

CHAPTER ONE



The day the rains finally came was like any other, with blistering air coating the canyon in a heavy stillness. By late afternoon, the only thing more suffocating than the air was the dust kicked up by our feet. We were as quiet as the dead, moving from rock to crevice, always watching the paths for a sign of movement. Not even a desert hare emerged from the shade. In a way, we were grateful to be left alone, but it was a haunting reminder of what waited for us in the valley below: a village of deserted streets, of wood and mud houses, and of the slow, creaking swing of the well's empty pail.

I crouched beneath the cover of the jutting rocks, my legs aching with exhaustion and my chest as tight as dry leather. The dust was unbearably hot between my fingers, and my knees stung with all the jagged little rocks that dug into

them. I was awful at this game—I was awful when I was a kid and still awful now, years later, when Henry had decided that the best way to watch his little brothers was to play go-seek-find.

Even with all of the hiding places the Sasinou Mountains had to offer, none ever seemed good enough to mask the red hair that grew out of my head in every which way. I wasn't exactly an image of grace and lightness of foot, either.

Earlier that day, Mother had given us a disgusted face when Henry came to our house, begging me to join them in the mountains. For weeks, she had worn the strip of black cloth like armor, knotting it fiercely around her upper arm every morning in the dark since the news had reached Father by post.

Mother and the others her age had grown up with him. They remembered his early ascension to the throne, the many years of pushing Auster's forces from our shores, and had admired him for his fair rule. Three years prior, when the king had married the young, beautiful Eglantine, the entire country celebrated the wedding. To everyone my age, he was a face on a portrait. To our parents, he had been a hero.

"Out playing games—now, of all times? It'll do nothing more than show the young ones how to be disrespectful," she had said, working a slab of dough on the countertop. I gripped the silver pendant around my neck and held my tongue.

"The king's been buried for a month," Henry said gently.

“A month and already forgotten,” she said. “Never thinking of what will become of us, now that the dear old man is gone. The queen is far too young to rule.”

Henry and I shared a look. All of the adults had uttered the same line at one point or another. My father had called a village meeting the night he had received the terrible news. Parents had filed into the great hall, where they remained closed all night, away from the prying ears of children. The queen was a sore subject with my parents. “Too young,” my mother said. “Too inexperienced,” my father added. “Her world is her wardrobe.” All of this was true. Eglantine was only a few years older than I. She had married a man old enough to be her father, and had earned only scorn from the people when she failed to produce an heir to the throne.

The next morning, they all emerged from the meeting with the same pale look of strain. It seemed a pact had been made, and we young people did not learn what it was. But we knew that single letter had done more to shake the roots of our village than any ten-year drought.

At the time, Henry and I were sure that the adults were only worried about Queen Eglantine neglecting the western villages. The king had taken a special interest in the region and had offered the use of the Wizard Guard’s finest wizards to try to coax the rain out of the clouds. When that had proved futile, he set up a peaceful water trade between us and Saldorra, an otherwise hostile country. Our yellow dirt, when mixed with water, could be fired into the hardest ceramics

the world had ever seen. Our sand was the only currency we had.

My mother turned to Henry. “I know that *you* at least have better things to do with your time.”

“We’re done salvaging the corn,” Henry said. “There isn’t much to go around, but Father said it should last at least a month. I’ve finished my chores, and Father and I won’t leave to make the mud deliveries until tomorrow morning.”

My mother stopped kneading, her hands releasing the battered dough. She glanced up through the small window that overlooked our bit of land.

“Sydelle, did you start the blanket for Mrs. Anders?”

I nodded, my eyes drifting back to the loom leaning against the wall. All Mrs. Anders wanted was a yellow blanket to help hide the dust tracked into her rickety little home. I would be done in a day, maybe two.

“All right, but take the basket and bring back some dry root. I need to grind a new batch for your father after you ruined the last of it with your clumsy hands.”

Henry said, “We’ll find enough to last for the next few months, I promise.”

And then, amazingly, she let us go.

* * *

Three hours later, I had stayed crouched down behind the rocks until my knees were shaking with pain—and just as I

was about to launch myself forward, Henry appeared beside me, grinning like a kid. I let out a small, surprised squeak. He held a finger to his lips.

I thought, not for the first time that day, that something was a bit off. We hadn't had this heavy a cloud cover in years, and Henry's tan skin and brown hair were looking unusually dulled. He faded easily back into the mountains. My pale skin, burned pink by the sun, made my efforts to hide all the more difficult.

He crawled past me, sticking his head out to gauge whether his brothers were still around.

"I think I lost them a ways back," he said. "Ready?"

"Why do I have to go first?" I complained. "You always make me go first—even when we were ten."

