gods,” he said. “Because only humans have the power to make the gods insignificant.”

Sparrow stared at her father, taking in his strong profile. “I will never worship them again. And I will never trust the Voster.”

“Neither will I.” He gave her a sad smile, opening his arms. “I am sorry, my daughter.”

She collapsed into his chest, into the strong embrace that had held her since she was a baby. “What do I do?”

He kissed her hair. “Be bold, my Sparrow. Be brave.”

PART I

DIVISION

I

RANSOM

Treow was a tomb.

The commons were deserted. No guards were posted in the watchtowers. A breath of wind caught the rungs of a rope ladder, swaying it back and forth with a creak. The tree-house above was as empty as the rest of the encampment.

Where was Odessa? She should be here.

The panic coursing through my veins was making me dizzy. I lifted my fingers to my lips and whistled. The shrill call ricocheted off trees before it was swallowed by the forest.

And as it faded, there was nothing but silence.

A chill skated down my spine.

Something was wrong. She might have gotten lost in the dark after leaving Ellder, but she would have found her way at daybreak.

The thunder of hooves echoed from afar. I held my breath, hoping it was Odessa and Evie, except the rider sat alone and her hair was stark, sleek white, not wild red curls.

Cathlin slowed her dappled mare to a stop and swung to the ground. She tied the horse to the same tree trunk where I'd tethered Aurinda.

My stallion's black coat was still damp with sweat from the punishing ride from the fortress to the encampment.

"You should have stayed in Ellder," I told Cathlin.

She stood at my side, a tendril of her white hair lifting in the breeze. "You were angry. I was worried that..."

"That I'd harm my own wife." My nostrils flared.

Yes, I was angry. Scared. Frantic. Confused. But I'd sooner drive a knife through my own heart than hurt Odessa.

"No." She pressed both hands to her flushed cheeks. "I was just worried. I don't know what to think, Ransom."

"Neither do I."

The image of the crux, a woman, was burned into my mind. How was it possible? What kind of magic was this? Or was my mind playing a trick on me?

I'd walked out of the fortress certain I was trapped in a nightmare. Even after I found Aurinda and saddled him for the ride to Treow, it had felt like moving in a fog. Going through the motions until I woke from the dream.

"Her hair," Cathlin whispered.

The crux had shifted from beast to beauty. To a woman who shared enough features with Odessa, from her hair to her nose to her delicate chin, that I couldn't unsee the resemblance.

And her blood...

"Do you think Odessa knows?"

"No." I refused to believe she'd keep that kind of a secret from me.

Reaching into my vest, I pulled out a lock of the shapeshifter's shorn hair. I twisted the silky curl around my finger, letting the orange and strawberry and copper colors catch the light. Then I released the strands into the wind.

"Did they burn the corpse?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Good."

"Where is everyone?" Cathlin asked, searching the trees. "The watchtowers were empty as I rode past."

"Gone. Treow is deserted."

Where are you, Cross? Where the hell are you?

I'd already lapped the encampment twice. I'd shouted for Odessa and Evie until my voice had cracked and my throat had gone raw. **Copyrighted Material**

If my father had taken them, if he hurt them, I didn't care what blood oaths I'd sworn, I would rip every limb from his body. And if a different kind of monster had found them in the night, I prayed Odessa had a safe place to hide.

"Odessa and Evie should be here," I said. "I sent them to the dungeons and told them I'd meet them here."

The color drained from Cathlin's cheeks.

"Where the fuck is she?" I dragged a hand over my face. "I never should have let her leave."

Cathlin put her hand on my shoulder. "We'll find them."

I would find them. Here, or in the shades.

"I saw these in the street on my way to the paddock." Cathlin moved to her saddlebags and took out two knives.

Odessa's knives.

Blood stained both blades.

Fuck. I hated that she didn't have them. That she was out there somewhere without protection. Without me.

The crack of a branch had both Cathlin and me whirling in the direction of the commons. My heart stopped, then sank when Mariette came walking through the trees.

"Guardian." The caretaker bowed. "Cathlin."

"Where is everyone, Mariette?" Cathlin asked.

"Gone." Her hair hung limp over her shoulders, the gray-ing strands having escaped a severe knot. Her dark-brown eyes were weary and bloodshot. She wore a thick, gray cloak and carried a bag, stuffed full, on her shoulders. "I was the last to leave. I was past the final watchtower when I heard a whistle and came back. The king and his soldiers rode through before dawn and warned us of the crux scout. We're following his caravan to Allesaria."

"Were Odessa and Evie with him?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I didn't see them. The king didn't arrive with many. Only twenty or so soldiers. They gathered supplies but didn't stay long."

“Fuck.” I clenched my jaw. “You should go. Catch up to the traveling party.”

Get the hell out of Treow while she had a chance to escape.

Mariette hesitated a moment, her gaze lifting to the treehouse above my head. Odessa’s treehouse. She stared at it for a moment like she was uncomfortable abandoning Treow. Like she wouldn’t see it again. But the hesitation faded, and as quickly as she’d appeared, she hurried off, weaving past thick tree trunks until she was gone.

“If she’s not with your father, then where?” Cathlin asked, turning in a slow circle.

Where? Where the fuck was my wife?

A terror unlike any I’d ever known settled deep in my bones. It chilled my blood. “How many people know of the crux?”

“Not many. Few survived the night.”

“Go back to Ellder. Pay the guards for their silence about the crux, the woman. Anyone else if necessary.” I walked to Aurinda and fastened Odessa’s knives to my saddle with a spare length of leather. “Stay with Xavier. Watch over him. If he wakes, send word. If he doesn’t...bury him beside my mother.”

Tears filled Cathlin’s eyes. “And where exactly should I send word?”

I swung onto the saddle, turning away from the path where Mariette had disappeared. Turning away from the road that would eventually take me to Allesaria.

There was a chance Odessa would use the etchings on my cuff and go in search of the capital city. But I had a feeling she’d take Evie somewhere else. A place where she could hide my sister from our father. A place where she felt safe.

“Quentis.”

ODESSA

What if I ran away?

Sitting on the shore of a lake with no name, I stared across water as still and smooth as glass, willing myself not to break. Not to give in to the heartache and fear. Not to crumble into a thousand tiny pieces like the round pebbles beneath my seat.

The lake was a mirror of snowcapped mountains, lofty evergreens, and a pastel sky. A flawless reflection of a realm turned upside down.

This meadow was the picture of serenity. A haven for the weary soul. A cell without bars or locks.

What if I ran away?

I wouldn't get far. *We* wouldn't get far. Besides that, I was lost. Entirely lost.

Evie was curled in my lap, fast asleep. She'd finally stopped shivering from the bath I'd forced her to take in the frigid water. Her clothes were filthy and covered in dried blood, but at least it was out of her hair and off her skin.

