

# *Ascendant*

*The lines of battle are drawn in  
black and white*



*Kimberly Grey*

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*By Kimberly Grey*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*To Sunflower and Rose*  
*Bloom brightly no matter how fierce the storm*

# *Chapter*

## *1*

Grace hates the dungeons. They're dark and cold and, worst of all, underground. Her wings bristle, and she tries not to imagine what would happen if the mountain collapsed on them. It has stood for centuries. It will not fall now.

She has been to the dungeons many times before. She should be used to it by now, but they remain oppressive and intimidating. Ahead of her, Father walks with the same easy pace as always, as though he has all the time in the world to get where he is going.

She all but jogs to keep up with him. She has to take two strides to match each one of his, even with his leisurely pace. The warden is waiting for them outside of the room, a thin woman with the pale skin and sleek wings of Mountain Clan. She offers Father a bow but ignores Grace.

Father waves away the gesture. "You have information."

"Yes," the warden replies. "This one was captured by a patrol several weeks ago." She gestures to the door behind her.

Grace feels her heart skip at the thought of what waits beyond it. She bites her tongue and focuses on Father's conversation. He will ask her about this later to be sure that she learned what she was supposed to. She isn't sure what, exactly, the lesson is meant to be this time, there are many things she might learn here.

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“What did he know?” Father is asking.

“Nothing particularly useful,” the warden says. “He was only a border guard, said a few things about troops moving to the east.”

“They always speak of troop movements,” Father says. He doesn’t seem interested, but Grace’s mind is racing.

“But—” Grace begins, and then cuts herself off, too late.

Father and the warden both turn to look at her.

Father’s face is blank as she bites her lip. He doesn’t like it when she interrupts. She is meant to be silent and learn, not interject her own thoughts, but this is important.

“Sorry,” she says.

“What do you think is so important?” Father asks. His voice is neutral, but she knows she has disappointed him. She swallows hard and tries to speak without her voice trembling.

“A report came across your desk just this morning,” she says. Father lets her read all of his reports so she can see the right way to write her own and judge the importance of others. “Allegiance is planning an attack on the eastern border in a few weeks’ time.”

The Black-Wings should have no way to know what Allegiance is planning, and no way to know they need to shore up their eastern defenses.

For one heart-stopping second, Father’s face remains blank. Perhaps she misread the report, or maybe she should have waited until later to tell him about it.

Then he smiles.

It is like seeing the sun come out after the long, dark months of winter. “Very well done,” he says, and he puts a warm hand on

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her shoulder. “Come, let’s see what our guest has to say for himself.”

*See? she wants to say to him. Look at how well I use your training. I can do whatever you need me to. I can live up to the title you have given me. I can be the Saboteur.*

Grace follows him eagerly, the warmth of his hand on her shoulder nearly enough to make her forget just what waits on the other side of the door. For a brief moment, she hesitates.

“Dear One?” Father asks.

“I’m fine,” she says immediately. She only just managed to keep out of trouble for interrupting him. She cannot be weak on top of that. “I just tripped.” It is a pitiful excuse, but Father lets it pass.

His hand returns to her shoulder. “The floors are a bit uneven in some areas,” he says, then he guides her to stand before the prisoner.

There isn’t a mark on the man, despite the fact that he is their enemy. They aren’t the Black-Wings, that they need to resort to torture to get their information. A shudder threatens to run down her spine at the thought of the stories she has heard about what the Black-Wings do to their prisoners.

Even though he is chained, she shuffles a step closer to Father.

It makes her feel weak. She is meant to be a soldier; she should be able to stand in front of their enemies. She had thought she would be ready, but now that the sight is before her, she knows that she isn’t.

If not for his wings, she could almost imagine that he was any normal man off of the street. There is nothing overtly monstrous about his face, nothing that would give away the evil that lies behind his eyes.

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His face isn't what matters, though; his wings will always tell the truth that the rest of him conceals.

In the dim light, his feathers almost merge with the shadows. Her own wings bristle at the sight. He isn't the first Black-Wing she has encountered—she has been to the dungeon before—but still her feathers prickle with unease. The only white on his wings are the three wind feathers at his wing wrist. A reminder of what he could have been, just as the black of her own is a reminder of what she could be, if she allowed herself to fall as he has.

She doesn't know how the Black-Wings tricked everyone into believing they were good for so long. The Black-Wing's nature should have been clear to any who looked at them. She wonders if they had tricked even the humans—the First-Born—on earth, or if they had known what the Guardians were blind to.

She isn't really supposed to listen to tales, but sometimes she just happens to overhear them. Her favorites say that the humans, the First-Born were wiser than any Guardian. It is hard to believe beings like that could be tricked by anyone, even the Black-Wings.

She supposed that if the Black-Wings were good at one thing, it would be telling lies.

“Your information has been most helpful,” Father says to the Black-Wing. “But my daughter has brought up an interesting question.”

His hand squeezes her shoulder, and Grace leans into him. She is finally able to pry her eyes away from the Black-Wing to smile at him. He returns the smile with a proud look.

“She would like to know how it is your queen knows to bolster defenses on the eastern border. I must admit, I am curious as well.”

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The Black-Wing clenches his jaw and jerks his chin into the air in silent defiance.

“Well?” Father asks.

The Black-Wing maintains his stony silence.

The warden steps into the room. “I will see what I can find, Spymaster,” she says, “but I fear we may have a traitor in the Citadel.”

Father’s lip curls. “And one high in the chain of command,” he agrees. “A field commander at the very least. See what this one knows, and then ask the others.”

“If they know nothing?”

“Ask again.” Father nudges Grace out of the room ahead of him. She is glad not to have to expose her back to the Black-Wing.

Grace watches Father on the way up out of the dungeons. He doesn’t *seem* angry now that he knows why she interrupted, but she did still speak when she was meant to be quiet.

“I’m sorry for interrupting.”

“Dear One.” He beckons her to his side. She swallows and obeys. Despite the temptation, she doesn’t drag her feet—she knows better than that.

When she reaches him, he tilts her chin up so she is looking him in the eyes. His hand is somehow even warmer than the hearth in her room. “You did very well,” he says. “I am *so* proud of you.”

She tries to school her face into the same dignified mask he wears. “Thank you, Father.” Her lips pull up into a smile regardless of her efforts. She tries to memorize him like this, happy and proud of her; she never wants to forget this moment. She wants to live in it forever. She wants time itself to stop so that she never has the chance to disappoint Father ever again.

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“You are truly the best student I could ask for,” Father says.

She dips her head humbly. “I owe it to your teaching, Father.”

Father smiles approvingly and pats her shoulder. “Run along for now,” he says. “You’ve earned a day off.”

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As nice as it is skip the sparring fields and the boring, repetitive work of learning forms, she doesn’t actually know what to do with herself. Her days are meticulously scheduled with very little down time, especially during the summer, to make the best of the warmth and daylight.

She takes off, pushing hard against the air, and rises to the top of the White Mountain, where the palace is perched. She should take advantage of this rare opportunity and do something fun, something that has nothing to do with the Black-Wings and the war.

Instead, she angles her wings and glides down to the open double doors of the palace. Her landing is soft and easy—she barely has to bend her knees to absorb the impact. This is a place of quiet respect. It wouldn’t do to disturb anyone else with a rough landing.

The Memorium is deserted when she steps in. Endless rows of tokens and weapons, all that is left of those who have fallen. She doesn’t know anyone here, yet, but death is inevitable in war.

Perhaps, for someone, death looms closer than ever.

*A traitor in the Citadel.* Even in her mind, it seems impossible. How could anyone side with the Black-Wings? After all they’d done? Despite what they were?

But it isn’t impossible; it’s real, and she was the one to discover them. That should make her happy, the thought that she uncovered a traitor and likely saved unknowable lives by telling Father.

Instead, she just feels confused, and maybe a little bit scared.

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She wanders through the maze of the Memorium. Her footsteps echo in the cavernous room. So many dead, brave soldiers, good people. And someone had betrayed them for the *Black-Wings*.

For *Fallen*.

She shudders at the thought. The dark feathers of the Black-Wing prisoner flash behind her eyes, and she cannot help flaring her wind feathers, as though he is hovering over her. Of course, the air is still, aside from a light breeze that winds its way through the windows from the far side of the room.

A low humming disturbs her thoughts. She turns and finds that the Memorium is no longer empty. A man stands before an ornate sword hung on the wall at the back of the room.

As though he can feel her eyes on him, the man stops humming and turns to her. “Hello, youngling.” The wrinkles around his eyes deepen as he smiles at her.

Grace dips her head. “Hello.”

His smile fades. “Are you visiting someone?”

“No,” she says, surprised, and then scrambles for something less rude. “I was just...thinking.”

The man nods understandingly. “It is a good place for heavy thoughts.”

“Are you visiting someone?” Grace asks, even though it is obvious that he is. She finds that she wants to talk to him. On some level, she thinks he is familiar, as though he has been hovering in the background of her life but has never spoken before.

The man gestures to the sword hung on the wall. “Someone I once knew,” he says, voice warm, though his smile is sad. “Her name was Haven.”

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Grace's eyebrows fly to her hairline. "I didn't know she had a token here."

"Not many do. Justice prefers to do his mourning in other ways. I come by every once in a while to make sure that it is well kept."

Grace looks at the sword with new eyes. The blade is notched at the base, and there are a few scratches too deep to be buffed out. She wonders if history would be different if Haven had been carrying it the night she was murdered.

The man takes a cloth from his belt and pulls the sword down from the wall. "There's not many of us left who actually knew her," he muses as he turns the sword this way and that, looking for any new damage.

"What was she like?" Grace asks, half-afraid that the man will snap at her and drive her away, but too curious to restrain herself.

