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books

FOURTH WING



REBECCA
YARROS



PIATKUS

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

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



CHAPTER ONE

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

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

I'm so fucked.

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

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

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

Every Navarrian officer, whether they choose to be schooled as healers, scribes, infantry, or riders, is molded within these cruel walls over three years, honed into weapons to secure our mountainous borders from the violent invasion attempts of the kingdom of Poromiel and their gryphon riders. The weak don't survive here, especially not in the Riders Quadrant. The dragons make sure of that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her eyes soften, and her fingers flex on my shoulders like she might

pull me into a hug, but she steps back and turns to stand at my side, facing our mother. “You can’t do this.”

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

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

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

“Well, she certainly isn’t you, is she, Lieutenant Sorrengail?” Mom braces her hands on the immaculate surface of her desk and leans in slightly as she stands, looking us over with narrowed, appraising eyes that mirror the dragons’ carved into the furniture’s massive legs. I don’t need the prohibited power of mind reading to know exactly what she sees.

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

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

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

It’s not the first time I’ve heard her curse the sickness that nearly

killed her while she was pregnant with me or the library Dad made my second home once she'd been stationed here at Basgiath as an instructor and he as a scribe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

My stomach turns over.

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

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

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

"Sending Violet into the Riders Quadrant is tantamount to a death sentence." Guess Mira isn't done arguing. Mira's *never* done arguing with Mom, and the frustrating thing about it is that Mom has always respected her for it. Double standard for the win. "She's not strong enough, Mom! She's already broken her arm this year, she sprains

some joint every other week, and she's not tall enough to mount any dragon big enough to keep her alive in a battle."

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

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

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

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

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

"I never said it was a fault." Mom turns to my sister. "Mira, Violet deals with more pain before lunch than you do in an entire week. If any of my children is capable of surviving the Riders Quadrant, it's her."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mom," I start. "She didn't mean—"

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

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

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

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

Guess there are no meritorious service awards for emotional availability.

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

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

"You won't get any special treatment just because you're my daughter, either. If anything, they'll come after you harder to make you prove yourself." She arches an eyebrow.

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

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

Or dead.

Neither of us says it.

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

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

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

"They'll tell her you said that."

"Like they don't already know," she grinds out through clenched teeth. "Let's go. We only have an hour before all candidates have to

report, and I saw thousands waiting outside the gates when I flew over." She starts walking, leading me down the stone staircase and through the hallways to my room.

Well...it *was* my room.

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

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

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

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

"What are you doing?"

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

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

"I figured. Good. Now, drop your pack and take off those horrible boots." She sorts through the items she's brought, handing me new boots and a black uniform. "Put these on."

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

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

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

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

"I can carry it!" This is all wrong. I'm supposed to be dedicating

my life to books, not throwing them in the corner to lighten my rucksack.

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

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

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

“Probably more,” I admit. “And they’re *venin*, not vermin.”

“Dad and his allegories,” she says. “Just don’t try to channel power without being a bonded rider and red-eyed monsters won’t hide under your bed, waiting to snatch you away on their two-legged dragons to join their dark army.” She retrieves the last book I packed from the rucksack and hands it to me. “Ditch the books. Dad can’t save you. He tried. I tried. Decide, Violet. Are you going to die a scribe? Or live as a rider?”

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

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

“Killing people.” I hand it back to her.

A slow smile spreads across her face. “Good. You can keep that

one. Now, get changed while I sort out the rest of this mess.” The bell rings high above us. We have forty-five minutes.

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

“Keeps it from rubbing,” she explains.

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

“Exactly, because that’s what you’re doing. Going into battle.”

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

“For your daggers.”

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

“You’ll earn more.”

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

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

Minutes later, half of what I packed is piled onto the crates. She’s repacked my rucksack, discarding anything deemed unnecessary and almost everything sentimental while word-vomiting advice about how to survive in the quadrant. Then she surprises me by doing the most sentimental thing ever—telling me to sit between her knees so she can braid my hair into a crown.

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

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

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