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ONYX STORM



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ONYX STORM

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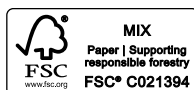
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*To the ones who don't run with the popular crowd,
the ones who get caught reading under their desks,
the ones who feel like they never get invited, included, or represented.
Get your leathers. We have dragons to ride.*

THE CONTINENT

EMERALD SEA

LUCERAS
PROVINCE

NAVARRE

MORRAINE
PROVINCE

ELSUM
PROVINCE

THE VALE ✦ ✦ BASGIATH

✦ CALDYR CITY

CALDYR PROVINCE

DEACONSHIRE PROVINCE

TYRRENDOR PROVINCE

✦ LEWELLEN

ARETIA ✦

ATHEBYNE ✦

CLIFFS
OF DRALOR

MEDARO
PASS ✦

DRAITHUS ✦

ARCTILE OCEAN



CYGNISEN
PROVINCE

MONTSERRAT

ESBEN MOUNTAINS

SUNIVA

CHAKIR

BRAEVICK
PROVINCE

SAMARA

NEWHALL

ANCA

SUMERTON

ZOLYA (CLIFFSBANE)

ESBEN MOUNTAINS

STONEWATER RIVER

RESSON

POROMIEL

BAY OF
MALEK

THE
BARRENS

PAVIS

KROVLA PROVINCE

CORDYN

NAMEBONDEDSIGNET/SPECIALTY*(if applicable)*

VIOLET SORRENGAIL

TAIRN AND ANDARNA

LIGHTNING WIELDING

XADEN RIORSON

SGAEYL

SHADOW WIELDING,
READING INTENTIONSSECOND SQUAD, FLAME SECTION, FOURTH WING

IMOGEN CARDULO

GLANE

MEMORY ERASING

QUINN HOLLIS

CRUTH

ASTRAL PROJECTION

RHIANNON MATTHIAS

FEIRGE

RETRIEVING

SAWYER HENRICK

SLISEAG

METALLURGY

RIDOC GAMLYN

AOTROM

ICE WIELDING

SLOANE MAIRI

THOIRT

SIPHONING

AARIC GRAYCASTLE
(AKA Cam Tauri)

MOLVIC

NOT MANIFESTED

AVALYNN, BAYLOR, AND LYNX - *FIRST-YEARS WITH UNMANIFESTED SIGNETS*

CATRIONA CORDELLA

KIRALAIR

MANIPULATING EMOTIONS

MAREN ZINA

DAJALAIR

BRAGEN, NEVE, TRAGER, AND KAI - *GRYPHON FLIERS*WORLD LEADERSKING TAURI THE WISE - *THE KING OF NAVARRE*HALDEN TAURI - *FIRST IN LINE FOR THE NAVARRIAN THRONE*QUEEN MARAYA - *THE QUEEN OF POROMIEL*VISCOUNT TECARUS - *FIRST IN LINE FOR THE POROMISH THRONE*

Onyx Storm is a nonstop-thrilling adventure fantasy set in the brutal and competitive world of a military college for dragon riders, which includes elements regarding war, hand-to-hand combat, blood, intense violence, brutal injuries, gore, murder, death, animal death, injury rehabilitation, grief, poisoning, burning, perilous situations, graphic language, and sexual activities that are shown on the page. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note, and prepare to face the storm...



The following text has been faithfully transcribed from Navarrian into the modern language by Jesinia Neilwart, Curator of the Scribe Quadrant at Basgiath War College. All events are true, and names have been preserved to honor the courage of those fallen. May their souls be commended to Malek.

Securing Basgiath and the wards has come at great cost, including General Sorrengail's life. Strategy must adjust. It is in the realm's best interest to ally with Poromiel, even temporarily.

—RECOVERED CORRESPONDENCE OF GENERAL AUGUSTINE MELGREN
TO HIS MAJESTY KING TAURI



PROLOGUE

Where in Malek's name is he going? I hurry through the tunnels beneath the quadrant, trying to follow, but night is the ultimate shadow and Xaden blends seamlessly into the darkness. If it wasn't for our dragons' bond leading me in his general direction and the sporadic disappearance of mage lights, I'd never think that he's masked somewhere ahead of me.