He doesn't get angry though. He smiles a sad, wistful smile and begins polishing the sword. "She was like the sun, warm and so bright you could barely stand to look at her. Some said that she lived life too fast." His smile falters. "I suppose, in the end, it's a good thing if she did."

"Were she and Justice really twins?" Grace can't help asking. The most common rumors said they were, but rumors weren't trustworthy.

"They were." The man nods. "I was never sure about all of that 'twins hearing each other's thoughts' business before I met them, but if you saw them on the battlefield, you couldn't doubt it."

*And the Black-Wings killed her.* Like they had killed so many others. Like the traitor would kill people. Grace swallows. In five hundred years of war, have they come any closer to defeating the Black-Wings than they were when Haven was killed? Or are they doomed to struggle against them forever?

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“Do you want to hold it?” the man asks, gesturing with the sword as though to hand it to her.

“No, I...I couldn’t.” Grace backs away.

The man smiles. “She wouldn’t mind.”

Almost against her will, Grace finds her hands wrapping around the hilt of the sword. It is still warm from the man’s skin, as though Haven had just set it down. On the blade, there is the imprint of one of her feathers, forever binding the weapon to her. Grace traces the edge of it, entranced.

Her eyes, reflected in the metal, stare back at her.

“If you could end the war,” the man asks, his voice muted and far away, “would you?”

“Yes,” Grace replies, almost absently. “Whatever it took.”

The man might reply, but his voice is muffled and far away. Time seems to move both faster than normal, and slower.

A hand touches her shoulder. “Are you alright?” the man asks.

The world rushes back, snapping into place as though nothing had happened. “I must have gotten lost in thought,” Grace says, but she can’t remember thinking anything.

The man takes the sword from her and returns it to the wall. “Thank you for indulging an old man’s desire to tell stories.”

Grace dips her head. “Thank you for telling me.”

The man smiles at her and opens his mouth, likely to say goodbye, but another voice calls out, “Grace.” She turns and finds a Desert Clan messenger standing a short distance away. “Your father wishes to see you in the king’s chambers. He’s been looking for you.”

Grace feels the blood rush from her face. How long has she been wandering around the Memorium? “I’m sorry, I’ve got to go,”

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she says to the old man, and darts out of the room. She leaps into the sky the moment she clears the door.

Grace puts more power in the next stroke of her wings, pushing herself to the limits of her speed. But she is no descendant of Mountain Clan; she can only go so fast.

*It's not fast enough!* a panicky part of her mind says.

How long has Father been looking for her? Hours? Even minutes would be too long. And she is being summoned to the king's chambers. It would be bad enough if Father simply wanted to see her in his office, but making him wait in front of the king must be nearly unforgivable.

Not that the king is an impatient man; she met him once, when she was young. She had spent a lot of time in those days wandering the palace, seeing what places she could get into. Her sole visit to his office is a fond memory.

The king isn't the one who is going to be angry with her or, more accurately, disappointed in her. Father is.

She dips one wing and half folds her feathers, sweeping into a turning dive that brings her to the main balcony of the palace. She forgets to shed speed, and her boots skid across the smooth stone. She has to throw out her arms and flare her wings to keep from sliding into the doors.

The guards on either side of the doors don't react, but she knows there is no way they didn't see her clumsy landing. The day just keeps getting better.

*Stupid, amateur mistake.*

Grace takes a deep breath, folds her wings and settles her feathers. She dusts off her armor and closes her eyes. *Please let this go well*, she prays. *Please don't let him be too angry*.

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She pushes open the doors and steps into the hall outside of the council chambers. The doors are shut tight, so she stands against the opposite wall and waits. She is still breathing hard from her flight, and her hands are shaking from adrenaline. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply; she must have herself back under control when she is called.

Appearing in the king's court wild eyed and disheveled would be almost as bad as being late. *Power comes from the appearance of strength.* One of Father's many valuable lessons.

By the time her breath evens out, the balcony doors open again. A flight walks through with a woman at their head, her dark skin and broad wings hallmarks of Desert Clan ancestry. They watch her curiously as they join her against the wall.

They don't line up and wait silently the way they are meant to. Instead, they stand facing one another in a clump, talking and nudging each other with easy smiles and quiet laughter.

*Undisciplined, she can imagine Father saying with a scowl. She hasn't behaved so poorly since her flight feathers came in. That is the difference between you and them, part of her says. Father made sure that you are the best, that you exemplify everything a warrior should be.*

She keeps her face carefully blank even as their conversation drifts to her ears. Perhaps they are here for the same reason she is. Any opportunity to use her training, the gifts Father has given her, is welcome. She will need these skills when he finally allows her into the field, a day that must be getting closer by the hour.

“Serenity says that Observants have been going around asking about suspicious behavior,” one of them says. He is of Forest Clan, likely the flight's scout. “Sounds like there might be a traitor.”

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“I heard there’d been a fight down near the dungeons. A general or something found with suspicious letters,” a Mountain Clan woman says.

“Chivalry, right? I heard that the guards confronted him but he escaped the city,” the scout says.

The other Mountain Clan warrior says, “If he was a traitor, he got what he deserved.” He scowls. His sleek wings bristle, wind feathers tilting sharply back. A medallion gleams on his armor. *Wind Weaver*. Whatever they have been called here for, it is serious. Wind Weavers aren’t called out for just anything.

“Hush,” their leader says, looking to the door. Grace realizes that it has opened.

“Come, Dear One,” Father says. Grace steps smoothly away from the wall and follows him through the door.

The room beyond is a huge dome carved from white marble. At the center of the room, the ceiling is fifty feet above her head. A sturdy table has taken over the duties of the ornate throne that sits abandoned on its dais at the opposite side of the room.

Justice stands up as she approaches, and Grace crosses her wrists and bends at the waist. “My king.” She bows deeply to him. She wonders just why she has been allowed into this meeting. Is it really about the traitor? Has he been caught already, as the flight outside said?

There are always rumors running around the Citadel. Father says it is because the soldiers don’t have enough work to keep their minds busy, so they resort to making up tales. Grace thinks that his work is trying to figure out the truth of the latest rumors floating around the Citadel as much as it is trying to ferret out the Black-Wings’ next move.

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Her eyes dart to him. His face is impassive, and his wings give nothing away. Grace takes a deep breath and tries to keep from fidgeting beneath his stare. The moment seems to stretch forever, but it must only be a second.

“Welcome, little one,” Justice says, and he gestures her to a chair beside Father. “I asked that you be allowed to sit in on this meeting. I understand you were the one to bring up the suspicion of a traitor?”

Grace can feel her wings lift with pride and tries to keep them under control. “I was, my king,” she says with dignity. She glances to Father again, and there is a faint smile on his face. She feels her heart swell with pride.

“Then I owe you my gratitude,” Justice says, drawing her eyes back to him. “You have done a great service to us all. We must always be watchful for the plots of the Black-Wings.” The smile slips away from his face, and his lip curls into a bitter snarl. “They will forever seek to drag us into their darkness. You must watch for their evil in everything.” As he stares into her eyes intently, she feels her wings prickle. She wishes he would look away; there is a dangerous spark in his eyes, like he is seeking treachery even in her.

Grace freezes for a moment. This isn’t the kind man she remembers but someone else entirely. “I will, my king,” she says, and bows to him again.

Thankfully, he seems to accept this, and again he motions her to the chair beside Father. “Of course you will,” he says. The darkness is gone from his eyes, but she still cannot bring herself to meet his gaze again. “You’re a loyal girl. Concord has raised you well.”

Grace sinks into the chair beside Father and, on impulse, wraps her fingers around his hand beneath the table. His hand does not grip hers back, but he doesn’t move it away.

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Of course, sitting next to Father puts her across from the other person at the table: Allegiance, Justice's Air Commander and Grace's birth mother, her dame.

Allegiance is studiously reading the papers in front of her, as though she hadn't been aware of the conversation going on around her. As though she isn't aware of Grace at all. Grace crushes the part of her that remembers the cold, lonely days she spent at Allegiance's side while her dame was supposedly absorbed in paperwork.

Even now she imagines she can feel a phantom edge of Allegiance's resentment as she turns the page. Grace shoves aside the part of her that wonders what she did to earn it.

Grace inherited much of her appearance from Allegiance. They both have the same coppery skin and dark hair that marks them as Forest Clan. They even share the same short stature. The only physical trait she doesn't share with her dame is eye color: where Allegiance's are a light green, Grace's have always been the cloudy gray of her sire.

A quiet part of her wonders what else she inherited from Noble. If she got most of her looks from her dame, is her personality more akin to her sire's? She shuts that part of herself away as quickly as it popped up. It doesn't make any difference to wonder about such things. Noble died before she was born, and besides, she doesn't need her sire—she has her father.

Grace turns her eyes away from Allegiance and glances at him. He is looking at her as well, his icy blue eyes taking in every detail of her appearance. No doubt he is all too aware of the rush she'd arrived in, despite the care she had taken to make herself look presentable.

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Their lack of blood relation is obvious. Father is a descendant of Mountain Clan, and it is apparent in his pale skin and hair, the sleek shape of his wings. Narrow and built for speed, while Grace's are rounded and made for maneuverability.

“Now then, Concord,” Justice says, “you were outlining the known patrol routes?”

“Yes,” Father says, leaning forward to trace his finger over the lines drawn on the map. “These are the previous routes from around two months ago, and these are the newer ones. As you can see, the Black-Wings are expanding their territory at an incredible rate...”

Grace’s eyes drift away from the map. She already knows this—she was there when the Observants brought the news to Father. Her eyes slide over to Justice, whose expression is troubled as he listens to Father speak. The furrows of his brow only deepen the wrinkles on his face.

