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REBECCA YARROS

Fourth Wing

FOURTH WING

Rebecca Yarros

Empyrean series – book 1

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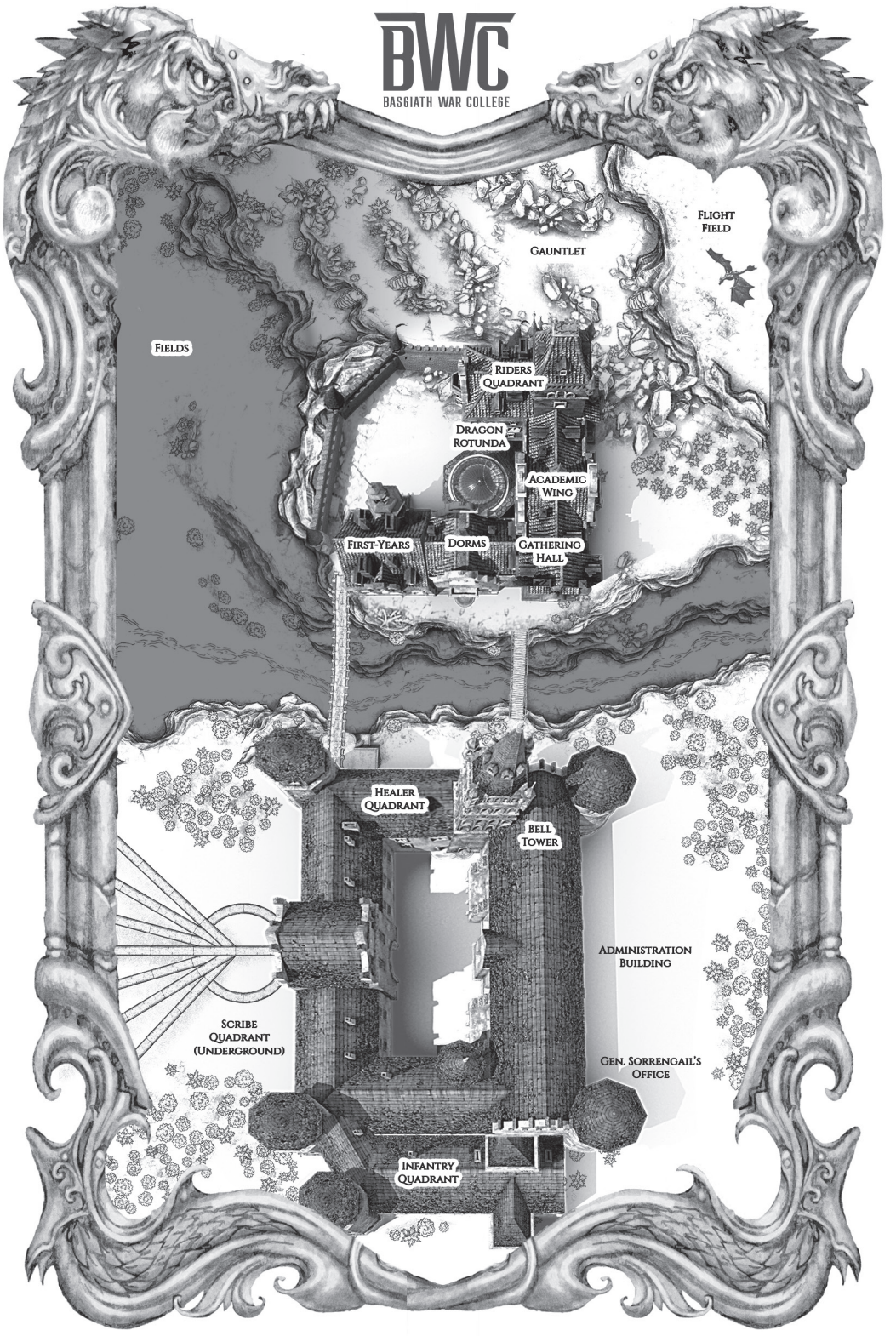
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Fourth Wing is a nonstop-thrilling adventure fantasy set in the brutal and competitive world of a military college for dragon riders, which includes elements regarding war, battle, hand-to-hand combat, perilous situations, blood, intense violence, brutal injuries, death, poisoning, 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 enter Basgiath War College...


BWC
BASGIATH WAR COLLEGE
FLIGHT FIELD
GAUNTLET
FIELDS
RIDERS QUADRANT
DRAGON ROTUNDA
ACADEMIC WING
FIRST-YEARS
DORMS
GATHERING HALL
HEALER QUADRANT
BELL TOWER
ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
SCRIBE QUADRANT (UNDERGROUND)
GEN. SORRENGAIL'S OFFICE
INFANTRY QUADRANT

To Aaron.
My own Captain America.
Through the deployments, the moves, the sunniest highs,
and the darkest lows,
it's always been you and me, kiddo.

Here's to the artists.
You hold the power to shape the world.

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.

A dragon without its rider is a tragedy.
A rider without their dragon is dead.

—Article One, Section One The Dragon Rider's Codex



CHAPTER ONE

Conscription Day is always the deadliest. Maybe that's why the sunrise is especially beautiful this morning—because I know it might be my last.

I tighten the straps of my heavy canvas rucksack and trudge up the wide staircase of the stone fortress I call home. My chest heaves with exertion, my lungs burning by the time I reach the stone corridor leading to General Sorrengail's office. This is what six months of intense physical training has given me—the ability to barely climb six flights of stairs with a thirty-pound pack.