Fear holds me with an icy fist, and my footing grows unsteady. He kept his head down this evening, guarded by Bodhi and Garrick while we waited for news about Sawyer's injury after the battle that nearly cost us Basgiath, but there's no telling what he's doing now. If anyone spots the faint, strawberry-red circles around his irises, he'll be arrested—and likely executed. According to the texts I've read, they'll fade at this phase, but until they do, what could possibly be important enough for him to risk being seen?

The only logical answer sends a chill up my spine that has nothing to do with the cold stone of the corridor seeping in through my socks. There hadn't been time for boots or even my armor after the *click* of the closing door woke me from a restless sleep.

"Neither of them will answer," Andarna says, and I yank open the door to the enclosed bridge as its counterpart on the far end snicks shut. Was that him? *"Sgaeyl is still...incensed, and Tairn smells of both rage and sorrow."*

Understandable for all the reasons I can't allow myself to dwell on yet, but inconvenient.

“Do you want me to ask Cuir or Chradh—” she starts.

“No. The four of them need their sleep.” No doubt we’ll find ourselves on patrols for any remaining venom come morning. I cross the freezing expanse of the bridge with increasingly uncertain steps and jolt at the view outside the windows. It had been warm enough for thunderstorms earlier, but now snow falls in a thick curtain, concealing the ravine that separates the quadrant from Basgiath’s main campus. My chest clenches, and a fresh wave of seemingly endless tears threatens to prick my painfully swollen eyes.

“It began about an hour ago,” Andarna says gently.

The temperature has fallen steadily in the hours since... *Don’t go there.* My next breath shakes, and I force everything I can’t handle into a neat, mentally fireproof box and stash it somewhere deep inside me.

It’s too late to save Mom, but I’ll be damned if I let Xaden get himself killed.

“You can grieve,” Andarna reminds me as I pull open the door to the Healer Quadrant and enter the crowded hall. Wounded in every color of uniform line the sides of the stone tunnel, and healers dart in and out of the infirmary doors.

“If I wallow in every loss, that’s all I’ll ever have time for.” I’ve learned that lesson well over the past eighteen months. Passing a set of clearly intoxicated infantry cadets, I cut through what’s become an expanded sickbay, searching for a blur of darkness. This part of the quadrant didn’t sustain any damage, but it still reeks of sulfur and ash.

“May your mother be remembered! To General Sorrengail, the flame of Basgiath!” one of the third-years calls out, and my stomach twists tighter as I forge ahead without reply.

When I approach the corner, then turn it, I see a patch of darkness enveloping the right side of the wall for a stuttering heartbeat, and then the stairwell to the interrogation chamber appears, flanked by two groggy guards. Shadows slip down the steps.

Fuck. Usually I love being right, but in this instance, I was hoping otherwise. I reach for Xaden mentally, but there’s only a thick wall of chilled onyx.

I have to get past these guards. What would Mira do?

“She would have already slain your lieutenant and been confident in her choice,” Andarna answers. *“Your sister is an act first, ask questions later kind of rider.”*

“Not helpful.” What little I’d eaten for dinner threatens to reappear. Andarna’s right. Mira will kill Xaden if she finds out he’s channeled from the earth, regardless of the circumstances. But confidence? That’s not a bad idea. I muster every ounce of arrogance I can scrounge up or fake, straighten my shoulders, lift my chin, and stride toward the guards, praying I look steadier than I feel. *“I need an audience with the prisoner.”*

The two men glance at each other, and then the taller one on the left clears his throat. “We’re under orders from Melgren not to allow anyone down these steps.”

“Tell me”—I tilt my head and fold my arms like I’m strapped with every dagger I own...or am at least wearing footwear—“if the man directly responsible for your mother’s death was a flight of stairs away, what would you do?”

The shorter one looks down, revealing a cut beneath his ear.

“Orders—” the taller one starts, glancing at the ends of my sleep-loosened braid.