Centuries ago the Black-Wings had lived among the White-Wings, a creeping disease, corrupting and turning. Justice was the one to uncover their lies, to expose them as the Fallen Guardians they were. In retaliation, the Black-Wings began the war to kill any and all White-Wings, to see the fall of everything they stood for.

Grace is not supposed to listen to the tales the soldiers like to tell of the Burning. Father thinks they are too embellished and contain little of the truth. She knows that he is probably right, but she still likes to hear them.

If there is one thing in common among all of the stories, it is Justice and, of course, Haven. The first twins born since the days of the clans. They had tried to warn people about the treachery of the Black-Wings, and the Black-Wings murdered Haven for revenge.

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From there, the war had spiraled out of control, too fast for anyone to stop. The Black-Wings murdered the queen, Clarity, when she wouldn't open a passage for them to earth, where they would no doubt have established themselves as gods over the humans, the First-Born.

It was Justice who pushed them out of the Citadel. He must have been younger then, because Grace can hardly imagine him taking to the field of battle now.

His hair is nearly as white as his wings, and unlike Father, he allows it to hang free instead of trapping it in a tail. It contrasts with the deep brown of his wrinkled skin.

He has to be at least eight hundred years old. Possibly even nine hundred, if anyone can live that long.

Father is a few centuries younger than Justice, but they've been working beside each other since before the Burning. Grace has heard guards say that he has been the Spymaster for as long as Justice has been king.

Allegiance is the second youngest, with her unlined face and bright eyes. At only a hundred and forty years old, Grace feels terribly young sitting with all of the gathered centuries of experience at the table.

“If your Observants could do their jobs *properly*,” Allegiance says, pulling Grace from her thoughts, “then perhaps the traitor wouldn't have escaped.” Allegiance's wings bristle and her wind feathers tilt back, she glares across the table at Father.

Grace glances to Father. He is silent, his face as unreadable as stone, but she can feel the tension in his body. She pulls her hand back to her own lap, hoping to avoid his attention. She swallows hard, her heart beating too fast.

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When father replies, his voice is low and smooth, his voice low and smooth. His anger is like one of the northern sea serpents swimming beneath the ice. There is no way to know when or where it will appear until it explodes out of the tight control he keeps over it. “Perhaps, you would be kind enough to remember that security within the Citadel is *your* responsibility.” His eyes are narrow slits, and the very air around him seems to crackle. “Perhaps you would like to explain how there came to be a traitor so high within the command of your *own* forces before you criticize me for the management of mine.” His voice is a low hiss, and Grace finds herself leaning so far away from him that she nearly falls from her chair.

Her feathers press tight against her wings, and her jaw aches from how hard she is clenching her teeth. She cannot make her eyes move away from Father. His hands grip the edge of the table so tightly that his knuckles are almost as white as the stone of the mountain.

“Enough,” Justice snaps, and Grace nearly gasps. She had all but forgotten that the was there. “This is exactly what the Black-Wings would want, us at each other’s throats.”

Father sits back, his face calm once again, as though the rage had never been there. “Of course.” She could almost convince herself that she had imagined his anger. Allegiance is still glaring across the table though.

“Allegiance,” Justice says, his voice low and almost as angry as Father’s had been.

“My apologies,” she says through clenched teeth.

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Grace doesn't allow herself to relax. She knows that Father is still angry, and if she makes any slip now, she will be the one bear the brunt of his temper, not Allegiance.

"Regardless of who is to blame, the traitor has escaped the Citadel," Justice says. He sweeps his gaze over the table, daring someone to begin the argument anew. "A party must be sent to pursue him." He motions to the guard beside the door, who ushers in the flight from the hallway.

They don't seem to pick up on the lingering tension as they bow and fill the remaining seats. The Desert Clan woman who seems to be their leader sits at the end of the table across from Justice.

"No doubt, you will have heard the rumors of a traitor in the Citadel," Justice says.

"Yes, my king," the flight leader replies. "Though how anyone could betray our cause is beyond me."

Grace nods silent agreement. What could possess a person to turn their back on the White-Wings? What could the Black-Wings offer them but death and damnation?

There are only three laws that separate the White-Wings from the Black. Three simple laws that define the Fallen, that govern the righteous:

*Do not willfully harm the innocent.*

*Do not knowingly aid the cause of the unjust.*

*Do not seek to overtake the mind of another.*

Whoever the traitor is, they have broken the second law; there is no doubt about that. Grace wonders when their feathers will turn black. Have they been applying dye ever since they agreed to spy for the Black-Wings? Or is the change more gradual?

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what would it take for someone to agree to serve the Black-Wings? To stand beside those who wear the sins of their forefathers on their feathers, to take the same taint into your own soul.

Justice nods solemnly. His eyes sweep over the table, the dark anger returning in his gaze. His eyes are searching, suspicious, as he says, “I do not know what sort of sick soul could willingly embrace the Black-Wings, but they cannot be allowed to live. Which is why we need you. You will take your flight into Black-Wing territory and find this traitor before they can reveal our secrets. Capture them if you are able, but kill them if it seems for a moment that they will escape you.”

Though he is speaking to the flight leader when he says this, his eyes meet Grace’s. She wants desperately to look away, but she fears that if she does, she will awaken something even worse than Father’s anger.

“You will go with them,” Justice says, and Grace cannot help but look behind herself as though someone else has appeared there.

“Me, my king?” she says. Her eyes dart to Father. She thinks that even he is surprised.

“You,” Justice confirms.

“My king—” Father begins.

Allegiance speaks at nearly the same time. “This is a serious mission—”

Justice holds up a hand to stop them both. “You have claimed that she is the best you have ever trained,” he says to Father. “She was the one to discover the traitor. She deserves the chance to see this through.”

When he turns to her, a bright fire burns in his eyes, and she feels that in this moment, he is even more dangerous than Father. “I

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am giving you a chance to prove your loyalty, little one. To prove your worth to our cause. Are you not eager to take it?"

Grace swallows hard. She wants to glance to Father, wants him to say no. That she isn't ready for this, that she can't go. She is trapped in the king's gaze, though, and her mouth forms the words without her permission. "Of course, my king. It...It would be a great honor to prove myself in such a noble pursuit."

The fire in Justice's eyes dims, and he seems to grow older and wearier before her. "Good, good. I have no doubt that you will be successful." He even smiles at her in a charmed sort of way. As though she volunteered for this, as though she had any choice.

Distantly, she hears them discuss the mission. Her mission. Father's Observants are already scouring the forests and sending back information: where the traitor has gone, his description, what happened when he escaped. Outlining likely places he will attempt to cross into Black-Wing territory. They are only one group out of many being sent out.

She barely hears it, and none of it makes sense. She is going on a mission into Black-Wing territory to hunt down a traitor. She agreed to do it, right here, in front of Father, without his permission.

She glances to him, begging him with her eyes to understand. His jaw is clenched tight, and his hands are once more balled into fists, but when he meets her gaze, he nods. She nearly collapses with relief. At least he isn't angry with her.

"You leave in the morning," Justice says. "Be prepared, all of you."

This seems to be a dismissal because Father rises from his seat and offers Justice a stiff bow. "My king," he says, then he directs

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Grace from the room with a hand on her shoulder. His grip is tight enough to bruise.

*He isn't angry with me, she reminds herself. I hope.*

He doesn't say a word as he guides her down the hallway. Grace tries to speak, but he tightens his grip on her shoulder in warning, so she keeps her mouth shut and her face impassive.

They do not speak until they are back in Father's apartments and the door is safely shut behind them.

"I'm sorry, Father," Grace blurts out immediately. "I didn't know what else to do. He was—"

Father holds up a hand to stop her. "I do not blame you, Dear One. I should have known better than to bring you before him." He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "I thought he would be satisfied with you uncovering the traitor. You must understand, the king has faced many betrayals in his lifetime. You know what the Black-Wings did to his sister. It has made him...wary. He fears treachery from all sides.

"Has he always been like that?" she cannot help but ask. "I met him when I was younger, and he didn't seem so very..." She trails off. The only word she can think of is *paranoid*, but it seems disrespectful to apply that to the king. It is too close to saying *mad*.

"You weren't a threat when you were younger," Father says. "Now that you are older and well trained, you could present a problem if you were a traitor."

"Will I really be going?" she asks. Part of her is thrilled at the prospect, no matter how the opportunity came about. Here is the chance to prove to Father that she is a good student. That she can live up to the plans he has for her.

The rest of her knows that this will be dangerous. She will be going into Black-Wing territory. They won't be prisoners; they will be soldiers, trained to hate from birth.

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*It will be just like sparring, she tells herself. You have the training. Now you only need to apply it.*

“I’m afraid you must,” Father says. “If you don’t, Justice will become convinced of your treachery, regardless of whether it is true or not.”

She bites her lip. “Will you come with us?”

Father shakes his head. “I cannot. The king has charged you to prove yourself, and you cannot do that if I help you. You will have to undertake this mission by yourself.”

Her heart sinks and fear churns in her belly. “Oh.”

“Don’t worry, Dear One,” Father says as he takes her chin in his hand and makes her meet his eyes. “It is not the first mission I would have chosen for you, but you would have been going on your first soon. You have prepared for this all your life. You are a diligent student, and I have been impressed by your progress each and every day. I have no doubt that you will succeed.”

She smiles up at him. “Thank you, Father.”

“Always, Dear One. Now, you have much to prepare and little time to do so.”

## *Chapter*

### **2**

The sun is setting when Haven leads him to the garden, shadows falling over them as soft as silk.

“Where are we going?” Endurance asks, confused, tired, hopeless.