I'm so fucked.

The thousands of twenty-year-olds waiting outside the gate to enter their chosen quadrant for service are the smartest and strongest in Navarre. Hundreds of them have been preparing for the Riders Quadrant, the chance to become one of the elite, since birth. I've had exactly six months.

The expressionless guards lining the wide hallway at the top of the landing avoid my eyes as I pass, but that's nothing new. Besides, being ignored is the best possible scenario for me.

Basgiath War College isn't known for being kind to…well, anyone, even those of us whose mothers are in command.

Every Navarrian officer, whether they choose to be schooled as healers, scribes, infantry, or riders, is molded within these cruel walls over three years, honed into weapons to secure our mountainous borders from the violent invasion attempts of the kingdom of Poromiel and their gryphon

riders. The weak don't survive here, especially not in the Riders Quadrant. The dragons make sure of that.

"You're sending her to die!" a familiar voice thunders through the general's thick wooden door, and I gasp. There's only one woman on the Continent foolish enough to raise her voice to the general, but she's supposed to be on the border with the Eastern Wing. *Mira.*

There's a muffled response from the office, and I reach for the door handle.

"She doesn't stand a chance," Mira shouts as I force the heavy door open and the weight of my pack shifts forward, nearly taking me down. *Shit.*

The general curses from behind her desk, and I grab onto the back of the crimson-upholstered couch to catch my balance.

"Damn it, Mom, she can't even handle her rucksack," Mira snaps, rushing to my side.

"I'm fine!" My cheeks heat with mortification, and I force myself upright. She's been back for five minutes and is already trying to save me. *Because you need saving, you fool.*

I don't want this. I don't want *any* part of this Riders Quadrant shit. It's not like I have a death wish. I would have been better off failing the admission test to Basgiath and going straight to the army with the majority of conscripts. But I *can* handle my rucksack, and I *will* handle myself.

"Oh, Violet." Worried brown eyes look down at me as strong hands brace my shoulders.

"Hi, Mira." A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. She might be here to say her goodbyes, but I'm just glad to see my sister for the first time in years.

Her eyes soften, and her fingers flex on my shoulders like she might pull me into a hug, but she steps back and turns to stand at my side, facing our mother. "You can't do this."

"It's already done." Mom shrugs, the lines of her fitted black uniform rising and falling with the motion.

I scoff. So much for the hope of a reprieve. Not that I ever should have expected, or even hoped for, an ounce of mercy from a woman who's been made famous for her lack of it.

"Then *undo* it," Mira seethes. "She's spent her whole life training to become a scribe. She wasn't raised to be a rider."

"Well, she certainly isn't you, is she, Lieutenant Sorrengail?" Mom braces

her hands on the immaculate surface of her desk and leans in slightly as she stands, looking us over with narrowed, appraising eyes that mirror the dragons' carved into the furniture's massive legs. I don't need the prohibited power of mind reading to know exactly what she sees.

At twenty-six years old, Mira's a younger version of our mother. She's tall, with strong, powerful muscles toned from years of sparring and hundreds of hours spent on the back of her dragon. Her skin practically glows with health, and her golden-brown hair is sheared short for combat in the same style as Mom's. But more than looks, she carries the same arrogance, the unwavering conviction that she belongs in the sky. She's a rider through and through.

She's everything I'm not, and the disapproving shake of Mom's head says she agrees. I'm too short. Too frail. What curves I do have should be muscle, and my traitorous body makes me embarrassingly vulnerable.

Mom walks toward us, her polished black boots gleaming in the mage lights that flicker from the sconces. She picks up the end of my long braid, scoffs at the section just above my shoulders where the brown strands start to lose their warmth of color and slowly fade to a steely, metallic silver by the ends, and then drops it. "Pale skin, pale eyes, pale hair." Her gaze siphons every ounce of my confidence down to the marrow in my bones. "It's like that fever stole all your coloring along with your strength." Grief flashes through her eyes and her brows furrow. "I told him not to keep you in that library."

It's not the first time I've heard her curse the sickness that nearly killed her while she was pregnant with me or the library Dad made my second home once she'd been stationed here at Basgiath as an instructor and he as a scribe.

"I love that library," I counter. It's been more than a year since his heart finally failed, and the Archives are still the only place that feels like home in this giant fortress, the only place where I still feel my father's presence.

"Spoken like the daughter of a scribe," Mom says quietly, and I see it—the woman she was while Dad was alive. Softer. Kinder…at least for her family.

"I am the daughter of a scribe." My back screams at me, so I let my pack slip from my shoulders, guiding it to the floor, and take my first full breath since leaving my room.

Mom blinks, and that softer woman is gone, leaving only the general. "You're the daughter of a rider, you are twenty years old, and today is Conscription Day. I let you finish your tutoring, but like I told you last spring, I will not watch one of *my* children enter the Scribe Quadrant, Violet."

"Because scribes are so far beneath riders?" I grumble, knowing perfectly well that riders are the top of the social and military hierarchy. It helps that their bonded dragons roast people for fun.

"Yes!" Her customary composure slips. "And if you dare walk into the tunnel toward the Scribe Quadrant today, I will rip you out by that ridiculous braid and put you on the parapet myself."

My stomach turns over.

"Dad wouldn't want this!" Mira argues, color flushing up her neck.

"I loved your father, but he's dead," Mom says, as if giving the weather report. "I doubt he wants much these days."

I suck in a breath but keep my mouth shut. Arguing will get me nowhere. She's never listened to a damned thing I've had to say before, and today is no different.