“He’s behind a locked door,” I interrupt. “I’m asking you to look the other way for five minutes, not give me the key.” My gaze darts poignantly to the key ring hanging on his bloodstained belt. “If it had been *your* mother, and she’d secured the kingdom’s entire defense system with her life, I promise I’d afford you the same courtesy.”

The tall one blanches.

“Goverson,” the short one whispers. “She’s the lightning wielder.”

Goverson grunts, and his hands flex at his sides. “Ten minutes,” he says. “Five for your mother, and five for you. We know who saved us today.” He motions toward the stairwell with his head.

But he *doesn’t* know. None of them realize the sacrifice Xaden made to kill the Sage...their *general*.

“Thank you.” I start down the stairs with wobbling knees, ignoring the pungent scent of wet earth that claws at the outer edges of my composure. “*I can’t believe he came down here.*”

“*He probably seeks information,*” Andarna notes. “*I cannot blame him for wanting to know what he is.*” The longing in her voice startles me on multiple levels.

“*He isn’t a soulless venin. He’s still Xaden. My Xaden,*” I snap, holding tight to the only thing I’m certain of as I make my way silently down the stairs.

“*You know what channeling from the earth does,*” she warns.

Know? Yes. Accept? Absolutely not. “*If he’d completely lost himself, he would have drained me at any number of points tonight, especially while I slept. Instead, he ensured our safety and risked exposure to sit at my side for hours. He channeled from the earth once. Surely we can repair wherever his soul may have... cracked.*” It’s the most I’m willing to admit. “*I already know what Tairn thinks, and the possibility of fighting both of you is exhausting, so please, for the love of Amari, be on my side.*”

The bond directly between us shimmers. “*All right.*”

“*Really?*” I pause on the stair, splaying my hand on the wall to catch my balance.

"I am as unknown as he is, and you still trust me," she says. "I will not be another battle you have to fight."

Oh, thank gods. Her words seep into the marrow of my bones, and I hang my head in relief. I hadn't realized how badly I needed to hear that until she said it. *"Thank you. And you have every right to know about where you come from, but I have no doubts about who you are."* I start down the remaining steps, sure of my footing. *"You alone should make the choice to find your family, and I'm worried that Melgren—"*

"I scorched the venom during the battle," she interrupts in a rush of words that run together.

"You...did." My brow puckers as I spiral downward toward the interrogation cells. I'd been too shocked at her appearance, the way her scales had shifted, to think about the burning dark wielder. As far as I know, we've never caught one on fire. Tairn hadn't said anything, either.

"I've been thinking about it all night. Magic feels different when I change color. Maybe my use of power in that moment altered the venom, weakened her enough to blister." Andarna slows enough to enunciate her words, but not by much.

"That could alter...everything." Muffled voices sound beneath me, and I quicken my pace. *"It's definitely worth investigating later."* Not that I'm willing to risk Andarna by shouting that she might be our newest weapon, especially not when the rumor has already circulated that we'll seek an alliance with Poromiel. What could be worse than leadership endangering Andarna? The whole Continent's leadership seeking to do the same.

"You can fight it all you want, but that power streaming through her veins?" Jack taunts, his words growing clearer as I near the final few turns. *"There's a reason the higher-ups want her. A little brotherly advice? Fall in line and find someone else to fuck. That infamous control of yours so much as flickers in her direction—"*

"I would never," Xaden retorts, his voice lethally icy.

My heart rate doubles and I halt just before the last curve in the stairwell, keeping out of sight. Jack's talking about *me*.

"Even you don't get a say in which parts of us are taken first, Riorson." Jack laughs. *"But speaking from personal experience, control goes quickly. Just look at you, freshly fed from the source and already down here, desperate for a cure. You will slip, and afterward... Well, let's just say that silver hair that has you so besotted will be gray like the rest of her, and those weak-ass initiate rings in your eyes won't just last a few days—they'll be permanent."*

"Not going to happen." Xaden bites out every word.

"You could deliver her yourself." Chains rattle. *"Or you could let me out and we'll do it together. Who knows, they might let her live just to keep you on*

a leash until you turn asim and forget all about her.”

“Fuck you.”