“Not much farther,” she says, taking his hands and pulling him after her. Her feet skip over cool grass, nearly dance steps. Her wings flutter, too happy to stay still.

A reluctant smile tugs at his lips, and he picks up his pace. His steps aren’t nearly as graceful as hers, despite all her attempts to teach him to dance. They don’t wander far from the path, only to a small grove of trees. The same grove where they had met what seems like a lifetime ago.

“What is this about?” he asks, taking note of their destination.

She is so happy her smile could light up the whole garden. She opens her mouth, ready to tell him the good news, ready to share her joy with him. “I—” the words cut off with a low, sickening thunk. She gasps, and her hand touches her abdomen instinctively. She feels something warm and wet, and something hard and sharp.

*An arrow, her mind says. You’ve been shot with an arrow.*

Then the pain blooms through her. Like fire, like ice.

*Haven?* Her brother’s voice is frantic in her head, just as pained as hers.

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*Justice, I*— She can't make herself say the words. It doesn't really matter; he knows just as well as she knows. He wails into the place where their minds meet, full of fury and denial.

*Don't you do this to me!* he cries. *You can't!*

They both know that she doesn't really have a choice. *I'm sorry*, she whispers to his mind.

In the physical world, Endurance holds pressure over the wound with shaking hands. He's saying something, but already it is hard to hear him. The sound is muffled and distant, as is the pain.

*I love you*, she thinks to the both of them, though only one hears her.

*"Haven, please."* Justice's voice is desperate, pleading.

She imagines that Endurance's is the same. Her hand feels beyond heavy, but she still gathers her remaining energy to lift it to his face. He presses it between his cheek and his shoulder, unwilling to take pressure off of the wound. He must know as well as she does that it will do no good, but he has never been one to take helplessness well. Tears rain down his cheeks, and he keeps shaking his head. Around them, guards are swarming, too late.

She can hear her heartbeat slowing in her ears

*"Please, don't go,"* Justice begs one last time. She can feel him falling into the darkness alongside her.

*I'm sorry. I love you*, she replies, and then the darkness rises up, and she knows no more.

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Grace wakes with the taste of blood and bile in her mouth. Her hands rip the blankets away and clench over her stomach. There is no arrow, no blood.

Of course there isn't. That was a dream. *A nightmare.*

She takes a deep breath and tries to calm the desperate thumping of her heart. She swallows down the bitter taste and she

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hugs her pillow tightly against her chest. *It was only a dream*, she tells herself firmly.

Her hands want to shake as she sets the pillow aside, but she folds them into fists instead. She shouldn't be worried about a dream. She should focus on her mission, the mission she will be leaving on in—her eyes flick to the window, and she nearly squeaks when she sees that the sun is already brightening the horizon.

The lock on her door clicks, breaking her from her thoughts, and Father enters. His mouth tightens and his brow lowers upon seeing her still in bed “Why are you not ready?” he asks, wind feathers dipping back.

“I was just...lost in thought,” she says, hesitating over the near lie.

Father sighs. “I understand you are nervous, but you have duties to attend to.”

“Yes, Father.”

“You have five minutes,” he says as he turns to leave, and the door clicks shut behind him.

She shoves all thoughts of the dream firmly out of her mind, unties her sleeping shift, and lets it fall to the floor, then steps across the cold stone to the chest that holds her clothes. She dresses quickly and quietly, first in the warm underclothes and then in her armor.

Last come the gauntlets from a drawer below the armor stand. She pulls them over her wrists like old friends. On each of her fingers she slips a delicate ring. With a flick of her wrist, the hidden catches release and the talons unfold, enveloping her fingers in deadly points.

This is one thing she knows she inherited from her sire. He had been a master of the ancient Forest Clan weapon, and from him, she had the muscle memory of a thousand years spent honing these

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talons. They are both throwbacks of a sort. Talons have, for the most part, fallen out of use. There are weapons that are easier to make, easier to learn, and with a longer reach besides.

*It doesn't really matter, she sometimes tells herself. He was only your sire, not your father; he was dead before you were born.* But a small part of her still loves having something of her sire for her own.

The actual weapon isn't Noble's but entirely hers; a part of her is within them. When the Black-Wings were exposed, they cursed the entirety of Caelam, stripping away all but the most basic powers from all Guardians, White-Wings and Black-Wings alike. But one of the few things that they were still capable of was creating the metal for weapons. It was a rare Guardian who was willing to delve below the ground to hunt for the metal ores that hid beneath the surface. Being cut off from the sky was just unnatural. But thankfully that wasn't the only way to get metal.

With time and care, the likeness of a weapon could be carved from a piece of wood, and when the Guardian who would wield it plucks one of their own feathers and combines them, it creates a material somewhere between wood and metal. Strong and light, buoyant, and nonconductive—which was a very good thing during storm season. Though weapons were the most common, many things could be made from the material.

Grace traces her finger along the outline of her feather on the surface of her gauntlet and thinks about the feather in Haven's sword. Maybe that was why she had such a dream, too much stress and too many reminders of a woman murdered by Black-Wings. Grace just hopes that she won't meet the same fate.

She shakes herself out of her thoughts—this is no time to be distracted. She has a mission. Grace scoops up the bag beside her

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door and checks through it one last time. She has everything she needs.

*You can do this, she tells herself firmly. Father trained you. Father trained you and now you have a chance to prove his efforts worthwhile.*

After this, who knows what the future holds? Father said he would have sent her out on her first mission soon anyway. Perhaps before the year is out, she will be slipping into Black-Wing territory on her own. Maybe she'll find the Black-Wings' secret city, or maybe she'll finally uncover the identity of the Black-Wing heir, the Ascendant.

She imagines bringing the Ascendant to Father, how proud he would be. All the lives she would save. The border guards wouldn't have to fear being kidnapped by the Ascendant anymore. She could put an end to the rumors of torture and experiments conducted in the heart of the Black-Wings' secret city.

Before her thoughts can get away from her, she realizes her five minutes are up. She takes a deep breath and meets Father in the main room.

He is standing beside a pack "Your rations." Grace takes it and slips it into her pack, trying not to think about how it is enough food to feed her for weeks. And it is all for her, plus whatever edible things they can find in the forest.

Father hands her another strip of dried meat, and she takes it automatically.

"You should eat before you go," he says.

"I think I'm too nervous to eat," Grace says, her stomach flutters in agreement.

"Eat, Dear One," Father says. "You will need the energy."

Despite the churning of her stomach, Grace obeys.

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Once the meat is gone and her belly full, they fly up to the roof where her traveling companions are waiting. The Desert Clan woman who leads the flight bows to both of them.

“Spymaster, Saboteur,” she greets them both.

Despite the circumstances, Grace allows herself a private smile. She is the Saboteur; she has a title to live up to. Father had chosen her, trained her, made her the warrior she is now. Surely she can track down a single traitor and bring him back to the Citadel.

Father nods solemn acknowledgment to the woman.

“Liberty. Your record speaks for itself. I know that you and your flight will serve well in this mission.”

Liberty dips her head, but Grace is distracted from her reply by one of the flight moving to stand beside her.

It is one of the Mountain Clan warriors, not the Wind Weaver, the woman. “Don’t worry, we’ll keep you safe.”

“I’m not untrained,” Grace says.

She smiles tightly. “Even trained warriors need help. That’s why we have flights.”

Father turns back to Grace. “Remember, capture the traitor if you can. Kill if you cannot. Don’t disappoint me, Dear One.”

She smiles up at him, trying to pretend that she is more eager than afraid. “I won’t, you’ll see.” She doesn’t think that he believes her, but he doesn’t say anything more to her.

“You all have your mission,” he says to them all. “Go forth and fulfill it.”

They bow and take off one by one, falling into a long-distance formation for the journey. When Grace looks back to him one more time, he is standing at the edge of the balcony, watching them fly

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away. She wishes again that he could come with them, that she didn't have to undertake such a dangerous mission alone.

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Grace quickly realizes just how *boring* traveling is. There is nothing to break the monotony of flying in a straight line and watching the person in front of her. They have to travel high in the air to avoid being spotted as they head out. Above the clouds, there is nothing to look at.

They fly in an open-ended triangle, staggered in the air so that the ones at the head of the formation break up the wind resistance for those behind. It is all very practical, but that doesn't help with the boredom.

At the head is Liberty, the flight leader. Her broad wings are perfect for long flights, a gift from her Desert Clan ancestors. In the middle flies a pair of Mountain Clan warriors. Speed is their gift, but their stamina is still better than Grace's.

Grace flaps a few times and then breaks into a glide, saving her energy as much as she can. The flight's scout flies beside her. Their Forest Clan blood gives them great maneuverability but takes from them the stamina required to fly further up in the formation.

A few hours into the flight, when even the scout is starting to lag, the Wind Weaver takes Liberty's place at the head. His wings move powerfully, and the air around them shapes to his will, cradling her and the others so they barely have to flap at all.

Grace tentatively stretches a hand out into the air. It tingles faintly against her skin, and she isn't sure if that is because of the cold or from the Wind Weaver.

Unfortunately, taking her focus off of her looming exhaustion gives her mind free rein to think of other things. There are too many

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things for her to worry about. Going into Black-Wing territory. Failing the mission and coming back to disappoint Father. Failing the mission and *not* coming back.

A sharp whistle interrupts her thoughts. *Going down*. It is the scout.

*Acknowledged*, Liberty whistles back, and the scout folds his wings and dips below the clouds.

A few moments later, he is back. *Adjust course six degrees east. Altitude three degrees down.* Liberty whistles acknowledgment, and their course shifts. They must be getting down from the mountain now.

Grace checks the position of the sun. If they continue at this pace, they'll make it to the edge of the trees before sundown. She would much rather spend the night there than try to find a warm place to camp on the mountain.