"Sending Violet into the Riders Quadrant is tantamount to a death sentence." Guess Mira isn't done arguing. Mira's *never* done arguing with Mom, and the frustrating thing about it is that Mom has always respected her for it. Double standard for the win. "She's not strong enough, Mom! She's already broken her arm this year, she sprains some joint every other week, and she's not tall enough to mount any dragon big enough to keep her alive in a battle."

"Seriously, Mira?" What. The. Hell. My fingernails bite into my palms as I curl my hands into fists. Knowing my chances of survival are minimal is one thing. Having my sister throw my inadequacies in my face is another. "Are you calling me *weak*?"

"No." Mira squeezes my hand. "Just…fragile."

"That's not any better." Dragons don't bond *fragile* women. They incinerate them.

"So she's small." Mom scans me up and down, taking in the generous fit of the cream belted tunic and pants I selected this morning for my potential execution.

I snort. "Are we just listing my faults now?"

"I never said it was a fault." Mom turns to my sister. "Mira, Violet deals

with more pain before lunch than you do in an entire week. If any of my children is capable of surviving the Riders Quadrant, it's her."

My eyebrows rise. That sounded an awful lot like a compliment, but with Mom, I'm never quite sure.

"How many rider candidates die on Conscription Day, Mom? Forty? Fifty? Are you that eager to bury another child?" Mira seethes.

I cringe as the temperature in the room plummets, courtesy of Mom's storm-wielding signet power she channels through her dragon, Aimsir.

My chest tightens at the memory of my brother. No one has dared to mention Brennan or his dragon in the five years since they died fighting the Tyrrish rebellion in the south. Mom tolerates me and respects Mira, but she loved Brennan.

Dad did, too. His chest pains started right after Brennan's death.

Mom's jaw tightens and her eyes threaten retribution as she glares at Mira.

My sister swallows but holds her own in the staring competition.

"Mom," I start. "She didn't mean—"

"Get. Out. Lieutenant." Mom's words are soft puffs of steam in the frigid office. "Before I report you absent from your unit without leave."

Mira straightens her posture, nods once, and pivots with military precision, then strides for the door without another word, grabbing a small rucksack on the way out.

It's the first time Mom and I have been alone in months.

Her eyes meet mine, and the temperature rises as she takes a deep breath. "You scored in the top quarter for speed and agility during the entrance exam. You'll do just fine. All Sorrengails do just fine." She skims the backs of her fingers down my cheek, barely grazing my skin. "So much like your father," she whispers before clearing her throat and backing up a few steps.

Guess there are no meritorious service awards for emotional availability.

"I won't be able to acknowledge you for the next three years," she says, sitting back on the edge of her desk. "Since, as commanding general of Basgiath, I'll be your far superior officer."

"I know." It's the least of my concerns, considering she barely acknowledges me now.

"You won't get any special treatment just because you're my daughter,

either. If anything, they'll come after you harder to make you prove yourself." She arches an eyebrow.

"Well aware." Good thing I've been training with Major Gillstead for the last several months since Mom made her decree.

She sighs and forces a smile. "Then I guess I'll see you in the valley at Threshing, candidate. Though you'll be a cadet by sunset, I suppose."

Or dead.

Neither of us says it.

"Good luck, Candidate Sorrengail." She moves back behind her desk, effectively dismissing me.

"Thank you, General." I heft my pack onto my shoulders and walk out of her office. A guard closes the door behind me.

"She's batshit crazy," Mira says from the center of the hallway, right between where two guards are positioned.

"They'll tell her you said that."

"Like they don't already know," she grinds out through clenched teeth. "Let's go. We only have an hour before all candidates have to report, and I saw thousands waiting outside the gates when I flew over." She starts walking, leading me down the stone staircase and through the hallways to my room.

Well…it *was* my room.

In the thirty minutes I've been gone, all my personal items have been packed into crates that now sit stacked in the corner. My stomach sinks to the hardwood floor. She had my entire life boxed.

"She's fucking efficient, I'll give you that," Mira mutters before turning my way, her gaze passing over me in open assessment. "I was hoping I'd be able to talk her out of it. You were never meant for the Riders Quadrant."

"So you've mentioned." I lift an eyebrow at her. "Repeatedly."

"Sorry." She winces, dropping to the ground and emptying her pack.

"What are you doing?"

"What Brennan did for me," she says softly, and grief lodges in my throat. "Can you use a sword?"

I shake my head. "Too heavy. I'm pretty quick with daggers, though." Really damned quick. Lightning quick. What I lack in strength, I make up for in speed.

"I figured. Good. Now, drop your pack and take off those horrible boots."

She sorts through the items she's brought, handing me new boots and a black uniform. "Put these on."

"What's wrong with my pack?" I ask but drop my rucksack anyway. She immediately opens it, ripping out everything I'd carefully packed. "Mira! That took me all night!"

"You're carrying way too much, and your boots are a death trap. You'll slip right off the parapet with those smooth soles. I had a set of rubber-bottomed rider boots made for you just in case, and this, my dear Violet, is the worst case." Books start flying, landing in the vicinity of the crate.

"Hey, I can only take what I can carry, and I want those!" I lunge for the next book before she has a chance to toss it, barely managing to save my favorite collection of dark fables.

"Are you willing to die for it?" she asks, her eyes turning hard.

"I can carry it!" This is all wrong. I'm supposed to be dedicating my life to books, not throwing them in the corner to lighten my rucksack.