My hands ball into fists. Jack knows Xaden’s channeled. He’ll tell the first person who questions him, and Xaden will be arrested. My mind spins as the two start to argue only yards away, their words blurring in the whirlwind of my thoughts. Gods, I could lose Xaden just like—

I can’t. I won’t. I refuse to lose him, for him to lose *himself*.

Fear fights to rise and I snuff it out, denying it air to breathe or grow. The only thing stronger than the power prowling within me is the resolve stiffening my spine.

Xaden is *mine*. My heart, my soul, my everything. He channeled from the earth to save me, and I’ll scour the world until I find a way to save him right back. Even if it takes bargaining with Tecarus for access to every book on the damned Continent or capturing dark wielders one by one to question, I’ll find a cure.

“We’ll *find a cure*,” Andarna promises. “*We will exhaust every closer resource first, but if I’m right and I somehow altered that venom inadvertently while changing my scales, then the rest of my kind should know how to master the tactic. How to change him. Cure him.*”

My breath stutters at the possibility, the cost. “*Even if you’re right, I’m not using you—*”

“*I want to find my family. We both know the order to locate my kind is inevitable now that your leadership knows what I am. Let us do so on our terms and for our own purposes.*” Her tone sharpens. “*Let us follow every possible path to a cure.*”

She’s right. “*Every possible path may require breaking a few laws.*”

“*Dragons do not answer to the laws of humans,*” she counters in a tone that reminds me of Tairn. “*And as my bonded, as Tairn’s rider, you no longer answer to them, either.*”

“*Rebellious adolescent,*” I mutter, forming half a dozen plans, half of which might work. Even as their rider, there are still some crimes that would demand my execution...and that of whomever I trust to involve. I nod to myself, accepting the risk, at least for myself.

“*You’ll have to keep secrets again,*” Andarna warns.

“*Only the ones that protect Xaden.*” Which currently means preventing Jack from revealing this conversation without killing him, since we can’t afford the manhunt the death of our only prisoner would cause.

“*You sure I shouldn’t ask Cuir or Chradh—*”

“*No.*” I start down the stairs. There’s only one other person besides Bodhi and Garrick I *can* trust to prioritize Xaden’s best interests, only one other person who can know the truth in its entirety. “*Tell Glane I need Imogen.*”

~~I will not die today.~~
I will save him.

—VIOLET SORRENGAIL'S PERSONAL ADDENDUM
TO THE BOOK OF BRENNAN



CHAPTER ONE

Two weeks later

Flying in January should be a violation of the Codex. Between the howling storm and the incessant fog in my goggles, I can't see shit as we cut through the blustering snow squall above the mountains near Basgiath. Hoping we're almost through the worst of it, I grip the pommels of my saddle with gloved hands and hold tight.

"Dying today would be inconvenient," I say down the mental pathway connecting me to Tairn and Andarna. *"Unless you're trying to keep me away from the Senarium this afternoon?"* I've waited more than a week for the invitation-disguised order to come from the king's council, but the delay is understandable given they're on the fourth day of unprecedented peace talks happening on campus. Poromiel has publicly declared they'll walk after the seventh day if terms can't be reached, and it isn't looking good. I only hope that they'll be in an agreeable mood when I arrive.

"Want to make your meeting? Don't fall off this time," Tairn retorts.

"For the last time, I didn't fall off," I argue. *"I jumped off to help Sawyer—"*

"Don't remind me."

"You can't keep leaving me off patrols," Andarna interrupts from the warmth and protection of the Vale.

"It isn't safe," Tairn reminds her for what has to be the hundredth time.

“Weather aside, we’re hunting dark wielders, not out for a pleasure flight.”

“*You shouldn’t fly in this,*” I agree, looking for any sign of Ridoc and Aotrom, but there’s only walls of white. My chest tightens. How are any of us supposed to see topography or our squadmates, let alone spot a dark wielder hundreds of feet below in this mess? I can’t remember a more brutal series of storms than the ones that have battered the war college in the last two weeks, but without —

Mom. Grief sinks the tips of her razor-sharp claws into my chest, and I lift my face to feel the stinging bite of snow against the tops of my cheeks, focusing on anything else to keep breathing, keep moving. I’ll mourn later, always later.