The scout dips beneath the clouds three more times before he comes back with more than course adjustments.

*Trees below.*

Finally, they are above the forest.

*Circle down*, Liberty whistles.

*Acknowledged*, Grace and the rest of the flight reply. Flight Language is simple and limited compared to proper Song, but it is useful. The wind whips away the quieter sounds of Song, but the piercing whistles carry easily.

The warrior ahead of Grace folds her wings and falls below the clouds. Grace follows. They trickle down like a light rain, scattering through the canopy of the forest. Grace and the scout slip easily through small gaps in the branches, twisting through branches that

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would snag the larger wings of their companions. Liberty and the rest of the flight fan out and find clearings to drop through.

They meet up atop a fallen tree, wings spread for balance on the slanted trunk. Grace digs her talons into the bark. She could stick her entire hand into the gaps if she wished, some of her arm too. The entire flight could walk side-by-side down the trunk. Each leaf is as big as her head. What could possibly have felled the giant, Grace isn't sure.

The forest covers most of Caelam, and there are things deep within it that have not been seen since the time of the clans. This tree was probably there for those times, Grace thinks. Some of them in the deep forest have been around since Caelam was formed.

Liberty seems to be gathering her thoughts, and Grace glances at the other members of the flight to see their reactions. They are all looking back at her. Liberty clears her throat, and Grace meets her eyes. She shoves her nervousness down into the bottom of her mind. *Power comes from the appearance of strength*, she reminds herself.

"I don't believe we have had the chance to introduce ourselves," Liberty says. "This has all been rather...impromptu."

*That's one word for it*, Grace thinks as she nods silently.

"I am Liberty." She gestures to herself, then to the Mountain Clan man beside her. "This is Faith." The Wind Weaver dips his head. "This is Hope, and my scout is Amity." The Mountain Clan woman and the scout dip their heads in turn.

Grace nods greeting to all of them. "I'm Grace," she says because she doesn't know what else to say.

"Right," Liberty says. She seems just as unsure of where to go from here as Grace feels. "We have a lot of travel ahead of us, so I suppose we should get started." Liberty unfolds the map from a

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pouch on her belt and spreads it out across the trunk. Grace and the rest of the flight gather around it.

“From here on out,” Liberty says, “it’s going to be slow work. We have this section to look over.” She traces a rough square of forest on the map, just at the edge of the Black-Wing border. “If we don’t find anything here, we go deeper into Black-Wing territory.”

From the looks of it, they have maybe another half a day’s travel before they hit their target. Grace resists the urge to groan. Already she is developing a passionate hatred for travel. At least now they’ll be beneath the canopy instead of above the clouds.

Liberty folds up the map and tucks it back into her belt. “Amity, if you would be so kind as to find us a place for tonight.”

Amity bows and flutters off into the treetops.

“Faith, you find water.”

He nods and heads off. Soon after him, Hope is assigned to find food, and she takes off in a different direction.

“That leaves us to find bedding and firewood,” Liberty says.

Grace looks around the woods and says, “Wherever will we find some?” She says flippantly, then snaps her mouth shut. Father doesn’t like it when she speaks in such a tone.

But Liberty smiles and actually laughs. “I’m sure you’ll be able to do it.”

The sound of her laughter is pleasant, but Grace still scolds herself. *What will you do, run off into the woods for a few days and come back half-feral?*

Father’s voice whispers through her mind, *Discipline always, Dear One. There is no room for children in war.*

It is only a memory, but Grace cannot help but feel chastised, and she glides to the ground silently instead of continuing to joke

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with Liberty. *There is no room for children in war*, she reminds herself, echoing Father's words. She lands quietly and begins gathering firewood, breaking twigs off branches as wide as she is tall.

She brings her haul back to the fallen tree. In the shadow of the trunk, there is a pile of brush, most of it is old and dead, except for a few things at the top, but they are already wilting.

*I hope that's not what we're sleeping on.* Grace sets her firewood a good distance from the pile so they don't get mixed up. She wipes sweat from her brow. It is only the beginning of summer, but already it is hotter in the forest than it ever gets in the Citadel. Her armor and furs are sure to bake her tomorrow when they will have to keep traveling through the hottest parts of the day.

On her second trip back with wood, she catches Liberty, apparently making a new pile. Grace's brow furrows. As glad as she is that they won't be sleeping on dead leaves and twigs, it seems pointless to gather two piles. "What's that one for?" she asks, gesturing to the original pile.

"Which one?" Liberty asks, setting down an armful of moss. She catches sight of the pile Grace is pointing to, and her eyes widen. She grabs Grace around the shoulders and tugs her away from the pile as though it will leap up and attack them. "That's a nest," she whispers, "for a throwing lizard. I should have been keeping a better eye out. They're a native predator, very aggressive, especially when defending their nests. *Never touch one.*"

They move their piles well away from the nest and gather in the opposite direction from it, working closely together, on Liberty's insistence.

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When Faith and Hope return, Hope's bag is missing. Hopefully, she left it full of food wherever Amity has found to camp. With the five of them carrying firewood and bedding, they only need one trip to get the supplies to their camp.

Amity has found a low branch—perhaps a hundred feet off the ground—that has grown straight enough for them to sleep on it. Grace lands directly on the branch, but the others, with their wider wingspans, must land on the trunk itself and climb up.

“You couldn’t have found a branch the rest of us could land on?” Liberty grumbles as she climbs.

“I didn’t have a problem,” Amity says innocently.

Liberty begins setting up as soon as she reaches the branch. Unpacking a tripod and hanging the fire pit, Amity starts shredding tinder and striking his flint. Faith grabs Hope’s bag from where it had been left and pulls a bounty of fresh food from it. A few small creatures with dark fur and sharp claws, small enough to crawl through the cracks of the tree bark. Hope begins skinning and gutting one while Faith continues to pull things from the bag.

Mushrooms and leafy stalks, a few round yellowish fruits and a pouch full of berries. Grace doesn’t let the longing show on her face. Plants cannot grow in the frigid temperatures of the Citadel, and with the Black-Wings controlling most of the fertile ground along the river, crops are limited. The land is mostly used to grow food for the animals hidden in the snowy tundra behind the mountain. Fruits and vegetables, even spices and seasonings, are only grown in small patches. The dried meat rations that are common fare throughout the Citadel taste like old smoke.

Hope hands the meat over to Faith and begins on another tree crawler. Faith pulls leaves from one of the stalks and begins

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shredding them and rubbing them into the meat. Hope puts a few berries into the empty cavity where the animal's internal organs had been and wraps the whole thing in one of the leaves from the tree. Amity's fire is blazing, and it accepts the bundle with a cheery hiss. By the time Faith sets a second bundle in the fire, a delicious smell is rising from the first.

Hope gives Faith another, and his hand takes a detour as it returns to the meat, dipping into the bag of berries. Hope smacks it away.

“I need those,” she scolds.

Faith reaches for the bag again.

“No.” Hope moves it out of his reach, closer to Liberty.

He pouts. “But I like them, and *you* like me. So if you’re really a friend...”

Hope remains unmoved. “Then I won’t let you spoil your dinner.”

“But *Mother*,” Faith says sarcastically.

Hope levels a glare at him.

“If she lets you eat them now, then you won’t get dessert,” Liberty chides, the only one of them keeping a straight face at this point. Then Liberty leans around the fire pit and snags a handful for herself. “Besides, I like the red berries more than you.”

Hope swats at Liberty’s hand as well but misses. Grace isn’t sure if it is on purpose or not. Either way, Liberty escapes with her prize and offers her hand to Grace.

“Want some?”

The temptation is there, to joke along with them, to say, *But then I'll ruin my dinner*. But that would be childish. She only smiles gratefully and says, “Thank you.”

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*There is no room for children in war.*

She rewards herself by taking half the berries. They have been partially squished by their rough handling, but that just means she has an excuse to lick the juice from her fingers. The few berries that weren't crushed explode in her mouth, popping between her teeth.

She nearly spits them out when the juice floods her mouth. It is too much. Sweet and tangy and sour all at once. She forces them down anyway. They are too good to waste, even though her wings ruffle with the overwhelming sensation. Liberty eats her half of the ill-gotten gains more sedately, popping one in her mouth at a time.

Above them, there is a low rumble, followed by a high-pitched cheep. Grace's head whips up, wind feathers fanning wide, trying to read the air currents. There is something in the shadows above them. By the light of the fire, she can see two pairs of eyes shining back at them.

Grace flicks her wrist, unsheathing her talons. The others have looked up as well, but they are calm. She hesitates. "What are those?"

Hope looks over to her. "Oh, they're just forest cats. They probably smelled the meat. They're wild but pretty friendly. Here." She holds out a pile of entrails to Grace. "They'll take it from your hand if you hold still. Their whiskers tickle." Her eyes sparkle with mischief.

Grace extends her hand, and the bloody pile is dropped in her palm. She holds her hand up to the glowing eyes, and they tilt. Another cheep, then a lanky body lands beside her.

In the light of the fire, Grace can see the patterns on the cat's fur. The coat is warm brown, like the bark of the trees, lighter on the

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belly and speckled with golden spots. Grace slowly lowers her hand and offers it to the cat. Hope is right—the whiskers do tickle.

Liberty mimics the cheeping sound to the other cat and offers it her own palm. It drops to the branch and has no problem climbing over Amity to reach her, perching on his shoulders as it eats. Liberty reaches out her other hand, gently touching a dark band on the cat's leg. Grace returns her attention to her own guest.

It licks her palm, cleaning off the blood and the last of the berry juice. Its long tail—twice as long as the body itself—waves slowly in the air. Grace slowly raises her other hand and touches the tip of one tufted ear. The cat lifts one lip at her, and Grace quickly puts her hand back down, trying not to take it personally.