Despite rinsing off in the lake, we still reeked of smoke, of death. It had been five days since Ellder, and I was beginning to fear the smell would haunt me forever.

I pressed a kiss to Evie's wet hair as a hawk swooped overhead and loosed a sharp caw. My entire body flinched.

Evie whimpered, curling deeper into my arms.

I kissed her hair again, rocking her gently back and forth until she relaxed.

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Faze purred as he nuzzled against my leg.
Water lapped at the shoreline.
My stomach growled.

Small noises to break the silence, but noises too quiet to chase away the screams. The beat of massive wings, the piercing screams of the crux, still rang in my ears.

I opened my hand and traced the pink scar on my palm with a fingertip. A scar with a mirror on Ransom's palm. Twins cut into our flesh on the day we signed the Shield of Sparrows treaty in blood and vowed to be husband and wife.

Maybe if I touched my scar enough, he'd find his way to my side. Maybe I'd feel the echo of his pulse and know he was still alive.

"Praise Ama. Beloved Mother," I whispered, "let him live. Let us find our way to each—" My prayer was cut short by the prickle of Voster magic at my nape.

Brother Dime walked through the grasses that surrounded this lake, his burgundy robes swishing against the golden green stalks. He reached for a yellow wildflower, skimming its blossom with a thick, grooved fingernail.

The early-morning sun cast the meadow in soft, creamy light. It was the only time of day that the priest's pale skin seemed to hold a hint of peach color.

He came to a stop where the grass ended and the rocks along the shoreline began. Far enough from where I was sitting that the sting of his magic wasn't unbearable, yet close enough to hear each other speak. With his hands clasped behind his back, he bowed. "Have you rested?"

"No." My voice didn't sound like my own. It was too flat, too lifeless.

Too numb.

There were too many horrors to face at the moment. Learning of Jocelyn's betrayal. Killing General Banner. Watching Brielle's death. Hearing Evie scream as Xavier bled out on the street.

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Later. Those nightmares weren't going anywhere. I'd deal with them when I wasn't traipsing through the wilderness with a Voster who may or may not be trying to save my life.

"We cannot linger," he said.

We'd been riding for five days, stopping only long enough to keep from hobbling Freya. Evie and I were both on the verge of collapse, and these short reprieves were barely long enough for us to catch our breath, let alone rest.

I needed a lifetime to recover from that night at the fortress, not five days and a few stolen moments beside a godsdamn lake, even if it was breathtaking. "We cannot keep going at this pace."

"You must, child."

I ground my teeth together to keep quiet.

As hard as we'd pushed, he never seemed to tire or sleep.

Brother Dime had walked these past five days while Evie and I rode Freya. Not once had his energy waned as he led us farther away from Ellder. From Treow.

From Ransom.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked for the hundredth time, and for the hundredth time, he did not answer.

"I will fetch your horse." He turned and retreated to the meadow where Freya was grazing.

When we stopped before sunrise today, I took off her saddle, using it to lean against, but I left her halter on so she'd be easier to catch. Not that Brother Dime ever had trouble catching my horse.

As he approached, she swished her black tail and walked to his outstretched hand, letting him stroke her gray cheek.

Maybe the reason I hadn't fought harder to escape Dime was because I feared Freya wouldn't leave his side. Or because I was scared to return to Ellder and witness the aftermath of what we'd left behind.

I was terrified I'd return and learn there was a reason for this aching hole in my heart.

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He's alive.

Ransom was alive. He wouldn't die, not when we had so much left to experience together.

He was probably in Treow, furious I wasn't. When he found us, I'd gladly suffer his best glower and an epic ass-chewing. As long as he was alive.

If going back to Ellder meant learning any other truth, meant losing him to the shades, then maybe I'd stay in the Turan wilds forever.

On a sigh, I stroked Evie's cheek. "Time to wake up, little star."

It took a moment for her gray eyes to flutter open. Her cerulean-blue starbursts flared bright, then faded with every blink until they were nearly engulfed by the gray.

I gave her a smile she didn't return.

She simply stared up at me, hopeless, like she was waiting for me to rewind time. To take her back to a life where Xavier was alive. A life where her father's blood wasn't crusted on her shirt.

He'd given his life to save ours. Mine.

It wasn't fair that she'd lost so much. A father. And her mother.

What would Luella say to Evie? How would she help her daughter move past this pain?

Help me. I sent the silent prayer to the shades, then swallowed the burn in my throat, refusing to give in to the tears. I couldn't break, not yet. Not while she needed me to stay strong.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

Evie shook her head.

She wasn't eating enough. Neither was I.

Not only had the long, endless days sapped my strength, but the constant bombardment from Brother Dime's magic had dwindled my appetite.

He worked to keep a distance, always careful not to touch

my skin with his. He held the long ends of Freya's reins as he led us through the forest, but those reins were only so long. And he had yet to let us out of his sight.

What if I ran away? Would he stop us?

I feared his magic enough not to try.

He hadn't treated us like captives, but I wasn't fool enough to believe we were free.

The night we rode away from the dungeons in Ellder, I asked Dime to take us to Treow.

Ransom had told me to follow the moon, Aurinda, and it would lead me to the encampment. I'd been so relieved that we'd have an escort, even if it was magical. When we turned the wrong way, away from the twin moons, I told Dime we had to turn back.

He'd taken Freya's reins from my grip and continued on into the dark.

I'd learned over the past five days that the Voster delivered most of his orders without a word.

"Up we go." I brushed Evie's hair away from her face, then helped her stand before getting to my feet.

Faze stretched out his front legs, his claws digging into the pebbles as he flicked his tail in the air. Then he pounced forward, jaw snapping at a bug. His ribs were more pronounced than they'd been in Ellder.

I'd been feeding him bits of the dried meat that Brother Dime gave to Evie and me, but Faze was used to drinking milk, too. And he was as sick of riding as we were. It had been too many days tucked in his carrier. The constant jostling and his own lack of freedom meant he was grumpy.

When I fished him out earlier, he'd bared his fangs and hissed. I'd flicked him on the nose.

Evie trudged to the shoreline, her arms limp at her sides.

My hand came to my heart, rubbing at the ache. How did I do this? How did I help her? I had no idea how to tell her about Luella's death or help her cope with losing

Zavier. She was too young to have seen so much blood and violence.

“Ease the burden on her heart, Goddess Carine.” I signed the Eight, circling my hand around my face and around my heart. “Give her peace.”

If the prayers for myself went unanswered, I would survive. But I hoped, for Evie’s sake, there was a god or Eight listening.

Faze bounded forward, winding around Evie’s legs. There were times when I was sure he felt her pain. Despite the growls and snarls he sent my way, he’d rarely left her side these past five days. He was always close, always patient. When she’d pull him into her arms and bury her face in his pink fur, he didn’t so much as squirm.