"And six years later," he whispered back, "I still like you enough to give you the glory of the capture, Sydelle Mirabil. Don't forget we have our honor to uphold."

"You mean *your* honor," I said. "Against your six-year-old brothers. If one of those demons hits me with a rock, you're taking my chores for a week."

Henry glanced out one more time and nodded. I sprang forward, heading for the scrap of fabric tied to the trunk of the hollow tree. Henry was right behind me, his long legs carrying him quickly across the small path. Above us, we heard the cries of the twins and the thudding of the rocks they launched in our direction. Demons.

Something did hit me. Something wet, which might have

been sweat had it not been so cool. It rolled down the back of my neck, nearly jolting me from my skin. At first, I didn't recognize it for what it was. It had been years, literally *years*.

I whirled around to face Henry, to see if he had felt it, too. He was staring up into the sky, his eyes wide. The twins launched one last rock from the cliffs overhead. It fell inches from my feet, but I didn't move. There was a moment of absolute silence before the thunder cracked and the sky opened.

We were drenched in a moment. The rain fell from the sky in heavy, fat drops. I let out a choked sound, half delight, half surprise. Henry and I stared at each other, holding our breath for fear it would be over just as quickly as it had begun. We had been six, maybe seven at the last rain, but the twins hadn't been born yet. They looked up at the sky, and it was clear by the looks on their faces that they were mystified.

"Come on!" Henry said, turning to run. "Allan! John!"

"My basket!" I said.

"Get it later," Henry insisted.

"I'll meet you down there," I said. "Just go—you have to watch your brothers."

The twins charged down the steep trail and passed right by us. We could hear shouts from the valley below, the village waking from its long, dry slumber.

Henry gave me a long look. Was he honestly worried I would get lost? I watched the rain smear the dust on his

cheeks into long, snaking lines and smiled. That was just the kind of friend he was, ready to fall over himself with concern.

“Go!” I said, giving him a playful push. We turned away from each other at the same moment, he back toward the village, barely visible through the sheet of rain. I was heading up, to the highest point of the canyon.

It had been raining for less than a minute, and already the dust had melted into patches of sticky mud. The raindrops were fat and unrelenting—a feast after a ten-year famine.

I stumbled over the loose rocks, but I never stopped, not even for a moment. I wanted to be in the village, to hear the songs and prayers. To see the look on my mother’s face, and the weight lifted from my father’s shoulders. Each raindrop was sending up a little splatter of dust, and I had never seen the dirt so dark as it was in that moment. The cracked, withered soil seemed to melt together beneath my feet.

When the men from Saldorra came to trade their water for our mud, I thought, wouldn’t they be surprised at what they found.

The scent of rain and dust was dizzyingly wonderful, and I wished for a bottle to capture it. A new blanket practically wove itself in my mind, and I could see how to bring the blues together with the silvers and browns. I could almost imagine what the village would look like spotted with green. We wouldn’t be forced to work so hard, every single day. The possibilities were freeing beyond my wildest dreams.

I found my basket right where I had left it, where the sun could dry the roots that Henry and his brothers had helped me pull from the ground. They were a soggy mess, but I didn't think my mother would mind.

I wrapped my arms around the basket, holding it closely to my chest, breathing deeply. I would stay up here a little while longer, where only the rain could touch me.

The voices from the village below were just as pronounced as before, even with the fierce pattering of rain against the rocks. Only now, the joy was gone, the songs suddenly replaced by shouts coming from the opposite direction of the village.

I pushed the wet hair off my cheeks and was to the ledge in three short steps, bracing my basket against my hip.

There were horses and men in the field just beyond the mountain, hundreds of them. Their scarlet uniforms were a blur from my vantage point, a long, twisting line of men and beasts.

My eyes drifted along the river of red, twisting down the pass. Behind the first group of horses were wagons, their wheels now trapped in the yellow mud. It looked as if the soldiers behind them were pushing vainly as the horses struggled to pull them free.

They weren't bringing in the usual trade of water.

I took a step back, colliding with something solid, my startled cry muffled by a hand. I was pulled away from the ledge, spinning toward the overhang of rock.

“Don’t scream,” someone said in my ear. “I’m going to let you go, but don’t scream, all right?”

I nodded, holding my basket tightly.

The man let me go without a moment’s hesitation. I whirled around, the basket coming up to smack the side of his face. He staggered back, but before I could bolt past him, he had me by the arm again, and this time his grip wasn’t as forgiving.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. I kept my eyes diverted, looking for a way to escape, to overpower him. He wouldn’t let me; he hauled me around and pinned me there. The happiness in my heart was entirely gone, replaced by fear.

The stranger wasn’t dressed in a Saldorra uniform as I would have expected a scout to be, but in simple clothes. He looked to be about my age, maybe a few years older. I watched the rain drip down the length of his long nose and collect in his dark, uncombed hair. There was a small cut on his face where the sharp edge of my basket had caught his skin, but it was nothing compared to the bruise on his other cheek.