“These guys *are* friendly,” Amity notes, reaching his hand back to pet Liberty’s cat. It hisses at him, and just like that the pair is gone, up into the safety of the dark and the branches. “Or not,” he says sheepishly. “I guess they just like Liberty.”

Liberty leans back, sticking one hand into a pouch on her belt and depositing something there. The rest of the berries maybe. “They are very good judges of character.”

They toss the rest of the entrails to the ground—apparently, Hope had been saving them in case of guests—and use sticks to carefully pull the wrapped meat out of the fire. It is flavorful and moist, worlds better than the dried rations in her bag. They will eat those if they have to, but for now, she pulls more meat from the bones of the tree crawler and enjoys the flavors.

The bones and other refuse are tossed off of the branch as well, and then they get ready for bed. The leaves that Liberty gathered have been arranged into a comfortable nest against the trunk of the tree. Liberty and her flight curl up together without hesitation,

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blanketed by each other's wings and warmed by the body heat of their companions. Grace hesitates.

She is used to sleeping alone. Father is far from physically affectionate, and his duties often require him to work late into the night. Grace has always slept alone.

"I'll take first watch," she says and moves to sit beside the banked fire. She curls her wings around herself, hands absently rubbing up and down her arms. Her eyes keep going back to the nest and the flight curled contentedly in it. She viciously jerks her head away and scans their surroundings, searching for any signs of Black-Wings.

The others hesitate for a moment, apparently unsure of leaving her to watch their backs on her own. Grace fights the urge to scowl—she can manage this much at least.

After a few hours, Hope comes to relieve her, and Grace settles on the edge of the group. It is surprisingly easy to fall asleep, despite the strange sounds of the forest.

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Haven sighs and rubs her temples, knowing it won't do any good. Her current headache isn't nearly so easy to get rid of. *The Court chose him*, she says in her mind, fighting to keep her tone even. Not that there's much point—Justice knows her mood as well as she knows his.

*But the Trinity didn't. He has no right to remain king. If you weren't so blind to his every fault, you would acknowledge that,* Justice replies. His anger scrapes against hers, and she grits her teeth. They've had this argument at least once a day ever since the ceremony, and neither of them is willing to budge.

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*Who then? If not him, then who should be king?* Her question, at least, makes him quiet for a long moment. There is no leaving the place in their minds where they speak, their very souls are connected. But he is quiet enough that she thinks he is ignoring her.

*We could, Justice says. You could. Everyone loves you, they would listen to you.*

*I don't want to be queen.* She makes a cutting motion through the air as though she could destroy the very notion.

Endurance gives her an odd look, distracted from writing in his journal by her gestures. This is why she hates to have these conversations during the day. She waves him away and leaves the room.

*Why not?* Justice asks. He never lets anything go. He knows exactly how much it annoys her, but it never stops him. *You would be a good queen, and Endurance could still have enough of a position to soothe his ego.*

She growls, shutting the doors of her room with a touch more force than is strictly necessary. *Why would I want to be queen?* she demands. *After...After everything that's happened, I can barely stand to look at that throne, much less sit on it.*

That does make him stop. Their argument is forgotten momentarily in favor of a soul-deep hug as they both fight back the image of their queen, their friend, fallen at the feet of her own throne. Reverence standing over her. Haven and Justice wracked with the shared agony of their wounds, only Endurance to guard them.

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*Can we just drop it?* she asks. Sensing his argument, she amends, *At least for now.*

*For now,* he agrees.

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Grace wakes with her nails biting into her palms, frustrated and somehow more tired than when she'd fallen asleep. Faith sits by the fire, feeding it a pile of small twigs. She is curled against Hope's side, blanketed by Liberty's wing.

Grace sits up and stretches her wings, resettling her feathers. It is easier to put the strangeness of the dream out of her mind with so many other things to focus on, and she does so gladly.

They eat the leftovers of last night's feast, the meat warmed again over the fire. Grace snags one of the yellow fruits and takes a *small* bite. Never let it be said that she doesn't learn.

The flavor washes across her tongue, tart and bitter, but not entirely unpleasant. Once they have eaten their fill, Liberty checks the map again, sending Amity above the treetops to make sure of their position.

Liberty traces a path over the paper. "This is the quickest route we can take that will keep us out of the open. We should be entering Black-Wing territory by seventh hour or so. We'll stop then and disguise ourselves."

Their feathers will stick out like snow in summer when they are in Black-Wing territory, directing any patrols in the area right to them. That can easily be solved by coating their feathers in a black powder. There is no helping the fact that their wind feathers aren't the right color, but it is the best they can do.

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Hopefully, they won't get close enough to any Black-Wings for them to tell. In their bags is stolen Black-Wing armor, lighter than their own due to the higher temperatures of the forest.

With their path decided, they set out. Grace and Amity can fly easily in the thick vegetation, but the rest of the flight have larger wingspans, and they must walk. Thankfully, they don't have to go all the way down to the forest floor.

The trees are so old and have grown so close together that, for the most part, they can walk easily from one branch to another, only having to climb occasionally. In the places where the trees are farther apart, there are ancient remnants of Forest Clan to help them across, bridges woven from living branches and vines millennia ago.

They travel along these for most of the day. Grace shoulders part of Amity's scouting duties, finding the easiest path for the others while he keeps an eye out for any Black-Wings on the wrong side of the border.

Toward evening, Liberty whistles for them to return. Grace dives once more, landing on a wide branch. Liberty, Faith, and Hope are already there taking off their armor piece by piece. Grace unbuckles her own armor and stows it in the hollow of the tree. One of Father's Observants will be by at some point to pick it up.

Once they are in only their woolen clothes, Liberty pulls out the powder. They take turns helping each other coat their feathers, slowly covering up the white with inky black. Grace shudders at the "Black-Wing" flight that surrounds her. The dark feathers are unnatural, a reflection of the soul beneath them.

The first Black-Wings earned their dark feathers when they betrayed the Trinity, long ago, and now their descendants carried

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their shame, with only their white wind feathers to remind them of what they once had. It seemed wrong to purposefully cover their own pure feathers, but it was necessary.

The powder itches. It has to be applied to both the top of the feathers and the underside, leaving tiny grains to rub against the skin on her wings. Grace ruffles her feathers, trying to get some of the extra dust to come out. When she flattens them again, they are just as itchy. Great.

With their wings disguised, they don the Black-Wing armor. It is almost a relief to wear after the stifling heat of White-Wing armor. Almost. It is still off-putting, being in the enemy's armor. Grace pulls at the stiff collar of the dark-green shirt, which rises about halfway up her neck and feels unnatural. Every time she lowers her chin, it brushes the fabric and tickles. The pants are loose as well, which is very odd after the sleekness of White-Wing uniforms. Thankfully, her boots can remain the same.

When they take to the air again, there is still a good two and a half hours of travel they can do before tenth hour when the light will begin to fade. Beneath the cover of the trees, sunlight fades faster, leaving sunset at about ten-half instead of twelfth hour. Grace and Amity continue patrolling the area around the rest of the flight as they walk.

At ninth hour, Grace and Amity begin looking for likely places to camp: wide, flat branches with good cover over them so they won't be spotted from the air and the smoke from their fire will be broken up in the leaves. They whistle to Liberty when they find a suitable place, and the rest of the flight climb up to them.

They are higher up than last night, a comfortable five hundred feet or so above the ground. This time, when Liberty hands out camp duties, Grace asks to accompany Hope on her foraging mission.

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Hope is happy enough to let her tag along and seems to take delight in pointing out the various edibles of the forest. Hope allows their conversation to wander from topic to topic. She only interrupts to point out plants to Grace and tells them their uses.

After awhile, Hope touches her wrist. “I wanted to ask...” She hesitates, and Grace nods to encourage her. “Are you...happy? With your father?”

Grace blinks at her. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Hope bites her lip. “I’ve heard about the Saboteur Program and it seems like you didn’t really get much of a childhood. Always training and such, and now you’re on a mission, in Black-Wing territory.”

“There is no room for children in war,” Grace says. “Nobody gets much of a childhood these days.”

Hope doesn’t look convinced, but she doesn’t argue.

Grace swallows, feeling oddly nervous. “I do wish that my first mission had been something less...dire, but the king knows what is best.”

“I guess so,” Hope mutters, but her tone says something different.

“Father says that he is just wary of betrayal,” Grace says. She isn’t sure which of them she is trying to convince. “He can’t be right all the time, but he does his best.”

“I wonder what else he’s been wrong about,” Hope whispers, so low that Grace isn’t sure if she heard it or if it was a trick of her mind. She debates asking what Hope means, but she is distracted by a dull red splotch on a nearby leaf.

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There is a clear trail of broken branches and trampled grass through the undergrowth. Trapped in the branches of a low bush is a white feather. “Hope,” Grace gestures to the path.

Technically, any wounded soldier could have left such a trail. But the likelihood of two White-Wings in this specific area who are wounded are low.

Hope pats her on the shoulder with a tight smile. “Looks like you’ve found the first signs of our traitor,” she says. Her voice isn’t quite as happy as Grace thinks it should be, but they still have a dangerous mission ahead of them.

They follow the trail to its beginning. Hope’s eyes study the broken branches and crushed leaves. From amid the wreckage, she pulls a handful of white feathers.

There is no doubting now, they’re on the traitor’s trail.

Hope leaves Grace in the clearing and goes to fetch the rest of the flight. Liberty regards the bloodied foliage with a blank face. “It is too late to search tonight,” she says eventually. “We’ll pick up the trail in the morning. Good find.” She nods to Hope and Grace.