I turned away from the lake, mentally summoning the strength to lift Freya’s saddle, when movement at the trees beyond Brother Dime made me go still. A rider on a black horse trotted into the meadow.

For a single heartbeat, I thought it was Ransom. I thought he’d found us and could lead us somewhere safe. But then my eyes caught up with my hopeful heart and I realized the horse wasn’t black but another blue roan. And the person in its saddle was another priest.

In one gnarled hand, he held the roan’s leads. In the other was a rope haltered to a brown horse trotting close behind.

Brother Dime led Freya to me, careful, as always, not to touch my hand as he transferred the reins.

Did Dime know why I could feel Voster magic when others couldn’t? I’d been too dazed since leaving Ellder to pester the priest for information, but if we were going to be traveling together, maybe I could get some answers.

“Who is that?” Evie appeared at my side, staring up at Brother Dime.

He dropped to a crouch, but he was so tall that even on bended knee she had to lift her chin to keep his gaze.

“Brother Skore. He will be accompanying us as we ride to Ozarth.”

“O-ozarth?” I blinked. “Wait. We’re going to Ozarth? Why?”

He ignored me.

Maybe I needed to have Evie ask the questions from now on. She had better luck getting answers.

Brother Dime lifted a hand, drawing the water from her hair and spinning it into a crown.

It seemed like a lifetime ago he’d done the same for me outside an art gallery in a castle in Quentis. A stinging sensation crawled up my skin, but I held back a cringe, not wanting to take a moment of magic away from Evie.

Except she didn’t stare up at the shimmering crown in wonder. No smile lit up her face. Instead, her gaze fell to the dirt. She stepped out from beneath the ring of water, moving closer to my side so her arm could hook around my leg.

Brother Dime sent the water away with a flick of his wrist.

It wasn’t easy to read his expressions, but the line of his colorless lips softened in what had to be pity. He stood and backed away a few paces, far enough that the bite of his magic lessened.

The other priest rode to Brother Dime’s side, coming to a stop and dismounting his horse. He wore pale blue robes that draped around his bony frame. His nose was the same hawkish shape as Dime’s.

Brother Skore let the animals free to graze as he came to Dime’s side. Both priests pressed their hands over their hearts and bowed.

Their combined magic rocked me on my heels.

“Go wait with Faze,” I told Evie, watching as she walked to join the tarkin at the water.

If Dime thought he could keep up this breakneck pace, the priest was dreaming.

Evie needed a place to sleep that wasn’t in my lap. She

needed a meal and a real bath and a safe space to cry. And Freya needed longer breaks than she'd been given.

"We must leave," he said.

"No." I raised my chin, hoping I looked braver than I felt. "Not until you tell me why we're going to Ozarth."

"It is the path you must take."

"That's not an answer to my question."

"It is the only answer I can give."

I scoffed. "Then we're leaving. We're going to Treow to find Ransom."

The priests shared a look that made my heart drop. A look that said I wouldn't find him there.

"What? Is he..." I couldn't finish the question. My head began spinning too fast, and the ground beneath my boots seemed to tilt sideways.

He's alive.

Ransom was alive. I wouldn't let myself consider any other outcome. If anyone could survive the crux, it was the Guardian. I gripped the leather cuff on my forearm, the cuff Ransom had given to me, letting this piece of him steady me.

"I do not know his fate, child." Brother Dime spoke gently, like he knew I was moments from collapsing to my knees. "But this is where your paths divide. He is loyal to the High Priest."

"Aren't you?" I certainly didn't trust the High Priest, or Dime for that matter, but weren't they all a part of the same brotherhood?

"This is a journey you must take alone. It is the only way to discover your dynasty."

"My dynasty? I don't have a dynasty." I pointed behind me. "I have a terrified little girl who saw her father get murdered. So answer my question. Why Ozarth?"

Brother Dime nodded to my saddle on the ground by my feet. "Turah is not safe for you. And I promised your father I'd keep you safe."

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“Then take me to him.”

Ransom had told me that if something happened to him, to Xavier, to get Evie out of Turah. To take her to Quentis. To put the entire continent of Calandra between her and King Ramsey.

If he didn't find us in Treow, Ransom would look for us in Quentis, so that's where we were going. My father would protect us, and we could shelter with my family during the migration.

“We don't need to cross the border to Ozarth,” I said. “There's no reason to travel east. We should ride south to the coast, then sail the Krisenth.”

“We will not be sailing to Quentis.”

I tossed up a hand. “Why not? It's the fastest route.”

The priests shared another look.

“What aren't you telling me? Why do you need to go to Ozarth? Unless you're planning on riding the entire length of this continent, then there's no point in...” *Oh, gods.* The realm tipped sideways as realization dawned. “No. It's too dangerous. It's too far. What about monsters? What about the migration? It will take weeks.”

From Turah to Ozarth, then Laine and Genesis. I couldn't even fathom the idea of making that journey.

I shook my head, heart pounding. “We're not going with you.”

“You are.” Brother Dime moved closer, the sting of his magic intensifying.

“Do I have a choice?”

“No.”

I glanced over my shoulder to Evie. Why hadn't I left the Voster days ago? He wouldn't have been able to catch us on foot. But now that this new priest was here with two horses, we'd never get away.

Unless I fought them. My gaze shifted to the sword beside my saddle.

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“Should the girl ride with me instead?” Brother Dime asked.

“No.” I stepped sideways, blocking his path to Evie. “She stays with me.”

“Then saddle your horse.”

This bastard was going to use her to manipulate me, and until I came up with a plan to escape, I was stuck. “Fine.”

“This will not be an easy journey,” he warned. “But you must find the strength to endure. For all of Calandra.”

“And if I can’t?”

“You must.” With that, Dime walked away.

Brother Skore cocked his head to the side, studying me for a long moment. Then he raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

A gust of wind came rushing from behind, nearly blowing me over. I lurched forward to catch myself, tripping over Freya’s saddle.

Damn these Voster.

I really should have run away.

CASPIA

A man with silver eyes drives his sword through Emery's heart. Feathers turn to flesh. Wings collapse to arms. Talons transform to toes.

She falls from the stars with the silver-eyed warrior.

My sister plummets to the earth.

Until there is nothing but blood and dust.

...

I woke from the vision with a jolt. My hair was stuck to the sweat on my brow, and every bone in my body felt as if it had been crushed, like I'd been the one to fall from the starry sky. There was a punishing ache in my chest, like the sword had gone through my heart, not Emery's.

"Not again." My hands gripped the bedsheets as I closed my eyes, giving my heart a chance to sink back down my throat. Then I kicked the blankets from my legs and stood, shuffling across the stone floor to the open windows of my room.

