

LBRIS

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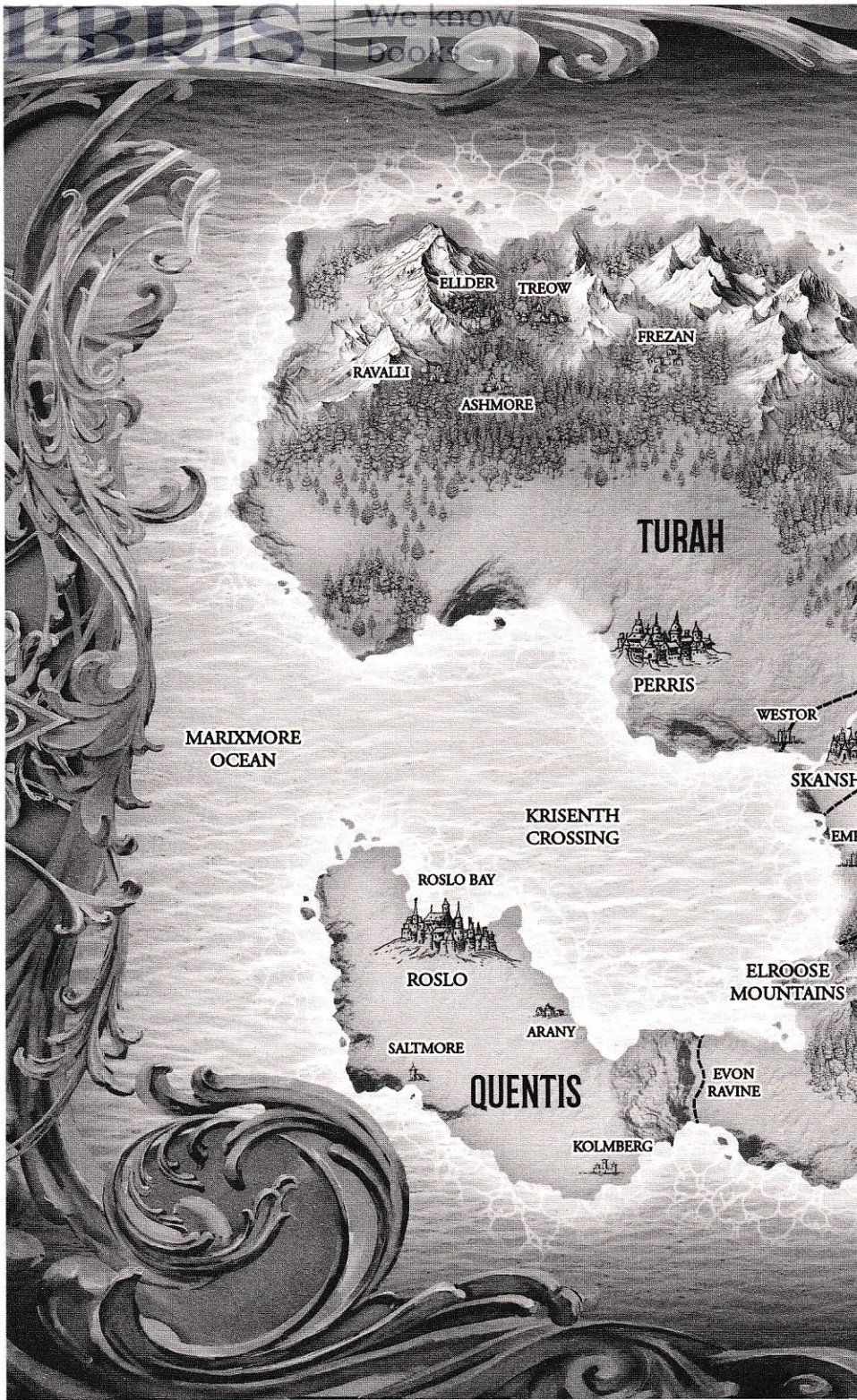
Rites of the Starling

DEVNEY PERRY



RED TOWER
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MARIXMORE
OCEAN

ELDER

TREOW

FREZAN

RAVALLI

ASHMORE

TURAH

PERRIS

WESTOR

SKANSH

KRISENTH
CROSSING

ROSLO BAY

ROSLO

ELROOSE
MOUNTAINS

SALTMORE

ARANY

EVON
RAVINE

QUENTIS

KOLMBERG

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CALANDRA

AXMAR
MOUNTAINS

NORCREST

HARROW RIVER

RIPPELL

OZARTH

GRINT MINE ROAD

OSTAN

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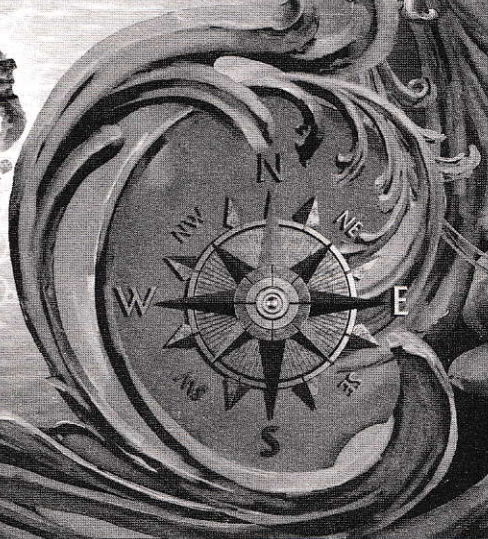
DEPMORE

GENESIS

CLEFTON

CORANESS

JASE



RANSOM

Treow was a tomb.

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

Where was Odessa? She should be here.

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

And as it faded, there was nothing but silence.

A chill skated down my spine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Neither do I."

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

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

"Her hair," Cathlin whispered.

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

And her blood...

"Do you think Odessa knows?"

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

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

"Did they burn the corpse?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Good."

"Where is everyone?" Cathlin asked, searching the trees.

"The watchtowers were empty as I rode past."

"Gone. Treow is deserted."

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

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

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

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

The color drained from Cathlin's cheeks.

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

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

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

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

Odessa's knives.

Blood stained both blades.

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

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

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

"Where is everyone, Mariette?" Cathlin asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Where? Where the fuck was my wife?

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

“Not many. Few survived the night.”

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

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

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

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

“Quentis.”

ODESSA

What if I ran away?

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

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

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

What if I ran away?

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

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

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

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

Evie whimpered, curling deeper into my arms.

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

Faze purred as he nuzzled against my leg.

Water lapped at the shoreline.

My stomach growled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Too numb.

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

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

"We cannot linger," he said.

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

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

"You must, child."

I ground my teeth together to keep quiet.

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

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

From Ransom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I gave her a smile she didn't return.

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

Evie shook her head.

She wasn't eating enough. Neither was I.

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

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

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

What if I ran away? Would he stop us?

I feared his magic enough not to try.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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