I let myself admit that he had a roguish charm about him. Some hint of softness in his eyes, at least. No, he wasn’t a soldier, but he was still a stranger, a vagabond, maybe. Even if I hadn’t seen his face, his worn boots and torn cloak would have told his story. The pressure of his hand on my arm became nearly unbearable, yet it wasn’t until I let out a gasp of pain that he released me.

“Are you from the village?” His words came out in an urgent rush. “From Cliffton?”

I nodded. “Why are the soldiers here? Do you have any idea why—”

“Can you take me to the elder?”

“My father?” At that, I did take a step back.

“Is he in the village now?” I wasn’t sure how to respond, and he must have been able to tell. He took my arm again, this time far more gently. “You can trust me, I’m here to help you. Is your father in the village, or has he left for the capital?”

The sound of horses and men below drifted in and out of my ears. I searched for a reason to distrust him, but instead I saw the desperation in his face, the real concern.

He had a kind face, even with the dirt, even with his wounds.

“Yes,” I said finally. “He is. I can take you to him.”

He took my other arm, pulling me toward him so quickly the basket slipped from my hands. It was the last sound that reached my ears, for in the next moment even the rain disappeared. The man brought his black cloak up around us, pulling me close to him. The world spun away under our feet. I felt my stomach lurch and the explosion of pain behind my eyes, and just as quickly, darkness fell over us.

* * *

I woke, not in the yellow mud of the mountains, but in the dark chill of my room, under a pile of blankets. Somehow, the afternoon had fallen into night without my knowing it. If the slow growl of thunder and the steady pattering of rain hadn't been there to greet me as I opened my eyes, the entire day might have been a dream.

How had I gotten down from the pass? I had slipped and knocked my head against the rocks before, but never so badly as to lose all recollection of it. And the stranger, what about him?

"Sydelle, are you awake?" Mother whispered. I turned my head and allowed the dizziness to wash over me. The usual rasp in her voice was gone.

"What's happened?" I asked, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. She held a candle up to her face, its flickering light catching the strands of her pale hair. My loom had been disassembled and moved from the main room of the house.

"That man I met in the mountains—is he here?"

There was sadness in her eyes where I had expected to find anger. I didn't know whether to be relieved or frightened by it.

"I'm sorry about the roots," I said quickly. "When the rain clears, I'll find more."

She brought the candle closer to my face, and, for the first time, the warmth it provided was a relief. My hair and dress were still damp, and the rain had cooled the air enough for me to shiver beneath the blankets.

“I’ll go tell your father you’re awake,” she said. “He’s with our guest.”

My mother left without another word, leaving me alone, my questions still unanswered. I sat up slowly, wishing she had left the candle with me. All I could make out in the darkness was my loom and the shape of my father’s leather bag next to it on the floor. It looked full. What had the man asked—if my father had left for the capital yet?

“ . . . would you . . . Sydelle . . . it’s . . . ”

The words came in soft fragments. I strained my ears past the slow drumming of rain to the conversation on the other side of the wall. Layers of mud and plaster muffled the voices, but the stranger’s rich voice was clear, almost as if he was in my room.

“ . . . from the capital?” asked my father.

“No, but I have spent a great amount of time there,” the stranger replied after a long pause.

“Just how old are you, Mr. . . . ?”

“North,” the man said, neatly sidestepping my father’s question. “Wayland North, if you’d prefer.”

“What are you doing around our parts?” Henry’s father asked. I hadn’t realized he was there. “It’s unusual to find a wizard so far west, given that we’re so close to Saldorra and they don’t take kindly to your . . . kind.”

A wizard, I thought numbly. The word rolled around inside of me. That man had been a wizard, one of Astraea’s disciples . . . and I had been so disrespectful. Had he brought the rain?

“After the king was murdered, some of the details didn’t align for me,” said the wizard. “I needed proof, so I traveled west.”

I pressed my ear up against the wall.

“We were told the poison came from Auster. Are you saying that it came from Saldorra?” my father asked. His voice was too calm—I almost couldn’t hear it above the pounding in my ears. *Poison?* Henry and I had guessed an illness, an accident perhaps . . . but murder . . .

Wayland North let out a sharp laugh. “I have it on good authority that the wizards haven’t the slightest idea where the poison came from. They only know it was put in his nightly glass of wine.”

“So we’ve declared war against Auster for nothing?” Mr. Porter asked, and I didn’t need to be by the wall to hear him. “On a whim—a guess? Did the Wizard Guard send you out here to search for information?”