The salt breeze kissed my cheeks. The cool air filled my lungs. The scents of spice and sweet smoke floated to my nose.

The vision of Emery's death would haunt me for hours, and as the weight of her loss settled on my shoulders, I sagged against the open sill, staring down at the sleeping city sprawled beyond the palace's feet.

Moonbeams bathed Showe in gray and white. The streets were empty. The city was quiet, though that silence wouldn't last long.

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Soon, the sun would rise from the ocean's depths to kiss the sky good morning. By dawn, the coastline would be dotted with fishermen steering boats with colorful sails. Wagons would stream toward the countryside fields to collect a harvest. Herdsmen would ride their steeds beyond the city's walls to tend to their flocks. And miners would pile into carts bound for the elfalter mines, where they'd reap the precious metal from Nelfinex's rock.

The noise and chaos from Showe's streets would filter through every open window in the palace, making it impossible to sleep. Not that I'd have time. Not with my chores and strict training regimen.

I'd be smart to crawl back in bed and rest until dawn, but I knew the moment I closed my eyes, I'd see Emery and the silver-eyed warrior.

Who was he?

Where was she?

I shifted to a seat in the wide windowsill, hugging my knees to my chest. In my heart, I knew she'd left for a good reason. But if my vision was true, if Emery had been murdered by that man and called to the afterlife by the Divine, we'd never know why she'd met that horrible fate.

I'd never have the chance to say goodbye.

"Emery," I whispered to the wind, hoping the vision was wrong. Hoping the sun would come when she'd whisper back.

It wasn't my first sleepless moon spent in the window, soaking in the light from the stars. By the time golden rays shone on the horizon, my back was stiff and my eyelids heavy. My body would be sluggish during training, and I could already hear the lecture from my tutors.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway beyond my bedroom. A moment later, knuckles tapped on the door and the knob turned. Xandra never waited for an answer or invitation.

"Caspia, are you awake? If not, wake up." My cousin walked into my room and clapped twice.

Her long, coppery red-and-orange curls were pulled into a tight knot at her nape. She was in uniform, her ecru pants molding to the lean curves of her hips and thighs. The matching sleeveless vest left her strong arms bare. Wrapped around her biceps and forearms were the elfalter metal bands that indicated her station. *Our* station.

Quiescent.

Xandra and I were both waiting to go through the ritus. Then we would be Starling, and those gleaming armbands would be replaced by rings on each finger.

Rings to represent loyalty to our country. To the Nelfinex people. To our family.

To the Starling.

"I'm awake." I unfolded my knees and swung my legs over the windowsill to hop down.

Xandra took in my unmade bed and flowing white robe. My own fiery-red curls were loose and hanging to my waist. Normally when she barged into my room, I was fast asleep, drooling on a pillow. Those two claps of hers had become my morning call to arms.

Her eyebrows knitted together as I slumped on the edge of my bed. "You had another vision, didn't you?"

"Yes." There was no point denying it. I didn't need a mirror to know my eyes were haunted.

"Was it the same one? About Emery?"

I nodded, picking at my thumbnail.

"Vexx," she cursed.

"Don't let anyone else hear you say that word."

Cursing was strictly forbidden for the Quiescent. We were to be the epitome of stoicism, and cursing was an emotional crutch, according to my aunt.

Xandra frowned. "I know you don't want to tell her about the visions again, but—"

"I don't." I stood and walked away from my cousin—from this conversation—and into my dressing room.

Aunt Oleana didn't want to hear about my visions, especially this one. No matter how many times I told her they were more than dreams, she'd only ever considered them my imagination run wild. She dismissed them as nonsense, as moon terrors that would stop after the ritus.

Even when the visions were true, when I had proof that what I saw had happened, she didn't believe. I'd stopped telling Oleana about them when I was sixteen. For years, I'd acted as her dutiful Quiescent, and if she wondered whether or not I still had *dreams*, she hadn't asked.

But after this vision of Emery had come again and again, I'd decided to break my silence.

She'd dismissed it with a flick of her wrist.

So no, I wasn't going to tell her about it again.

Clothes littered the floor of my dressing room. There was a towel in the doorway to my bathing chamber. The chest of drawers against the wall was nearly empty, its contents strewn in various piles.

I stripped off my robe, tossing it onto the nearest heap that I'd sort through later. Then I rummaged through the mess for the cleanest of my uniforms. All were wrinkled and had been worn at least once.

Instead of sitting in my window, I should have done my washing. But laundry was my least favorite chore and the least of my worries, so I donned my pants and vest, the same as Xandra's, and began braiding my hair in twin rows.

Xandra was making my bed when I emerged from the dressing room.

"You didn't have to do that."

"I don't mind." She shrugged and straightened a pillow. "Where's Hop?"

"Graciella asked if he could sleep in her room."

"If you're not careful, she's going to steal your fenek."

"You're probably right." I laughed, righting a corner of the linen blanket, turning a hand over the saffron-colored

fabric. Then I sat on the bed's edge to pull on my knee-high leather boots.

Xandra took a seat at my side. "If you tell her, she might believe you this time."

"She won't." Of that, I had no doubt.

"But this is the only vision that has repeated. That must mean something."

"Yes," I murmured as a sinking feeling settled in my belly.

I'd had visions my entire life. They'd come infrequently when I was a child, but as I'd grown from Nestling to Quiescent, as I'd matured into a woman, they'd come more often. Sometimes every four or five suns.

Yet in all that time, the vision of Emery and the silver-eyed warrior was the only one I'd had more than once. Last moon's marked the sixth time.

Nothing good came from the number six.

"You must tell her, Caspia. If not for your own peace of mind, for Graciella. If it's true, she has the right to know her mother isn't coming back. And if Emery has been murdered, there must be retribution."

She was right. We both knew she was right. *Vexx.*

For Graciella's sake, I needed to tell my aunt. And Emery deserved vengeance.

It was the Starling way.

"Fine," I muttered.

"Thank you." Xandra took my hand, holding it tight. With her other, she lifted the elfalter pendant hanging around her neck and brought it to her lips. The red-and-orange metal glimmered in the sunlight. The silver wing inlaid into the circle sparkled like a star. "By the grace of the Divine, she will listen."

I lifted my own necklace, pressing a kiss to the emblem of Nelfinex, of the Starling, as I gave a silent prayer.

By the grace of the Divine, give us the rite.

By the grace of the Divine, give us the rite.

“We should go.” I stood, tugging at the hem of my vest in the hopes of it working out a few wrinkles.

“To speak to Aunt Oleana?” Xandra asked.

“Yes. Before I lose my nerve.”

“Make a vow. Then your courage won’t wane.”

The Starling honored loyalty. We believed in vengeance and strength and discipline. But above all else, we kept our vows. Or died trying. So I pressed two fingertips to the center of my forehead. “You have my vow.”