“It’s just a quick patrol,” Andarna whines, jarring me from my thoughts. *“I need the practice. Who knows what weather we’ll encounter on the search for my kind?”*

“Quick patrols” have proven deadly, and I’m not looking for reasons to test Andarna’s fire theory. Dark wielders may have limited power within the wards, but they’re still lethal fighters. The ones who didn’t escape post-battle have used the element of surprise to add multiple names to the death roll. First Wing, Third Wing, and our own Claw Section have suffered losses.

“Then practice evenly dispersing enough magic to keep all your extremities warm during flight, because your wings won’t hold the weight of this ice,” Tairn growls into the falling snow.

“Your wings won’t hold the weight of this ice,” Andarna blatantly mocks him. *“And yet yours miraculously carry the burden of your ego.”*

“Go find a sheep and let the adults work.” Tairn’s muscles shift slightly beneath me in a familiar pattern, and I lean forward as far as the saddle will allow, preparing for a dive.

My stomach lurches into my throat as his wings snap closed and we pitch downward, slicing through the storm. Wind tears at my winter flight hood, and the leather strap of my saddle bites into my frozen thighs as I pray to Zihnal there isn’t a mountain peak directly beneath us.

Tairn levels out, and my stomach settles as I tug my goggles up to my forehead and blink quickly, looking right. The drop in altitude has lessened the intensity of the storm, improving visibility enough to see the rocky ridgeline just above the flight field.

“Looks clear.” My eyes tear up, assaulted by both wind and snow that feels more like tiny projectiles of ice than flakes. I clean my lenses using the suede tips of my gloves before snapping them over my eyes again.

“Agreed. Once we hear the same from Feirge and Cruth, we’ll end today’s endeavors,” he grumbles.

“You sound like making it three straight days without encountering the enemy is a bad thing.” Maybe we’ve really caught and killed them all. As cadets, we’ve

slain thirty-one venin in the area surrounding Basgiath while our professors work to clear the rest of the province. It would be thirty-two if anyone suspected one of them was living among us, though—even if he’s credited with seventeen of the kills.

“I am not comforted by the quiet—” Wind whips overhead with a *crack*, and Tairn’s head jerks upward. Mine immediately follows suit.

Oh no.

Not wind. Wings.

Aotrom’s claws consume my vision, and my heart seizes with panic. He’s dropping out of the storm directly on top of us.

“Tairn!” I shout, but he’s already rolling left, hurling us from our course.

The world rotates, sky and land exchanging places twice in a nauseating dance before Tairn flares his wings in a jarring snap. The movement cracks the inch-thick layer of ice along the front ridges of his wings, and chunks fall away.

I draw a full but shaky breath as Tairn pumps his wings with maximum effort, gaining a hundred feet of altitude in a matter of seconds and barreling straight toward the Brown Swordtail bonded to Ridoc.

Wrath scalds the air in my lungs, Tairn’s emotions flooding my system for a heartbeat before I can slam my mental shields down to muffle the worst of what streams in through the bond.

“Don’t!” I shout into the wind as we come up on Aotrom’s left, but as always, Tairn does whatever he wants and full-on crunches his jaws within what looks like inches of Aotrom’s head. *“It was clearly an accident!”* One that would usually be avoided by dragons communicating.

The smaller Brown Swordtail *squawks* as Tairn repeats the warning, then Aotrom exposes his throat in a gesture of submission.

Ridoc looks my way through the band of snow and throws up his hands, but I doubt he sees my shrug of apology before Aotrom falls away, heading south to the flight field.

Guess Feirge and Rhi reported in.

“Was that really necessary?” I drop my shields, and Tairn’s and Andarna’s bonds come flooding back at full strength, but the shimmering pathway that leads to Xaden is still blocked, dimmed to an echo of its usual presence. The loss of constant connection sucks, but he doesn’t trust himself—or what he thinks he’ll become—to keep it open yet.

“Yes,” Tairn answers, declaring the single word sufficient.