"No. You can't. You're barely thrice the weight of the pack, the parapet is roughly eighteen inches wide, two hundred feet aboveground, and last time I looked, those were rain clouds moving in. They're not going to give you a rain delay just because the bridge might get a little slick, sis. You'll fall. You'll die. Now, are you going to listen to me? Or are you going to join the other dead candidates at tomorrow morning's roll call?" There's no trace of my older sister in the rider before me. This woman is shrewd, cunning, and a touch cruel. This is the woman who survived all three years with only one scar, the one her own dragon gave her during Threshing. "Because that's all you'll be. Another tombstone. Another name scorched in stone. Ditch the books."

"Dad gave this one to me," I murmur, pressing the book against my chest. Maybe it's childish, just a collection of stories that warn us against the lure of magic, and even demonize dragons, but it's all I have left.

She sighs. "Is it that old book of folklore about dark-wielding vermin and their wyvern? Haven't you read it a thousand times already?"

"Probably more," I admit. "And they're *venin*, not vermin."

"Dad and his allegories," she says. "Just don't try to channel power without being a bonded rider and red-eyed monsters won't hide under your bed, waiting to snatch you away on their two-legged dragons to join their dark army." She retrieves the last book I packed from the rucksack and

hands it to me. "Ditch the books. Dad can't save you. He tried. I tried. Decide, Violet. Are you going to die a scribe? Or live as a rider?"

I glance down at the books in my arms and make my choice. "You're a pain in the ass." I put the fables in the corner but keep the other tome in my hands as I face my sister.

"A pain in the ass who is going to keep you alive. What's that one for?" she challenges.

"Killing people." I hand it back to her.

A slow smile spreads across her face. "Good. You can keep that one. Now, get changed while I sort out the rest of this mess." The bell rings high above us. We have forty-five minutes.

I dress quickly, but everything feels like it belongs to someone else, though it's obviously tailored to my size. My tunic is replaced by a tight-fitting black shirt that covers my arms, and my breezy pants are exchanged for leather ones that hug every curve. Then she laces me into a vest-style corset over the shirt.

"Keeps it from rubbing," she explains.

"Like the gear riders wear into battle." Have to admit, the clothes are pretty badass, even if I feel like an imposter. *Gods, this is really happening*.

"Exactly, because that's what you're doing. Going into battle."

The combination of leather and a fabric I don't recognize covers me from collarbone to just below my waist, wrapping over my breasts and crossing up and over my shoulders. I finger the hidden sheaths sewn diagonally along the rib cage.

"For your daggers."

"I only have four." I grab them from the pile on the floor.

"You'll earn more."

I slide my weapons into the sheaths, as though my ribs themselves have become weapons. The design is ingenious. Between my ribs and the sheaths at my thighs, the blades are easily accessible.

I barely recognize myself in the mirror. I look like a rider. I still feel like a scribe.

Minutes later, half of what I packed is piled onto the crates. She's repacked my rucksack, discarding anything deemed unnecessary and almost everything sentimental while word-vomiting advice about how to survive in the quadrant. Then she surprises me by doing the most sentimental

thing ever—telling me to sit between her knees so she can braid my hair into a crown.

It's like I'm a kid again instead of a full-grown woman, but I do it.

"What is this?" I test the material just above my heart, scratching it with my fingernail.

"Something I designed," she explains, tugging my braid painfully tight against my scalp. "I had it specially made for you with Teine's scales sewn in, so be careful with it."

"Dragon scales?" I jerk my head back to look at her. "How? Teine is huge."

"I happen to know a rider whose powers can make big things very small." A devious smile plays across her lips. "And smaller things…much, much bigger."

I roll my eyes. Mira's always been more vocal about her men than I have been…about all two of them. "I mean, how much bigger?"

She laughs, then tugs on my braid. "Head forward. You should have cut your hair." She pulls the strands tight against my head and resumes weaving. "It's a liability in sparring and in battle, not to mention being a giant target. No one else has hair that fades out to silver like this, and they'll already be aiming for you."

"You know very well the natural pigment seems to gradually abandon it no matter the length." My eyes are just as indecisive, a light hazel of varying blues and ambers that never seems to favor either actual color. "Besides, other than everyone else's concern for the shade, my hair is the only thing about me that's perfectly healthy. Cutting it would feel like I'm punishing my body for finally doing something well, and it's not like I feel the need to hide who I am."

"You're not." Mira yanks on my braid, pulling my head back, and our eyes lock. "You're the smartest woman I know. Don't forget that. Your brain is your best weapon. Outsmart them, Violet. Do you hear me?"

I nod, and she loosens her grip, then finishes the braid and pulls me to my feet as she continues to summarize years of knowledge into fifteen harried minutes, barely pausing to breathe.

"Be observant. Quiet is fine, but make sure you notice everything and everyone around you to your advantage. You've read the Codex?"

"A few times." The rule book for the Riders Quadrant is a fraction of

the length of the other divisions'. Probably because riders have trouble obeying rules.

"Good. Then you know that the other riders can kill you at any time, and the cutthroat cadets *will* try. Fewer cadets means better odds at Thresh-ing. There are never enough dragons willing to bond, and anyone reckless enough to get themselves killed isn't worthy of a dragon anyway."

"Except when sleeping. It's an executable offense to attack any cadet while sleeping. Article Three—"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean you're safe at night. Sleep in this if you can."

She taps the stomach of my corset.

"Rider black is supposed to be earned. You sure I shouldn't wear my tunic today?" I skim my hands over the leather.