“Thank you.”

I went to the tray on my vanity where I kept my elfalter bands and quickly slid them on my forearms and biceps. Then I followed Xandra out of my room.

She and I took the nearest staircase, jogging up eight flights. When we reached the palace’s top floor, we passed a servant coming out of Saskia’s suite.

“Princess Caspia. Princess Xandra.” His caramel eyes were bright as he passed us for the stairs, carrying a tray with Saskia’s half-eaten breakfast.

“Good morning.” I returned his warm, kind smile.

Once we were through the ritus, once we were Starling, the servants and attendants would be required to drop to their knees and bow when we met them in the halls. They would treat us as they did the Starling. As they did Aunt Oleana, the queen. For once we completed our ritus, we would be royalty.

But we weren’t Starling yet.

I’d miss the easy smiles and casual greetings. I’d miss the informality of being a Quiescent. I’d miss my room on the middle level of the palace, where I was closer to the city. I’d miss visiting the Nestlings each afternoon in the libraries.

At least as Starling, I wouldn’t have to do my own laundry.

Xandra and I walked past a row of arched openings that overlooked the city and the Marixmore Ocean beyond. The scents of sage and citrus and salt wafted into the hall, and I drew in a deep breath, holding it in my lungs.

Emery once told me that her senses had sharpened and changed after the ritus. She'd lost her love of crystalized lemon and candied honey. I hoped that when my transformation was complete, I still loved the smell of the sea.

We passed door after door as we walked the length of the palace. Each belonged to a suite occupied by a Starling. Sisters. Cousins. Aunts. Great aunts. Grandmothers.

A giggle echoed from an open room. A girl with wild, bouncing red curls—Starling hair—came racing out and into the hall with a fenek giving chase.

“Graciella.” I smiled and bent to a crouch, arms opening wide.

She crashed into my chest, laughing as I swept her up and spun her in circles. “Hi, Aunt Caspia.”

“How is my sweetling girl?” I kissed her cheek and tapped her freckled nose before setting her down.

She pushed a stray curl out of her face. “Bored and hungry. We’re sneaking into the kitchens for a treat. It was Hop’s idea.”

“Oh, was it?” I reached to scratch behind Hop’s ears. “Hello, my pretty pet.”

He nuzzled against my leg and purred. His cinnamon fur was nearly the same shade as the tiled floor, rich and warm and soft. The white tusks that extended below his jaw were as bright as the walls. Hop swished his bushy tail, then nudged Graciella’s hand, a silent order for her to follow him into mischief.

“Don’t get caught,” Xandra warned.

Graciella laughed, her gold eyes dancing as she skipped after my pet. “I never get caught.”

Xandra shook her head as we continued down the hallway for the staircase that would take us to the mews. “That girl is too much like her mother.”

The ache in my chest was instant. “That she is.”

Graciella was only six summers, but even this young, she

was Emery's in every way. They were mirrors of each other in looks and personality.

It surprised no one that Aunt Oleana had taken over care of Graciella after Emery's disappearance. Oleana had done the same when my mother left Nelfinex, leaving three daughters behind. And Emery had always been Oleana's favorite niece.

The niece she now refused to discuss.

Maybe she'd listen this morning. For Graciella's sake, for Emery's honor, I would try.

One last time.

We reached a set of curving stone stairs and climbed to the level above. The sounds of beating wings and chirping notes greeted us when we reached the landing.

The mews were still full this early. Nearly every nest was taken by a swift. As the sun rose higher in the sky, by the time the temperature reached its peak, these nests would all be empty. The massive birds would leave the palace to hunt the large elk and goats that inhabited Nelfinex's rocky mountains. But for now, they were crowded and noisy.

I walked to the closest nest, to a young female with glossy black feathers. "Hello, pretty girl."

She lifted her enormous beak to my outstretched hand, then nuzzled closer so I'd stroke the feathers between her dark eyes.

Most swift lived in the wild, but a select few of the smartest and strongest stayed in the mews.

Xandra wandered to the opposite end of the space to find Bisten, her favorite male and the largest swift who called this palace home. His auburn feathers had a golden sheen in the early-morning light.

"Caspia." My aunt's voice rang through the room, carrying over the other noise.

She stood at the mouth of an open archway, hands clasped

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behind her back, staring out over Showe. Her expression was blank and unreadable.

Oleana's hair was bound by thin straps of leather. The plait they formed fell down her spine in a thick line. She was dressed in an amber gown, the light fabric swishing in the breeze above her bare toes.

She'd never had children, choosing instead to raise me and my sisters as her own. Of her three nieces, it was said that I took after her most. That when she'd been my age, we would have been mistaken for twins. We had the same straight nose and bow-shaped lips. The same oval face and delicate chin.

In appearance, we might have been similar. But in spirit, we were as different as the sun and the moons.

Aunt Oleana wasn't a loving woman. She was a leader, a ruler, and a politician. She was bound by duty to her people, to this country, and to our bloodline.

She viewed my tender heart as a weakness. A queen could not afford affection. Not even for the girls who were raised as her daughters.

As I joined her, the female swift I'd been petting stood, stretching her wings as much as the space would allow. She hopped to another archway, and with a single push off her strong legs, she leaped from the ledge, her wings stretching wide. The spikes at their leading edge sliced through the air.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Aunt Oleana asked as I took the place by her side, both of us watching as the female flew higher and higher.

"Yes."

"If Graciella isn't able to shift after her ritus, I'll pair them as riders." She spoke so quietly it seemed more of a passing thought than a statement she'd meant to share. A dread she hadn't meant to voice.

"Why don't you think she'll be able to shift?"

"A contingency plan." Oleana gave me a small smile, her

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eyes dropping to the bands clasped around my arms. That hint of a smile vanished.

At twenty-five summers, I was long overdue for my ritus. Oleana had shifted at fifteen. Emery and Saskia both by sixteen.

My mother left Nelfinex when I was a baby, and since no one in my family spoke of her, I wasn't sure if or when she'd gone through her ritus.

Every Starling felt the calling at her own time, and there was no rushing or forcing the change.

We simply prayed to the Divine that it called.

Xandra's mother, my aunt Ophelia, had never gone through a ritus. Neither had her eldest daughter, Hara. They'd been born with Starling blood, yet they could not shapeshift. They would forever be Quiescents, flying on the backs of the swift rather than wings of their own.

Xandra's biggest fear was that she'd never go through a ritus.

So was mine.

In the Starling's written history, there was no record of the gift ever failing to manifest. To my aunt's knowledge, Ophelia had been the first. Hara the second.

As much as I hated to think there was a chance I'd never be a Starling, it was possible. The gift in our blood might have passed me over. It could happen with Graciella, too.