“You’re almost twice his size and it was obviously an accident,” I repeat as we descend rapidly to the flight field. The snow on the ground of the box canyon has been trampled into a muddy series of paths from the constant patrols second- and third-years are flying.

"It was negligent, and a twenty-two-year-old dragon should know better than to close himself off from his riot simply because he's arguing with his rider," Tairn grumbles, his anger lowering to a simmer as Aotrom lands beside Rhi's Green Daggertail, Feirge.

Tairn's claws impact the frozen ground to Aotrom's left, and the sudden landing vibrates every bone in my body like a rung bell. Pain explodes along my spine, my lower back taking the brunt of the insult. I breathe through the worst of it, then accept the rest and move on. *"Well, that was graceful."* I jerk my goggles to my forehead.

"You fly next time." He shakes like a wet hound, and I block my face with my hands as ice and snow fly off his scales.

I tug at the leather strap of my saddle when he stills, but the buckle catches along the jagged, shitty line of stitches I put in after the battle, and one of them pops. *"Damn it. That wouldn't have happened if you'd let Xaden fix it."* I force my body out of the saddle, ignoring the aching protest of my cold-cramped joints as I make my way across the icy pattern of spikes and scales I know as well as my own hand.

"The Dark One didn't cut it in the first place," Tairn responds.

"Stop calling him that." My knee collapses, and I throw my arms out to steady my balance, cursing my joints as I reach Tairn's shoulder. After an hour in the saddle at these temperatures, a pissed-off knee is nothing; I'm lucky my hips still rotate.

"Stop denying the truth." Tairn enunciates every word of the damning order as I avoid a patch of ice and prepare to dismount. *"His soul is no longer his own."*

"That's a little dramatic." I'm not getting into this argument again. *"His eyes are back to normal—"*

"That kind of power is addictive. You know it, or you wouldn't be pretending to sleep at night." He twists his neck in a way that reminds me of a snake and levels a golden glare on me.

"I'm sleeping." It's not entirely a lie, but definitely time to change the subject. *"Did you make me repair my saddle to teach me a lesson?"* My ass protests every scale on Tairn's leg as I slide, then land in a fresh foot of snow. *"Or because you don't trust Xaden with my gear anymore?"*

"Yes." Tairn lifts his head far over mine and blasts a torrent of fire along his wing, melting off the residual ice, and I turn away from the surge of heat that painfully contrasts my body temperature.

"Tairn..." I struggle for words and look up at him. *"I need to know where you stand before this meeting. With or without Empyrean approval, I can't do any of this without you."*

"Meaning, will I support the myriad of ways you plan to court death in the

name of curing one who is beyond redemption?" He swivels his head in my direction again.

Tension crackles along Andarna's bond.

"*He's not—*" I cut off that particular argument, since the rest is sound. "*Basically, yes.*"

He grumbles deep within his chest. "*I fly without warming my wings in preparation for carrying heavier weight for longer distances. Does that not answer your question?*"

Meaning Andarna. Relief gusts through my lips on a swift exhale. "*Thank you.*"

Steam rolls in billowing clouds from his nostrils. "*But do not mistake my unflinching support of you, my mate, and Andarna for any form of faith in him.*" Tairn lifts his head, cueing the end of the conversation.

"*Heard.*" On that note, I trudge toward the trampled path where Rhi and Quinn wait. Ridoc gives Tairn a wide berth as he does the same to my right. My nearly numb, gloved fingers fumble with the three buttons on the side of my winter flight hood, and the fur-lined fabric falls away from my nose and mouth as I reach them. "Everything good on your route?"

Rhi and Quinn look cold but uninjured, thank gods.

"Still...alarmingly routine. We didn't see anything of concern. Wyvern burn pit is still just ash and bone, too." Rhi picks a clump of snow from the lining of her hood, then pulls it back up over her shoulder-length black braids.

"We didn't see shit for those last ten minutes, period." Ridoc shoves his gloved hand into his hair, snowflakes slipping off his brown cheeks without melting.

"At least you're an ice wielder." I gesture to his annoyingly flake-free face.

Quinn pulls her blond curls into a quick bun. "Wielding can help keep you warm, too."