"The wind up on the parapet will catch any spare cloth like a sail." She hands me my now-much-lighter pack. "The tighter your clothes, the bet-ter off you are up there, and in the ring once you start sparring. Wear the armor at all times. Keep your daggers on you at *all times*." She points to the sheaths down her thighs.

"Someone's going to say I didn't earn them."

"You're a Sorrengail," she responds, as if that's answer enough. "Fuck what they say."

"And you don't think the dragon scales are cheating?"

"There's no such thing as cheating once you climb the turret. There's only survival and death." The bell chimes—only thirty minutes left. She swallows. "It's almost time. Ready?"

"No."

"Neither was I." A wry smile lifts a corner of her mouth. "And I'd spent my life training for it."

"I'm not going to die today." I sling my pack over my shoulders and breathe a little easier than this morning. It's infinitely more manageable.

The halls of the central, administrative part of the fortress are eerily quiet as we wind our way down through various staircases, but the noise from outside grows louder the lower we descend. Through the windows, I see thousands of candidates hugging their loved ones and saying their goodbyes on the grassy fields just beneath the main gate. From what I've witnessed every year, most families hold on to their candidates right up to the very last bell. The four roads leading to the fortress are clogged with

horses and wagons, especially where they converge in front of the college, but it's the empty ones at the edge of the fields that make me nauseous.

They're for the bodies.

Right before we round the last corner that will lead to the courtyard, Mira stops.

"What is— *Oof*." She yanks me against her chest, hugging me tight in the relative privacy of the corridor.

"I love you, Violet. Remember everything I've told you. Don't become another name on the death roll." Her voice shakes, and I wrap my arms around her, squeezing tight.

"I'll be all right," I promise.

She nods, her chin bumping against the top of my head. "I know. Let's go."

That's all she says before pulling away and walking into the crowded courtyard just inside the main gate to the fortress. Instructors, commanders, and even our mother are gathered informally, waiting for the madness outside the walls to become the order within. Out of all the doors in the war college, the main gate is the only one no cadet will enter today, since each quadrant has its own entrance and facilities. Hell, the riders have their own citadel. Pretentious, egotistical fucks.

I follow Mira, catching her with a few quick strides.

"Find Dain Aetos," Mira tells me as we cross through the courtyard, heading for the open gate.

"Dain?" I can't help but smile at the thought of seeing Dain again, and my heart rate jumps. It's been a year, and I've missed his soft brown eyes and the way he laughs, the way every part of his body joins in. I've missed our friendship, and the moments I thought it might turn into more under the right circumstances. I've missed the way he looks at me, like I'm someone worth noticing. I've just missed…him.

"I've only been out of the quadrant for three years, but from what I hear, he's doing well, and he'll keep you safe. Don't smile like that," Mira chides. "He'll be a second-year." She shakes her finger at me. "Don't mess around with second-years. If you want to get laid, and you should"—she lifts her brows—"often, considering you never know what the day brings, then screw around in your own year. Nothing is worse than cadets gossiping that you've slept your way to safety."

"So I'm free to take any of the first-years I want to bed," I say with a little grin. "Just not the second-or third-years."

"Exactly." She winks.

We cross through the gates, leaving the fortress, and join the organized chaos beyond.

Each of Navarre's six provinces has sent this year's share of candidates for military service. Some volunteer. Some are sentenced as punishment. Most are conscripted. The only thing we have in common here at Basgiath is that we passed the entrance exam—both written and an agility test I still cannot believe I passed—which means at least we won't end up as fodder for the infantry on the front line.

The atmosphere is tense with anticipation as Mira leads me along the worn cobblestone path toward the southern turret. The main college is built into the side of Basgiath Mountain, as if it was cleaved from a ridgeline of the peak itself. The sprawling, formidable structure towers over the crowd of anxious, waiting candidates and their tearful families, with its stories-tall stone battlements—built to protect the high rise of the keep within—and defensive turrets at each of its corners, one of which houses the bells.

The majority of the crowd moves to line up at the base of the northern turret—the entrance to the Infantry Quadrant. Some of the mass heads toward the gate behind us—the Healer Quadrant that consumes the southern end of the college. Envy clenches my chest when I spot a few taking the central tunnel into the archives below the fortress to join the Scribe Quadrant.

The entrance to the Riders Quadrant is nothing more than a fortified door at the base of the tower, just like the infantry entrance to the north. But while the infantry candidates can walk straight into their ground-level quadrant, we rider candidates will *climb*.

Mira and I join the riders' line, waiting to sign in, and I make the mistake of glancing up.

High above us, crossing the river-bottomed valley that divides the main college from the even higher, looming citadel of the Riders Quadrant on the southern ridgeline, is the parapet, the stone bridge that's about to separate rider candidates from the cadets over the next few hours.

I can't believe I'm about to cross that thing.

"And to think, I've been preparing for the scribe's written exam all these

years." My voice drips with sarcasm. "I should have been playing on a balance beam."

Mira ignores me as the line moves forward and candidates disappear through the door. "Don't let the wind sway your steps."

Two candidates ahead of us, a woman sobs as her partner rips her away from a young man, the couple breaking from the line, retreating in tears down the hillside toward the crowd of loved ones lining the roads. There are no other parents ahead of us, only a few dozen candidates moving toward the roll-keepers.

"Keep your eyes on the stones ahead of you and don't look down," Mira says, the lines of her face tightening. "Arms out for balance. If the pack slips, drop it. Better it falls than you."

I look behind us, where it seems hundreds have filed in within the span of minutes. "Maybe I should let them go first," I whisper as panic fists my heart. What the hell am I doing?