"Emery shifted at sixteen," I told Aunt Oleana. "Her gift was strong. I'm certain she gave it to Graciella."

The queen stayed quiet.

As always, any mention of Emery was met with silence. Just like the mention of our mother.

The only thing Aunt Oleana had ever said about my mother was that she'd been a dreamer. Part of me wondered if my mother's "dreams" were visions like mine.

A piercing scream carried from above a moment before a huge male swept down from the palace's towers. Then

came a shout, free and joyous, as the bird leveled out, wings outstretched. Hara rode on his back, her saddle harnessed around his chest.

My cousin, with a beaming smile, twisted to wave.

Oleana lifted her arm to wave back. If I didn't know better, I would have thought the moisture in her eyes was tears. But I knew better.

She did not cry.

My aunt was not a woman to accept unfortunate fates. Instead, she'd built these mews so that the swift we tamed could be Ophelia's and Hara's wings. So that my daring cousin could fly, even if that meant doing so on the back of her precious bird.

In two or three or four generations' time, maybe the Starling gift would have dwindled to nothing more than a memory. Maybe by that time, whatever it was in our blood that made my lineage special would be so diluted that we'd lose the gift entirely. But this way, we could still fly.

Hara and her male flew beyond the city walls, his horns gleaming beneath the sun as they raced into the distance.

"You must begin to tend to Bisten." Aunt Oleana turned and nodded to where Xandra stood, stroking the swift's feathers.

"Why?" Bisten's temper was legendary, and he snapped at all the keepers except for Xandra. My cousin loved his prickly temperament, but I found it irksome. "He's better suited to Xandra."

"Possibly. But I have chosen him for you."

I nodded, knowing better than to argue. Oleana had a reason for every decision.

Like Bisten could sense we were going to be stuck with each other, he let out a low chuff and set off for an archway window, leaving his nest empty as he flew away from the palace.

Xandra went to the back of tools to get started on her

chores. For those of us who had not gone through the ritus, our suns started with chores. Xandra and I were assigned to the mews, and when we were finished here, we'd move on to lessons and weapons training.

"If necessary, she can choose a different male," Oleana said. "She gets on well with most."

"I hope it won't be necessary. For either of us."

"So do I."

Our country was vast, the largest on the continent of Kenn. But Oleana was not the only ruler, and the three southern countries were controlled by tyrants.

If they suspected the strength of the Starling was weakening, they wouldn't hesitate to strike. The kings from the south were as hungry for power as they were for land.

We needed to stand strong.

We needed to ensure that anyone who harmed a Starling was dealt a fast death.

"Aunt Oleana, I must tell you something."

She turned to face me, her attention fixed so firmly I nearly shied away. "Your ritus? Do you feel it calling?"

"No." Not yet.

"I see." Disappointment flashed over her face before she schooled her expression to cold indifference. "What must you tell me?"

I steeled my spine. "I had a vision of Emery's death again."

If there was any hint of warmth in Oleana's golden eyes, it vanished. "Emery is not dead."

"I don't want to believe it's true, either. But what if—"

"She's not dead." Her voice was as sharp as a blade. "She left us to go on some ridiculous journey with that man. She abandoned her family, her daughter, when I expressly told her she was not to leave. She defied my order. She has forsaken her duty. But she is not dead. She will return and take her rightful place."

"But the vision

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“Enough.” Oleana sliced a hand through the air.

I hid my fists behind my back. “I’ve had the same vision of Emery six times, Aunt Oleana. It’s more real than anything I’ve ever felt. There is a man with silver eyes who—”

“I said enough,” she shouted, so loud I rocked back on my heels. “You will not speak of this again. I forbid it, Caspia.”

It wasn’t an order from my aunt. It was a command from my queen.

I ducked my chin, ever the obedient princess. “Yes, Majesty.”

She hooked a finger under my chin, tilting up my face until I met her gaze. “They are only dreams, Caspia. That’s all they’ve ever been. Nothing more. Your sister is alive. And by the grace of the Divine, she will return soon.”

Dreams. No matter how many had come true, no matter how often I pleaded with her to believe, they’d only ever be dreams. “Yes, Aunt Oleana.”

She cupped my cheek. “We must focus on our family. This country. The Beesan king has been pushing against our southern border. If he learns that Starling blood is wilting, he may get reckless ambitions. I will not let a single Nelfinex person suffer the same fate as the Velvi’os-telfer. We will not be driven from our own land and hunted to near extinction. We must stand strong. Together. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Good. Now, get on with your work.” She swept past me and walked to the stairs, lifting the hems of her skirts as she set off for her auditorium, where she’d spend the sun ruling our country.

I waited until she was gone before I let my shoulders sag.

Xandra abandoned her shovel and crossed the room, joining me at the open archway. “I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have pushed you to tell her. I thought... I thought she might listen.”

“It’s not your fault. It wasn’t my aunt’s, either.”

She didn't want to believe Emery was gone, and my visions were something she simply could not understand. Only two people had ever believed they held merit.

Xandra.

And Emery.

When—if—I went through the ritus, would the visions stop? Part of me hoped I'd never dream again.

Turning away from Xandra, I let my gaze wander to the ocean, where waves crashed against the shore. The coastline was as blue as an azure jewel, the sand as bright as our uniforms. The water was endless, darkening as it stretched toward the unknown.

A tingling sensation crept up my arms, raising bumps on my flesh. My blood stirred. Something inside me tugged toward that dark blue, pulling so hard I took an involuntary step forward and gasped.

The ritus.

"Caspia?" Xandra asked. "What is it?"

"Nothing," I lied, not ready to name the sensation quite yet. I lifted my hand to the pendant resting over my heart, and the elfalter metal warmed as I covered it with my palm.

There were answers across the sea. Answers for Emery. Answers for myself.

Oleana had told me the ritus beckoned us in different ways. Some were called to journey into the mountains. Others would trek across the desert.

My future was beyond Nelfinex's shores.

"Oh, I don't like that look," Xandra muttered.

I tore my gaze from the sea, feigning surprise. "What look?"

Her mouth flattened into a thin line. "The look that says you're going to get us into trouble."

ODESSA

A tree branch slapped me in the face.

“Ouch.” I batted it away, tasting pine needles and sap. I carefully touched the sting on my cheek, and my fingers came away wet.

Just when I thought this night couldn’t get worse, now I was bleeding. *Son of a bitch.*

Shades, I *hated* this.

I hated trees. I hated nature. I hated my saddle, and I hated this night.

The faint light from the crescent twin moons, Aurinda and Aurrellia, was barely enough to see my own hand in front of my face, let alone oncoming tree branches. Trying to see in this darkness was giving me a headache. And Brother Dime, riding ahead of me, couldn’t be bothered to warn me to duck.