They return to camp and eat quietly. The relaxed atmosphere from the night before is nowhere to be found. All of Liberty’s flight is on edge. Their eyes watch the flickering shadows cast by the fire, their hands often straying to their weapons.

It is a long time before any of them are ready to sleep.

## *Chapter*

### **3**

It is dark when her eyes open again. Grace stares into the night for a moment, finding herself surprised and relieved that she didn't have another of the strange dreams from Haven's eyes.

Warm breath spreads across her cheek, and Grace tenses.

"It's only me," Liberty whispers.

"What's goin' on?" Grace asks, relaxing and rubbing her eyes.

"Nothing. It's your watch."

"Oh." She yawns, sitting up.

Hope murmurs and shifts a wing in her sleep, but doesn't wake up. Grace picks her way out of the pile and sits beside the fire. She sweeps her gaze over the landscape, leaning over to check below them. Nothing.

Satisfied, Grace listens to the forest around her. There are tiny chirps and buzzes in the air, from what she isn't sure. Occasionally something scrapes or scratches on bark—tree limbs rubbing together or maybe animals going about their business.

In the quiet, her thoughts are harder to ignore. The tiny, wordless doubts that seem so far away in the light of day and the company of others.

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As much as she has tried to convince herself that this mission is the best thing she could hope for, a true test of her training, she knows she isn't ready for it. She wishes Father could be with them. She misses his steady confidence at her side.

Her eyes stray to the tangle of limbs and wings just out of arm's reach. She feels something stirring within her, something soft and small, a longing for something she dares not name.

She wonders what it would be like to have wing-mates, to have a flight. People to fly and fight beside. People she could trust to have her back no matter what.

*Like a family.*

She shuts the thought away. She has a family. It may be small, but it is hers. She has Father and his patience, his kindness. Her eyes drift over to the others. The feeling stirs again, soft and warm and glowing in her heart. It seems so precious, so fragile. So wrong.

*You must be strong, she tells herself. They would only weaken you, like roots creeping through stone. Father is the only one you need. He loves you. Isn't that enough?*

She jerks her eyes away from Liberty's flight. They have each other, and she has Father. Once this mission is over, they will continue to do their duties, and she will continue her training. That is all this is, a test of her training. A test of her love for Father.

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Deep down, a quiet anxiety moves like a glacier into her awareness. What if she fails? What if she doesn't kill the traitor, or capture them. What will Father do? She imagines his face drawn tight with disappointment, his eyes cold and hard like they get when she hasn't done a form correctly or put together his hints.

His voice will be sharp when he says, "I told you not to disappoint me." Anger will cloud the air around him until he seems ten times his normal size. There will be condemnation in his every word and action, and then, when she is almost ready to throw herself on the ground and beg for his forgiveness, he will sigh and shrink, and his eyes will fill with that terrible, terrible sadness.

He will shake his head and stare quietly for a moment, wonder just how he could raise such a worthless *failure*. He will say, "This is my fault. I thought you were ready. I thought you knew enough to do this for me. But I was wrong."

Grace cannot stand the thought of it. It sends something desperate lancing through her heart. Her muscles tense with the desire to rush back to the Citadel, to beg him for his forgiveness, to tell him, "No, it's *my* fault. I am the one responsible." *Not you, never you.*

"Grace?"

She whips around, apologies crowding around her lips before she realizes that it is not Father, only Liberty. Grace blinks away the image of Father's eyes, caught somewhere between rage and sorrow.

"What?" Her voice is strange, thready and weak.

Liberty's brow furrows. "Are you alright?"

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Grace forces herself to hold her breath, then lets it out, draws in a deep lungful of air. “I’m fine.”

Picking her way out of the nest, Liberty comes to sit beside Grace. “You sure?”

Grace opens her mouth, almost tells Liberty about her fears, about the horror of Father’s anger. “I...” She breaths deeply again. “I’m...” She can’t do it. “I’m just worried about the mission.”

Liberty extends a wing over her. “I’m worried too,” she says quietly. “But we must have faith that everything will go according to plan. That we’ll all get out alright.”

They sit quietly together, even though it isn’t Liberty’s watch, and Grace can’t help the gratitude that wells up within her. “Do you have anyone waiting for you?” she asks quietly.

The pensive expression on Liberty’s face softens into a faint smile. “Yes. I’ve pledged myself to someone. This is supposed to be my final mission before we can fulfill our vows.” She pulls a small medallion from her armor, toying with it. In the low light Grace can see a faint etching she doesn’t recognize—crossed wings, she thinks. An odd token for a pledged couple, but she supposes if it makes them happy then there is no real reason it shouldn’t be.

“Congratulations.”

Liberty gives her a grateful smile. “What about you?”

“Only Father.”

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Liberty tucks the medallion away. “Haven’t you got friends or anything?”

Grace looks away. “I don’t have time for friends, I have to train.” She tries to say it with pride, to imbue the words with the duty she feels. *Should* feel. But they come out small and lonely.

*Just like you*, something in her hisses spitefully.

Liberty doesn’t say anything, only scoots a little closer.

Somehow, that is better than anything she could have said.

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The rain starts in the early hours of the morning. Everyone is still on edge and now there is an air of urgency to their movements as they pack up the camp. The rain will wash away the trail if it goes on for too long, and they would have to start all over.

They return once more to the place where the traitor landed—crashed, more like—and follow the trail from there. They spread out, still within sight of one another, but far enough apart that no hint of the traitor’s passing will escape them.

It is tedious work, and though most of the rain is caught by the leaves above their heads, a good portion of it still falls to the ground. Before an hour has gone by, Grace is nearly soaked through, and the dye on her wings is getting patchy. There is no way to replace it now; it

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would only rinse off faster. They will simply have to hope that they do not encounter any Black-Wing patrols.

They search through thickets and treacherous mud pits, losing the trail several times and backtracking in the hopes of picking it up again. Thankfully, the traitor is wounded and has left many signs of his passing.

By midday the rain has grown heavier, and distant flashes of lightning appear above them. Grace pulls her boot out of a deep puddle and slips immediately into the next one.

Hope stops to haul her out, but both of them freeze when Faith motions sharply. He holds his hand low, fingers clenched into a fist as he crouches against a tree trunk.

*Stay low, stay together.*

He glances to them and makes another sign: *Enemy*.

Grace stiffens and feels as though even the blood in her veins has frozen. Hope curses under her breath and signs back, *How many? Positions?*

Faith slowly peeks around the tree and then pulls back. *Six. Ahead, and to the left.*

Liberty appears beside them so quickly and silently that Grace flinches. Her eyes are hard and her teeth are clenched. Amity is just behind her, creeping up to join Faith watching the Black-Wings.

Amity moves past Faith, keeping low to the ground, only moving when the wind shakes the foliage to cover

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him. Grace quickly loses sight of him, and she holds her breath, hoping that he will return.

A minute later he does.

*Objective*, he signs grimly, *center position*.

They have found the traitor, but he is in the middle of a Black-Wing patrol. Her heart pounds against her ribs.

*Point position*, Amity signs, *Wind Weaver*:

Grace thinks her heart stops altogether. Having a Wind Weaver on their side is a great advantage, but getting caught between two of them in a fight could spell disaster.

*Hold position*, Liberty signs immediately. She creeps forward to join Faith and Amity. They watch silently for a moment, and then she signals Hope and Grace forward. Grace feels as though the rustle of every leaf she touches is as loud as thunder. Somehow, though, the Black-Wings are still oblivious when she peeks around the tree to see them.

They are gathered in loose formation around the traitor. His white feathers stick out like a beacon as a Black-Wing healer winds a bandage around his side. They are speaking in low tones, too far away for Grace to hear even without the rain and thunder.

Grace squints at the traitor's wings. Oddly enough, she feels somewhat disappointed. She had thought that his wings would turn black when he switched sides. Maybe it is a more gradual change.

The leader of the Black-Wing force is easy to pick out. He stands beside the healer and watches the forest around them as though he is waiting for something.

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Another patrol? His hair is blood red, cut close to his skull and plastered down by the rain.

On his armor is a round medallion, and though she is too far away to see what is engraved on it, she knows that it is a pattern of swirling lines. The mark of a Wind Weaver.

She feels her skin crawl as she turns away from the Black-Wings to see what Liberty's orders are. It feels wrong on every level to turn her back on them, even if they don't know she's there.

*Strike now,* Amity insists. He touches the quiver of arrows at his side and then his chest before pointing to the traitor. *I could take out the traitor first.*

*No,* Liberty signs, with a firm shake of her head for emphasis.

“This is our only chance,” Faith whispers. “They could vanish into their city the moment we look away.”

Liberty only shakes her head again.

Amity starts to sign a response, but gives up and instead hisses, “War is dangerous. This is our mission. We have to do it.”

Liberty looks at him for a long, quiet moment. Indecision flashes across her face, then acceptance, and finally determination. “It isn’t my mission,” she replies.

And then she springs away from them. Grace twists to follow her automatically, half rising before her mind catches up. Liberty didn’t order them to attack; she just leaped for the Black-Wings. Was she sacrificing herself?

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Was this some sort of strategy that Grace doesn't know about?

Liberty lands among the Black-Wings and doesn't draw her blade. Instead, she shouts, "To arms!" and turns to face the rest of her flight. The Black-Wings draw their blades, but they don't raise them against Liberty. "They're in the brush over there," Liberty says, and as if they're following her orders, the Black-Wings charge.

No. Not *as if* they are following her orders. Liberty is ordering the Black-Wings. Liberty *is* a Black-Wing. Liberty has betrayed them.