"No," Mira answers. "The longer you wait on those steps"—she motions toward the tower—"the greater your fear has a chance to grow. Cross the parapet before the terror owns you."

The line moves, and the bell chimes again. It's eight o'clock.

Sure enough, the crowd of thousands behind us has separated fully into their chosen quadrants, all lined up to sign the roll and begin their service.

"Focus," Mira snaps, and I whip my head forward. "This might sound harsh, but don't seek friendships in there, Violet. Forge alliances."

There are only two ahead of us now—a woman with a full pack, whose high cheekbones and oval face remind me of renderings of Amari, the queen of the gods. Her dark brown hair is worn in several rows of short braids that just touch the equally dark skin of her neck. The second is the muscular blond man with the woman crying over him. He's carrying an even bigger rucksack.

I look around the pair toward the roll-keeping desk, and my eyes widen. "Is he…?" I whisper.

Mira glances and mutters a curse. "A separatist's kid? Yep. See that shimmering mark that starts on the top of his wrist? It's a relic from the rebellion."

I lift my eyebrows in surprise. The only relics I've ever heard of are when a dragon uses magic to mark the skin of their bonded rider. But those relics

are a symbol of honor and power and generally in the shape of the dragon who gifted them. These marks are swirls and slashes that feel more like a warning than a claiming.

"A *dragon* did that?" I whisper.

She nods. "Mom says General Melgren's dragon did it to all of them when he executed their parents, but she wasn't exactly open to further discussion on the topic. Nothing like punishing the kids to deter more parents from committing treason."

It seems…cruel, but the first rule of living at Basgiath is never question a dragon. They tend to cremate anyone they find rude.

"Most of the marked kids who carry rebellion relics are from Tyrrendor, of course, but there are a few whose parents turned traitor from the other provinces—" The blood drains from her face, and she grips the straps of my pack, turning me to face her. "I just remembered." Her voice drops, and I lean in, my heart jumping at the urgency in her tone. "Stay the hell away from Xaden Riorson."

The air rushes from my lungs. That name…

"*That* Xaden Riorson," she confirms, fear lacing her gaze. "He's a third-year, and he *will* kill you the second he finds out who you are."

"His father was the Great Betrayer. He *led* the rebellion," I say quietly. "What is Xaden doing here?"

"All the children of the leaders were conscripted as punishment for their parents' crimes," Mira whispers as we shuffle sideways, moving with the line. "Mom told me they never expected Riorson to make it past the parapet. Then they figured a cadet would kill him, but once his dragon chose him…" She shakes her head. "Well, there's nothing much that can be done then. He's risen to the rank of wingleader."

"That's bullshit," I seethe.

"He's sworn allegiance to Navarre, but I don't think that will stop him where you're concerned. Once you get across the parapet—because you *will* make it across—find Dain. He'll put you in his squad, and we'll just hope it's far from Riorson." She grips my straps tighter. "Stay. Away. From. Him."

"Noted." I nod.

"Next," a voice calls from behind the wooden table that bears the rolls of the Riders Quadrant. The marked rider I don't know is seated next to a

scribe I do, and Captain Fitzgibbons's silver eyebrows rise over his weathered face. "Violet Sorrengail?"

I nod, picking up the quill and signing my name on the next empty line on the roll.

"But I thought you were meant for the Scribe Quadrant," Captain Fitzgibbons says softly.

I envy his cream-colored tunic, unable to find the words.

"General Sorrengail chose otherwise," Mira supplies.

Sadness fills the older man's eyes. "Pity. You had so much promise."

"By the gods," the rider next to Captain Fitzgibbons says. "You're Mira Sorrengail?" His jaw drops, and I can smell his hero worship from here.

"I am." She nods. "This is my sister, Violet. She'll be a first-year."

"If she survives the parapet." Someone behind me snickers. "Wind just might blow her right off."

"You fought at Strythmore," the rider behind the desk says with awe. "They gave you the Order of the Talon for taking out that battery behind enemy lines."

The snickering stops.

"As I was saying." Mira puts a hand at the small of my back. "This is my sister, Violet."

"You know the way." The Captain nods and points to the open door into the turret. It looks ominously dark in there, and I fight the urge to run like hell.

"I know the way," she assures him, leading me past the table so the snickering asshole behind me can sign the roll.

We pause at the doorway and turn toward each other.

"Don't die, Violet. I'd hate to be an only child." She grins and walks away, sauntering past the line of gawking candidates as word spreads of exactly who she is and what she's done.

"Tough to live up to that," the woman ahead of me says from just inside the tower.

"It is," I agree, gripping the straps of my rucksack and heading into the darkness. My eyes adjust quickly to the dim light coming in through the equidistant windows along the curved staircase.

"Sorrengail as in…?" the woman asks, looking over her shoulder as we begin to climb the hundreds of stairs that lead to our possible deaths.

"Yep." There's no railing, so I keep my hand on the stone wall as we rise higher and higher.

"The general?" the blond guy ahead of us asks.

"The same one," I answer, offering him a quick smile. Anyone whose mother holds on that tight can't be *that* bad, right?

"Wow. Nice leathers, too." He smiles back.

"Thanks. They're courtesy of my sister."

"I wonder how many candidates have fallen off the edge of the steps and died before they even reach the parapet," the woman says, glancing down the center of the staircase as we climb higher.

"Two last year." I tilt my head when she glances back. "Well, three if you count the girl one of the guys landed on."

The woman's brown eyes flare, but she turns back around and keeps climbing. "How many steps are there?" she asks.