I silently glared into the darkness, hoping he’d feel my irritation the same way I could feel his magic.

If not for the sound of his horse’s hooves and the prickle of that magic, I wouldn’t have a damn clue that he was in front of me. The same was true of Brother Skore. He trailed behind, probably to make sure I didn’t get any ideas about leaving our delightful little parade.

It had been three miserable days since we left the mountain lake, and I ached from head to toe. Not even my first journey across Turah, riding beside Tillia, had been this painful.

Thinking of her beautiful face made my heart ache. Was

Halston alive? Had he survived losing his leg to the crux? Would he get the chance to meet their baby?

What would Tillia do in this situation? Would she continue riding with the Voster? Or would she say to hell with it and try to escape?

Evie wiggled in the saddle, tearing me from my thoughts.

Her body was pressed against mine, her weight in my arms with her head on my shoulder as she slept.

Even if it cost me everything, I would find a way to get this girl to Quentis. To keep her safe. So I stared ahead, catching the occasional glimpse of Brother Dime's shadowed figure as we rode into the night.

With my hands loose around the reins, I traced the scar on my palm.

The hole in my chest felt bigger at night. It was too quiet, too lonely, in the dark.

He's alive.

He was alive. He had to be alive. He wouldn't have waited long in Treow before returning to Ellder to retrace our path. Would he catch up to us soon?

Or did Brother Dime have a way to hide our trail? Maybe they were using wisps of wind to blow dirt over our tracks.

Gods, I hated the Voster. I hated their magic. I hated their vague statements about fate and destiny. I hated their creepy fingernails and eerie eyes.

The hate simmered under my skin, a constant burn in my chest. And stoking this rage made the heartache easier to forget.

Ransom trusted the priests. That had seemed like enough of a reason to follow Brother Dime out of that dungeon in Ellder. But maybe my husband was wrong. Maybe I'd been right all along to be skeptical of the brotherhood.

Doubt and fear were wearing me thin.

We'd stopped more frequently over the past three days to let the horses recover. It should have been enough time for

me to rest, but each time I closed my eyes, I'd panic that the Voster would take Evie while I slept.

Our last stop had been at midday. I'd finally managed to sleep for a few hours, until a dream had jolted me awake.

Long after the sun had set, the nightmare of Luella's death still haunted my thoughts. In this darkness, it was hard to block out the memory of her body being cleaved in half by the crux.

Another tree branch swung for my face, but this time, I managed to swat it away.

After we left the lake, Brother Dime had warned me that we'd have to ride through the night. He'd insisted these mountains were crawling with grizzur. Xavier had once told me the monsters don't see well at night, so it was safer to travel after the sun went down.

Were there monsters in these woods? Or was the threat of death by fangs and claws another one of Dime's ploys, because traveling by night was the most effective way to ensure I stayed lost?

We could be in Turah or Ozarth or the Evon Ravine for all I knew.

Brother Skore murmured something from behind me, the low hum loud enough to reach my ears but too quiet for me to understand the words. After three days and nights listening to those quiet words, I'd come to the conclusion that he was praying.

Except he never signed the Eight. He didn't speak to any of the Six. Instead, he kept invoking the Divine. Was that another term the Voster used for Ama and Oda?

As tempting as it was to ask, Brother Skore did not seem overly fond of this princess.

In fact, I'd say he was about as happy to be trekking through the mountains at night as I was. Maybe we could bond in our shared misery.

A blast of wind came from behind, Skore's signal I was going too slow.

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Maybe not.

I twisted over my shoulder, pulling free the smelly curls he'd whipped into my face, and gave him my fiercest glare. Could he see in the dark like Ransom? Oh, I hoped so.

"Papa." Evie's body jerked, her leg kicking.

The jolt was enough to stir Faze awake in his carrier. He squirmed, his paws pushing into my ribs so hard I winced.

"Shh." I rocked Evie. "It's okay."

She whimpered and kicked again, her mouth turning down in a frown.

Her nightmares were getting worse, and these long, dark nights weren't helping. Last night she'd fought me so hard I'd nearly dropped her. It was like she was reliving Ellder again. Like she was fighting me as I'd dragged her away from Xavier's body.

"It's okay. You're okay."

She kicked harder, squirming to be free.

"Wake up, Evie." As much as she needed to sleep, my arms were too tired to hold her while she thrashed. "Wake up."

Her eyes popped open, wide and terrified. She blinked up at me, like she was still stuck in the past. Then reality came crashing down.

A reality where her father was gone.

Fat, soul-crushing tears spilled down her cheeks. "I want Papa."

"I know, little star."

Her body shook as she buried her face in my chest, letting free the sobs that had been building for days and days.

I didn't care if it pissed off the Voster. I pulled hard on Freya's reins, forcing her to stop. Then I wrapped both arms around Evie, holding her while she cried.

"I want Papa." Her tears coated my shirt. The sound of her heartbreak filled the night, echoing off trees until it floated above their tops like smoke, destined for the shades.

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“I’m sorry, Evangeline,” I whispered into her hair. “I’m so sorry.”

A gust of magical wind hit my back. I ignored it.

Brother Skore could rot while we took this one godsdamn minute to mourn.

I curled around Evie, stroking her hair as she cried, shielding her from the wind.

He could blow and blow and blow. *The asshole*. I wasn’t moving.

Only when the sound of hooves stopped at my side and the prickle of magic intensified did I finally look up.

In the dark, his white skin and pale robes glowed.

“What?” I snapped. “Just give us a few—”

A roar sounded in the distance. A roar that was close enough to stop Evie’s sobs in a snap and make her sit up straight.

Oh, hell. I knew that roar. *Grizzur*.

Skore pointed to the trail ahead. If the other gusts of wind he’d sent were subtle hints, the blast that slammed into my shoulders now was an order.

I was already moving, gripping Freya’s reins as I kicked her forward. We bolted into the trees, quickly catching Brother Dime as we sped from a walk to a canter. I adjusted my seat, the muscles in my legs screaming as I struggled to find a rhythm at the faster pace with Evie in front of me and Faze in his carrier against my ribs. My satchel full of books and the dagger Ransom had given me bounced where I’d secured it to the saddle. My sword in its sheath smacked me against the spine.

“Hold on,” I told Evie. Told myself. “Just hold on.”

Another roar sounded, loud enough to hear over my pounding heart and Freya’s hooves and Evie’s cries. Brother Skore’s wind was relentless, pushing us forward as he stayed at my side, his robes flowing off his gangly frame.

We rode hard and fast for what felt like days until finally

we broke through the trees and into a clearing kissed by moonlight.

Brother Dime drew his mount to a halt, waiting as we came to a stop at his side. He panted, and for the first time, it seemed that this grueling pace had finally caught up to the priest.