For a split second, Grace is frozen, staring at Liberty where she stands unharmed beside the Black-Wing Wind Weaver. Between her flight and the healer. Then her eyes slip to the Black-Wing patrol that is charging through the underbrush, weapons drawn.

"Liberty, get Chivalry out of here," the Wind Weaver barks, gesturing to the traitor.

"Move!" Faith barks, hauling Grace to her feet and all but throwing her behind him as he draws his sword. Grace trips but catches herself. She whirls to face the Black-Wings and flicks her wrist. Her talons unsheath, and her wings flare instinctively.

The Black-Wings don't pause. The first one catches Faith's sword against his own. The second meets Hope's. Amity leaps before the third and fourth soldiers, blades flashing in the low light. Grace stands before the fifth.

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His drawn blade glows with blood lust and malice as she stares at it. She has never sparred with real weapons. Wooden ones, yes, blunted ones, many times. Never real sharpened blades though.

*This is nothing like sparring.*

She meets the soldier's eyes. They are mostly hidden in the shadows of his helmet and the darkness of the forest around them, but she can see them glint when lightning flashes.

She steps backward onto a root, and her right wing brushes against a vine. This isn't the level training floor, with bright lights and open spaces. She isn't fighting a White-Wing soldier who will stop if she makes a mistake. She will have more to worry about than Father's disapproval if she slips up here.

*This is nothing like training.*

The soldier pauses just out of striking range. "Surrender," he says. His voice is low and stern. He isn't afraid of her at all—why would he be?

"Never," Grace replies. It doesn't sound strong and determined like she means for it to. Her voice cracks and wavers, and honestly she isn't sure if he can understand her at all.

He must, though, because he tilts his head in acknowledgment, and the next second he is upon her. She nearly gets tangled in the vine when he lunges forward. She deflects the blow with her gauntlets. Dips beneath the vine and ducks out of range of another blow.

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She can't keep doing this. She has to attack at some point, or he'll corner her somewhere and then it will all be over. She ducks another blow.

The air around them tingles with power. Not the gentle tickle against her skin like when Faith was making the flight here easier. This is like a thousand needles stabbing into her skin. The underbrush sways, and a few of the smaller trees groan as the wind whips around them. Faith and the Black-Wing Wind Weaver have found each other.

A swaying branch nearly smacks her in the face, and she has to keep her wings tucked tight against her body to keep the wind from tearing at them. The Black-Wing staggers as the winds gust harder, but he isn't giving ground.

She needs to do something.

He is so much stronger than her though. One strike would be enough to take her down if he catches her. She dances back, and only a shift in the air over her wind feathers warns her that she is about to run up against a tree. She tries to angle away from it, but the Black-Wing feints. She can feel the tree looming over her, and she braces herself on it when her foot slips into a mud puddle.

Her talons dig into the bark. The Black-Wing stands before her, his stance relaxed. He knows he has her cornered. "Surrender," he says again, over the roaring of the wind.

"No," Grace shouts back.

"You have nowhere to go."

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Then she realizes he is Desert Clan. His wings are too long and broad to fly here. It is true *he* has nowhere to go. If possible, her heart beats faster at the thought. At best it's insane; realistically it's just short of suicidal. But it's her only option.

She whips around and uses her talons to pull herself up the tree. She plants both of her feet against the trunk and pushes off with all her might.

Her wings snap out, scooping the air around her as she flips over his head. For one shining moment, she rises above the Black-Wing, above the battlefield. The air is abruptly still, as if the whole world is holding its breath.

Then the wind turns against her.

Woven into a great net, it smashes her back to the earth. Her breath flies out of her lungs, and she lies gasping on the forest floor. Above her, the red-haired Wind Weaver appears.

“Take her,” he orders. The air around them is still, but for a weak breeze. Faith lost.

Grace scrambles to get up, but her head is spinning, and she seems to be moving slower than the rest of the world. The Black-Wing barely has to touch her to get her back on the ground.

He grabs both of her wrists in one hand. She tugs weakly against his hold but can't get her body to cooperate. She needs to get away. Needs to move. There is only one reason to bother with taking her from the battlefield.

They want to take her to the Ascendant. Her mind can't seem to operate her hands and feet, but it has no

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problem with flashing an image of the Ascendant before her: ghostly pale skin, burning red eyes, wings blacker than a starless night.

*She comes for you after the battle is over, her mind whispers. She finds the ones that haven't died yet, the ones that are too weak to fight back. Then she takes them. She takes them, and she twists them until not even their own families recognize them.*

Her heart lodges in her throat. She can't breathe around it. She kicks at the Black-Wing, but he barely notices. Fear curls icy talons into every inch of her. She isn't going to die. Her fate is going to be so, so much worse

Then Amity bursts into the clearing. His blade is a silver flash of death as he lashes out at the Black-Wing. The soldier deflects it and retrieves his sword to answer. Their battle quickly leads them out of the clearing.

The Wind Weaver turns to Grace.

She doesn't give him the chance to try and capture her himself. She's still dizzy, but she gets to her feet.

Liberty bounds into the clearing, her wings high. “Glory!” she shouts, a tinge of desperation in her tone. “Chivalry is dead.”

The Wind Weaver curses. “Fall back.”

“Not without you,” Liberty snaps.

“That's an order.”

“You're not my commander.”

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Grace darts past them while they are distracted. Through the wall of brush, she finds Amity and the Black-Wing. Amity's dagger glints from the ground where it's been buried to the hilt.

Amity is barely standing, holding one arm against his stomach and breathing in heavy, uneven gasps. The Black-Wing stands before him, blade in hand.

He does not give Amity the chance to surrender. He says nothing as he steps forward. Says nothing when his blade slides into Amity's flesh. Says nothing when Amity's body falls to the ground, a fountain of blood rising from beneath his armor.

Grace opens her mouth to scream, but nothing comes out. She feels as though she is a thousand miles away from her body, as though she is simply watching this. Or hearing about it in a tale from the safety of a shadowed corner. It can't be real. Amity can't actually be dead.

But it is real. He was killed right in front of her. That is his body lying on the forest floor. His blood mixing with the rainwater and mud.

*This is nothing like training.*

She wants to go home. She doesn't want to be here, in the real world, on a real battlefield. She thought she did, but she was wrong. She never wants to be on a battlefield again.

The Black-Wing turns to face her. His helmet was knocked off in the fight, and she can see his eyes now. They're brown. The sword in his hand is stained with red.

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He takes a step toward her. Shifts his grip on the pommel.

A shudder runs down her spine. She wants to fly away, but she can't. Not with the Wind Weaver just through the brush, waiting to strike her down again. She will either die here or be taken back to the Black-Wing's city and given to the Ascendant.

The Black-Wing takes another step forward. His lips move, but she cannot hear what he says over the roaring in her ears.

No. No. She isn't going to die. Not without a fight.

She shifts her feet. Takes a stance drilled into her muscles by a hundred thousand repetitions. Her talons glitter on her fingers, winking in the light.

The Black-Wing pauses.

She doesn't hesitate. From first position, she shifts into a lunging strike. Her opponent evades. Raises his sword. Says something.

Words don't matter. All that matters is the battle. She can almost hear Father's voice: *Very good, Dear One. Don't let yourself get distracted.*

She shifts into third position. A low crouch, ready to spring up from below. Leaps directly into her next attack. Don't think, just act. Strike, defend. There is nothing else but these two things. Hurt and avoid hurt.

Her opponent answers with a block and kick that catches her in the chest. She lands in a puddle on the forest

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floor. It is warm against her skin. So warm that it burns into her. It isn't rainwater—

No. No. She can't think about that. Her opponent is still standing before her. She isn't finished yet.

She gets back up. Her chest aches. The world seems muffled around her. Has the rain stopped? Too many things are moving around. Branches shifting, the wind whistling through them. Bright spots of flowers.

Her opponent is still. He holds his sword away from himself. The blood hasn't been washed away.

Sloppy.

*Always clean your weapon*, Father admonishes. She shifts back into first position. Launches herself again. He blocks. She darts away. He catches her next blow on the blade of his sword. It bites into her palms where they aren't protected by the gauntlets. She can barely feel it. It all seems too far away and too close at the same time.

She strikes again. Misses as he sidesteps.

She is so tired. Her muscles are screaming, begging for her to stop. Sit down, let them rest. Even her heart seems tired of beating. She can't stop though. She can't fail. She can't lose.

Her opponent—the Black-Wing. She can't lose sight of that. This is a Black-Wing, not just a sparring match—throws her to the ground and holds her by one shoulder.

He pins her right wrist beneath one foot. Her left hand is free. Her arm moves without her telling it to. It rises and swings.

Her talons shine in the light.

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She watches as they glide through the air, as they meet with the flesh of the Black-Wing. As they bite through skin and muscle and bone. Blood splashes over her fingers, over her face.

The Black-Wing falls to the side, fingers grasping at his throat as though he could stop the blood. She can smell it in the air, thick and heavy.

Another wave of blood washes over her hand, like the push and pull of a sea wave. Then one more. Then it stops.

She stares down at the Black-Wing, waiting for him to get up. Waiting for Father to step forward and judge her form, her speed, her reflexes. But this is not sparring. The Black-Wings killed Amity, and now she has killed one of them.

It should feel good, shouldn't it? It should feel like she has done the right thing. She has heard the other soldiers speak of avenging the deaths of their comrades. They brag about the battles they have fought. They are proud of the lives they have taken.

So why does she feel like throwing up? Like screaming and screaming and never stopping. She wants to run away, to hide somewhere in the forest where no one will ever find her again. She wants to turn back time. She doesn't want this to be real.

Someone is shouting. When she looks up, one of the other Black-Wings is staring right at her. No, not at her, at the...the body beneath her. Her knees waver, and she nearly falls