"Two hundred and fifty," I answer, and we climb in silence for another five minutes.

"Not too bad," she says with a bright smile as we near the top and the line comes to a halt. "I'm Rhiannon Matthias, by the way."

"Dylan," the blond guy responds with an enthusiastic wave.

"Violet." I give them a tense smile of my own, blatantly ignoring Mira's earlier suggestion that I avoid friendships and only forge alliances.

"I feel like I've been waiting my entire life for this day." Dylan shifts his pack on his back. "Can you believe we actually get to do this? It's a dream come true."

Right. Naturally, every other candidate but me is excited to be here. This is the only quadrant at Basgiath that doesn't accept conscripts—only volunteers.

"I can't fucking wait." Rhiannon's smile widens. "I mean, who wouldn't want to ride a *dragon*?"

Me. Not that it doesn't sound fun in theory. It does. It's just the abhorrent odds of surviving to graduation that sour my stomach.

"Do your parents approve?" Dylan asks. "Because my mom's been begging me to change my mind for *months*. I keep telling her that I'll have better chances for advancement as a rider, but she wanted me to enter the Healer Quadrant."

"Mine always knew I wanted this, so they've been pretty supportive.

Besides, they have my twin to dote on. Raegan's already living her dream, married and expecting a baby." Rhiannon glances back at me. "What about you? Let me guess. With a name like Sorrengail, I bet you were the first to volunteer this year."

"I was more like volun-told." My answer is far less enthusiastic than hers.

"Gotcha."

"And riders do get way better perks than other officers," I say to Dylan as the line moves upward again. The snickering candidate behind me catches up, sweating and red. *Look who isn't snickering now.* "Better pay, more leniency with the uniform policy," I continue. No one gives a shit what riders wear as long as it's black. The only rules that apply to riders are the ones I've memorized from the Codex.

"And the right to call yourself a supreme badass," Rhiannon adds.

"That too," I agree. "Pretty sure they issue you an ego with your flight leathers."

"Plus, I've heard that riders are allowed to marry sooner than the other quadrants," Dylan adds.

"True. Right after graduation." If we survive. "I think it has something to do with wanting to continue bloodlines." Most successful riders are legacies.

"Or because we tend to die sooner than the other quadrants," Rhiannon muses.

"I'm not dying," Dylan says with way more confidence than I feel as he tugs a necklace from under his tunic to reveal a ring dangling from the chain. "She said it would be bad luck to propose before I left, so we're waiting until graduation." He kisses the ring and tucks the chain back under his collar. "The next three years are going to be long ones, but they'll be worth it."

I keep my sigh to myself, though that might be the most romantic thing I've ever heard.

"You might make it across the parapet," the guy behind us sneers. "This one here is a breeze away from the bottom of the ravine."

I roll my eyes.

"Shut up and focus on yourself," Rhiannon snaps, her feet clicking against the stone as we climb.

The top comes into sight, the doorway full of muddled light. Mira was

right. Those clouds are going to wreak havoc on us, and we have to be on the other side of the parapet before they do.

Another step, another tap of Rhiannon's feet.

"Let me see your boots," I say quietly so the jerk behind me can't hear.

Her brow puckers, and confusion fills her brown eyes, but she shows me the soles. They're smooth, just like the ones I was wearing earlier. My stomach sinks like a rock.

The line starts moving again, pausing when we're only a few feet from the opening. "What size are your feet?" I ask.

"What?" Rhiannon blinks at me.

"Your feet. What size are they?"

"Eight," she answers, two lines forming between her brows.

"I'm a seven," I say quickly. "It will hurt like hell, but I want you to take my left boot. Trade with me." I have a dagger in the right one.

"I'm sorry?" She looks at me like I've lost my mind, and maybe I have.

"These are rider boots. They'll grip the stone better. Your toes will be scrunched and generally miserable, but at least you'll have a shot at not falling off if that rain hits."

Rhiannon glances toward the open door—and the darkening sky—then back to me. "You're willing to trade a boot?"

"Just until we get on the other side." I look through the open door. Three candidates are already walking across the parapet, their arms stretched out wide. "But we have to be quick. It's almost our turn."

Rhiannon purses her lips in debate for a second, then agrees, and we swap left boots. I barely finish lacing up before the line moves again, and the guy behind me shoves my lower back, sending me staggering onto the platform and into the open air.

"Let's go. Some of us have things to do on the other side." His voice grates on my last freaking nerve.

"You are not worth the effort right now," I mutter, gaining my balance as the wind whips at my skin, the midsummer morning thick with humidity. *Good call on the braid, Mira.*

The top of the turret is bare, the crenelations of stone rising and falling along the circular structure at the height of my chest and doing nothing to obscure the view. The ravine and its river below suddenly feel very, very far. How many wagons do they have waiting down there? Five? Six? I know

the stats. The parapet claims roughly fifteen percent of the rider candidates. Every trial in the quadrant—including this one—is designed to test a cadet's ability to ride. If someone can't manage to walk the windy length of the slim stone bridge, then they sure as hell can't keep their balance and fight on the back of a dragon.

And as for the death rate? I guess every other rider thinks the risk is worth the glory—or has the arrogance to think they won't fall.

I'm not in either camp.

Nausea has me holding my stomach, and I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth as I walk the edge behind Rhiannon and Dylan, my fingers skimming the stonework as we wind our way toward the parapet.