“We can’t keep going like this.” My lungs burned, my voice hoarse. Something wet hit my forearm, and it took me a moment to realize it wasn’t a raindrop but one of Evie’s tears. “Please. We need to stop.”

“You masked our scent?” Dime asked Skore, earning a nod.

The wind. It wasn’t to push me forward but to hide our trail from the grizzur.

“We’re nearly there.” Brother Dime urged his horse forward, thankfully at a walk.

I sucked in a deep breath and wrapped my arms around Evie, giving her a hug and a kiss. Then I reached into Faze’s carrier, scratching his head as I nudged Freya forward.

We followed Brother Dime through the clearing and into more trees. When we emerged into a rolling field, a light shone in the distance. It grew steadily larger as we rode to a cabin at the edge of another wood.

The house reminded me of the homes in Ravalli, built from rough-hewn logs and sunken into the ground. There were no spikes on its roof. I hoped whoever lived here would add them before the migration.

Beside the house was a barn built level with the earth. A horse with a white stripe down its nose grazed in a fenced corral.

The front door of the house opened, and a man climbed the stairs, a lantern in one hand, a crossbow in the other. He was a colossus with brown skin and black hair braided in rows. His eyes were hard and focused as he raised his weapon. Then his stern expression vanished and he let the crossbow drop to his side. “Brother Dime.”

“I am sorry for the intrusion, Damon.”

“No apologies. Welcome.” He quickly rushed down the stairs to the house, shouting through the door, “Sally. We have visitors. Put on a kettle.”

Both priests swung off their horses.

“Are we staying here?” If we were leaving again, there was no way I was getting down. I’d never get back up, not tonight.

Brother Dime nodded.

“Thank the gods.” I signed the Eight and got down, then helped Evie out of the saddle.

She hurried to hide behind my legs.

Weeks ago, she might not have been the first to introduce herself, but she wouldn’t have cowered. I blamed this new-found wariness on Banner. On the pride and violence of vengeful men.

Banner could rot in Izzac’s hell for all I cared, and I wished him constant torment from the God of Death.

Damon walked to Brother Dime, bowing to the priest before taking his horse’s reins. “What do you need?”

“Shelter for the Sparrow.”

Damon’s eyes darted in my direction as he lifted the lamp. He took in my wrinkled, filthy clothes. His gaze lingered a moment too long on Ransom’s cuff before he offered the same bow he’d given the Voster. “Of course. It would be an honor.”

“Thank you.” I shifted, forcing Evie into the light. “This is Evangeline.”

Damon gave her a smile. “Hello, dear one.”

“And this is Faze.” I fished the tarkin from his carrier, bending to set him on the ground. If we were going to be staying in this man’s home, he should know we came with a pet.

Faze’s steps were wobbly, like he was still shaken up from the harrowing ride. He let out a growl, then sniffed the air.

“Th-that’s a...” Damon sputtered.

“Tarkin.” I gave him a sweet smile. “Do you have any milk?”

“Another bowl?” Sally asked, stirring the pot of stew with her ladle.

“No, thank you.” I dabbed the corner of my mouth. “It was delicious.”

The meal was rich with meat and vegetables, and their home smelled of savory spices. But after too many days with too little food, my stomach protested being full.

Evie had barely eaten half of her serving and was nibbling a yeasted roll as she leaned against my side.

Sally gave me a kind smile before going to tidy her kitchen.

It was almost strange to be clean and fed. Strange and wonderful and energizing and draining.

While Damon had stayed outside to help the Voster with our horses, Sally had ushered us inside the house. She’d taken one look at us in the light and immediately shown us to the small bathing chamber attached to their house.

She ran a hand pump that sent a spray through a hose in the ceiling, and though the water was cold, most of the dust and dirt washed down the drain.

As I combed out Evie’s hair and my own, Sally found us fresh clothes. I was wearing a pair of her pants, slightly too big, but I’d cinched them with a rope. The tunic I’d borrowed was a simple tan.

Ransom’s cuff was hidden beneath my sleeve.

My necklace was tucked under the collar, the metal warm against my skin.

Evie was dressed in a blue shirt that had been Damon’s when he was a child. It smelled stale from the cedar chest where it had been for years, but it was clean. There hadn’t

been any pants in Evie's size, so I'd washed hers in Sally's laundry tub, then hung them to dry.

The door swung open, and Damon ducked inside. He'd gone out to dispose of our dirty wash water and check on the Voster, who were staying in a loft in the barn.

For the first time in days, I didn't feel the crackle of their magic. It was bliss.

Faze was in a corner of the room, licking his paws after his own meal of milk and meat scraps.

Damon crossed the room to Sally, kissing her honey-colored hair, then took the bench seat across from the one that Evie and I shared.

A necklace I hadn't noticed earlier swung free from the collar of his tan tunic.

Evie sat up straight, eyes locked on the black claw tied to a string of leather. "What's that?"

"Oh, it's from a lionwick. My father gave it to me." Damon lifted it to catch the room's light. "The story goes, he found the monster in a trap. As a gift for setting the beast free, the monster gave my father this claw. He wore it like this, around his neck, and never fell sick. He never felt pain. He gave it to me the day he decided to take his place in the shades. Now it keeps me healthy and strong. And someday, I'll give it to my son."

The bench might as well have been pulled out from beneath me.

No. Fucking. Way. I fought to keep my jaw from dropping as Sally slid into the space beside her husband.

Damon's hand splayed across her rounded belly.

"A fanciful story." Sally tapped the claw necklace. "I think they both just like how it looks."

Damon laughed, his dark-brown eyes alight with love. "Maybe you're right."

Or maybe it was magic.

How was it that, not so long ago, I'd sat around a different

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table and heard this same story? Luella had said it was in the journal with the emblem of my own necklace on the cover. A journal that had led her to create the elixir that played its role in Lyssa.

A journal in my satchel.

Had the person who wrote that story known these people? Had Luella met them before? Maybe tomorrow, I'd pull Damon aside and ask. But right now, I didn't want to mention Luella's name with Evie so close. I wasn't ready to tell her that Luella was dead.

Evangeline yawned, her mouth stretching wide.

"I think I'd better get her to bed." I stood, picking up my bowl.

"Leave that." Sally waved me off. "Get some rest. We'll see you in the morning."

I collected Faze so he wouldn't shred their armchair in the night. Then I whisked Evie to the spare room where we'd be sleeping. Once she was tucked into the cot and asleep, I tiptoed to my satchel and took out the black leather journal.

My fingertips skimmed the embossed wing inlaid in a circle. Then I opened the clasp and cover to pages filled with sentences I couldn't read.

The old language.

I wasn't sure how or when, but even if it took me months, I'd read every page of this journal. If there was a chance it held the clue to a cure for Lyssa, I'd memorize every page.