"I'm not chancing it when I can't see what I might strike." Especially having lost my only conduit in the battle. I glance at Ridoc as a line of our Tail Section's dragons launch for their patrol behind him. "What were you arguing with Aotrom about, anyway?"

"Sorry about that." Ridoc cringes and lowers his voice. "He wants to go home—back to Aretia. Says we can launch the search for the seventh breed from there."

Rhi nods, and Quinn presses her lips in a firm line.

"Yeah, I get that," I say—it's a common sentiment among the riot. We're not exactly welcome here. The unity between Navarrian and Aretian riders crumbled within hours of the battle's end. "But the only path for an alliance that can save Poromish civilians requires us to be here. At least for now."

Not to mention, Xaden insists we stay.

“He remains because Navarre’s wards protect you from him.” Tairn blasts another stream of fire when I ignore him, heating his left wing, then crouches before launching skyward with the others.

The courtyard is nearly empty when we enter through the tunnel that runs under the ridgeline separating it from the training grounds. In front of us, snow tops the dormitory wing, the centered rotunda that links the quadrant’s structures, and all but the southernmost roofline of the academic wing ahead to our left, where Malek’s fire burns bright in the highest turret, consuming the belongings of our dead as he requires.

Maybe the god of death will curse me for keeping my mother’s personal journals, but it’s not like I wouldn’t have a few choice words for him should we meet, anyway.

“Report,” Aura Beinhaven orders from the dais at our left, where she stands with Ewan Faber—the stocky, sour-faced wingleader of what little remains of Navarre’s Fourth Wing.

“Oh, good, you all made it back.” Ewan’s voice drips with sarcasm as he folds his arms, snow falling on his broad shoulders. “We were so worried.”

“Prick was barely a squad leader in Claw when we left,” Ridoc mutters.

“Nothing this morning,” Rhiannon replies, and Aura nods but doesn’t deign to say anything. “Any news from the front?”

My stomach knots. The lack of information is agonizing.

“Nothing I’d be willing to share with a bunch of deserters,” Aura answers.

Oh, screw her.

“A bunch of deserters who saved your ass!” Quinn offers a middle finger as we continue past, our boots crunching on the snow-covered gravel. “Navarrian riders, Aretian riders... We can’t function like this,” she says to the group quietly. “If they won’t accept *us*, the fliers don’t have a prayer.”

I nod in agreement. Mira’s working on that particular issue—not that leadership knows or will allow the use of whatever she’s learned, even if it saves the negotiations. Pompous assholes.

“Devera and Kaori will be back any day. They’ll sort out command structure as soon as the royals ink a treaty that hopefully pardons us for leaving in the first place.” Rhi cocks her head as Imogen walks out of the rotunda in front of us, her pink hair skimming her cheekbone as she descends the stone steps. “Cardulo, you missed patrol.”

“I was assigned elsewhere by Lieutenant Tavis,” Imogen explains, not missing a beat as she comes our way. Her gaze jumps toward me. “Sorrengail, I need a word.”

I nod. She was on Xaden duty.

I will not die today.

I will save him.

—VIOLET SORRENGAIL'S PERSONAL ADDENDUM TO THE BOOK OF BRENNAN

Power rises, humming through me with insistent demand, and I lift my right hand, aiming my palm toward the sky of the open amphitheater.

Xaden vanishes from behind me a second before I release the strike.

Light flashes, illuminating the arena as lightning streaks upward, through the barrier of the wards and into the clouds above, and I hear the other cadets' collective gasps before the darkness descends again.

"You're astounding," he says, already one of the shadows.

"Why only me?" I ask, turning endlessly to find him.

"You need to be able to find me." Shadows rush against my skin, and less than a breath later, they're gone, leaving me stumbling near the front of the mat, staring at Xaden's retreating back as he climbs the stairs.

"Why me?" I repeat, more than aware of the other cadets staring as I find my balance, studying me as if hoping to discover a mark, since Xaden walked away unscathed. *"Xaden!"*

He doesn't so much as pause his ascent. *"Because you're the only one capable of killing me."*



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