Three riders wait at the entrance, which is nothing more than a gaping hole in the wall of the turret. One with ripped-off sleeves records names as candidates step out onto the treacherous crossing. Another, who's shaved all his hair with the exception of a strip down the top center, instructs Dylan as he moves into position, patting his chest like the ring hidden there will bring him luck. I hope it does.

The third turns in my direction and my heart simply…stops.

He's tall, with windblown black hair and dark brows. The line of his jaw is strong and covered by warm tawny skin and dark stubble, and when he folds his arms across his torso, the muscles in his chest and arms ripple, moving in a way that makes me swallow. And his eyes… His eyes are the shade of gold-flecked onyx. The contrast is startling, jaw-dropping even—everything about him is. His features are so harsh that they look carved, and yet they're astonishingly perfect, like an artist worked a lifetime sculpting him, and at least a year of that was spent on his mouth.

He's the most exquisite man I've ever seen.

And living in the war college means I've seen a *lot* of men.

Even the diagonal scar that bisects his left eyebrow and marks the top corner of his cheek only makes him hotter. Flaming hot. Scorching hot. Gets-you-into-trouble-and-you-like-it level of hot. Suddenly, I can't remember exactly why Mira told me not to fuck around outside my year group.

"See you two on the other side!" Dylan says over his shoulder with an excited grin before stepping onto the parapet, his arms spread wide.

"Ready for the next one, Riorson?" the rider with the ripped sleeves says.

Xaden Riorson?

"You ready for this, Sorrengail?" Rhiannon asks, moving forward.

The black-haired rider snaps his gaze to mine, turning fully toward me, and my heart thunders for all the wrong reasons. A rebellion relic, curving in dips and swirls, starts at his bare left wrist, then disappears under his black uniform to appear again at his collar, where it stretches and swirls up his neck, stopping at his jawline.

"Oh shit," I whisper, and his eyes narrow, as if he can hear me over the howl of wind that rips at my secured braid.

"Sorrengail?" He steps toward me, and I look up…and up.

Good gods, I don't even reach his collarbone. He's massive. He has to be more than four inches over six feet tall.

I feel exactly what Mira called me—*fragile*—but I nod once, and the shining onyx of his eyes transforms to cold, unadulterated hatred. I can almost taste the loathing wafting off him like a bitter cologne.

"Violet?" Rhiannon asks, moving forward.

"You're General Sorrengail's youngest." His voice is deep and accusatory.

"You're Fen Riorson's son," I counter, the certainty of this revelation settling in my bones. I lift my chin and do my best to lock every muscle in my body so I don't start trembling.

He will *kill you the second he finds out who you are.* Mira's words bounce around my skull, and fear knots in my throat. He's going to throw me over the edge. He's going to pick me up and drop me right off this turret. I'm never going to get the chance to even walk the parapet. I'll die being exactly what my mother's always danced around calling me—weak.

Xaden sucks in a deep breath, and the muscle in his jaw flexes once. Twice. "Your mother captured my father and oversaw his execution."

Wait. Like *he* has the only right to hatred here? Rage races through my veins. "Your father killed my older brother. Seems like we're even."

"Hardly." His glaring gaze strokes over me like he's memorizing every detail or looking for any weakness. "Your sister is a rider. Guess that explains the leathers."

"Guess so." I hold his glare, as if winning this staring competition will gain me entrance to the quadrant instead of crossing the parapet behind him. Either way, I'm getting across. Mira isn't going to lose both her siblings.

His hands clench into fists, and he tenses.

I prepare for the strike. He might throw me off this tower, but I won't make it easy for him.

"You all right?" Rhiannon asks, her gaze jumping between Xaden and me.

He glances at her. "You're friends?"

"We met on the stairs," she says, squaring her shoulders.

He looks down, noting our mismatched shoes, and arches a brow. His hands relax. "Interesting."

"Are you going to kill me?" I lift my chin another inch.

His gaze clashes with mine as the sky opens and rain falls in a deluge, soaking my hair, my leathers, and the stones around us in seconds.

A scream rends the air, and Rhiannon and I both jerk our attention to the parapet just in time to see Dylan slip.

I gasp, my heart jolting into my throat.

He catches himself, hooking his arms over the stone bridge as his feet kick beneath him, scrambling for a purchase that isn't there.

"Pull yourself up, Dylan!" Rhiannon shouts.

"Oh gods!" My hand flies to cover my mouth, but he loses his grip on the water-slick stone and falls, disappearing from view. The wind and rain steal any sound his body might make in the valley below. They steal the sound of my muffled cry, too.

Xaden never takes his eyes from me, watching silently with a look I can't interpret as I bring my horrified gaze back to his.

"Why would I waste my energy killing you when the parapet will do it for me?" A wicked smile curves his lips. "Your turn."

A dragon without its rider is a tragedy.
A rider without their dragon is dead.

– ARTICLE ONE, SECTION ONE, THE DRAGON RIDER'S CODEX

Twenty-year-old Violet Sorrengail was supposed to enter the Scribe Quadrant, living a quiet life among books and history at Basgiath War College. Now she is ordered to join the hundreds of candidates striving to become the army's elite: dragon riders. But when you're smaller than everyone else and your body is brittle, death is only a heartbeat away... because dragons don't bond to "fragile" humans. They incinerate them.

With fewer dragons willing to bond than cadets, most would kill Violet to better their own chances of success. The rest would kill her just for being her mother's daughter – like Xaden Riorson, the most powerful and ruthless wingleader in the Riders Quadrant.

Everyone at Basgiath War College has an agenda and Violet will need every edge her wits can give her just to see the next sunrise – because once you enter, there are only two ways out: graduate or die.

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