“The Guard is still pursuing Auster as the primary culprit,” the wizard said. “You have to understand that if we go to war with them, it won’t be because they killed our king. With the king dead, Auster’s king is claiming his right to the throne.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Mr. Porter said.

“No,” my father said. “It’s not. The king of Auster is his second cousin, the last of his living relatives, and you know as well as I do that our laws say that a woman cannot inherit the throne, regardless of circumstances.”

“You said a law had been introduced to change that,” Mr. Porter said, “on the chance that the queen didn’t deliver a male heir.”

“There was to be a vote on it next month,” Father said. “We can vote it in, but there’s a real possibility that Auster won’t recognize the law as valid.”

“They’ve been waiting for an excuse to invade the country under legitimate circumstances,” North said. “Saldorra’s soldiers will join their forces. I would say they’re maybe half a day from overtaking your village.”

“Sydelle!” a voice hissed. I started, tearing myself away from the wall. It had come from outside, slipping through the small hole in my wall that was meant to be a window, without glass or fabric.

“*Delle!*” It was Henry. If he had been any louder, the entire village would have heard him. I looked out to see him hunkered down in the mud, drenched straight through his clothes.

“What?” I asked, annoyed.

“Are you all right? I waited for you in the market,” he said. “And out of nowhere you appeared with the wizard—I thought you were dead, you were so pale. Did you faint?”

“Not now!” I whispered. “I’ll tell you everything tomorrow, just go!”

I didn’t wait to see if he would listen. Two steps later and my ear was back against the wall, catching the wizard’s voice.

“. . . and they won't stop,” North said. “I used the rain to slow them as much as I could—I didn't realize it would be such a help to you.”

“You have no idea what you've done for us in bringing the rain. I can't even begin to fathom how you succeeded where other wizards have failed,” my father said. He sounded tired. “Anything we can give in return, *anything*, we'll give you.”

“If you're still willing to give up what we discussed before, then there's nothing more I could ask for.” North cleared his throat. “But we shouldn't stay much longer. Auster and the officials in Provincia have agreed on a two-month deadline to try to resolve this without magic and sword, but I'm afraid it will take me just as long to get there, and I don't trust the mail service to deliver the report safely.”

“I insist you stay the night, then. You look worn—even your cloaks need looking after.”

I sat up a little straighter on the floor, tucking my legs beneath me. I knew what was coming.

“They all do, I'm afraid,” North said. “I saw a bit more action in Saldorra than I had expected. But wizard tailors are pricey, and I haven't been across one in a few months. I have an entire country to cross, and less than two months to do it. It'll have to wait until I get to Provincia.”

“Nonsense, my daughter will do the same for free.”

“It requires a bit of skill—” North protested.

“She's the best in the village, I assure you,” he said. “Sydelle!”

I stood quickly, brushing the dust from my dress and hands. He called my name again, impatient as always.

Only the wizard looked up at me when I entered our sitting room. Jugs of water and plates of our precious bread were scattered on the table's surface.

"Sydelle, you'll mend Mr. North's cloaks and show him to your room," Father said. "You can stay with your mother and me for the night."

I nodded and said nothing, though it killed me not to ask the questions that were running through my mind. If I embarrassed my father now by opening my mouth, I wouldn't hear the end of it for months—probably years, knowing his legendary temper.

North stood and stretched. I waited until he came toward me, close enough to smell the mix of sweat and rain clinging to his clothing and skin, and to see the dark circles under his eyes.

"You don't have to mend them," North said as we entered my small room. "Honestly, they've been far worse."

I watched him out of the corner of my eye, studying him as I would a book or drawing. How could I not? He was the only wizard I'd ever seen—in all likelihood, the only wizard I ever would see. It seemed so strange to have him look so ordinary. After all the stories I'd read about their adventures and magic, I never expected them to look like any man or woman. There was only one difference, slight enough that I almost missed it, and that was the warmth that surrounded

him, a warmth that was so much softer than the heat of our sun.

“Are you afraid I’ll ruin them?” I asked, assessing my small supply of thread and needles. He lifted the cloaks one by one, and I was startled to see how many there actually were—black, red, green, blue, yellow. Why did he need so many?

“I’m sure you’re very good,” he said. “But these cloaks are special. Do you know anything about how magic works?”

I shook my head. “Not in the least.”

“Well . . . ,” North began. “These cloaks are what I use for magic. If they’re not mended carefully, I won’t be able to use them.”

I held out my hand, still unable to look him fully in the eye.

“I’ll be careful,” I said.

North sighed. “One to begin with, all right?”

He tried untying them from around his neck, but the strings had become badly knotted, and his gloved hands were shaking so badly that I had to do it myself. The moment my hands touched him, he stilled.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Fine. A bit tired.”

“Are you sure?” I said, watching him more carefully now.

He nodded, holding perfectly still as I worked on the stubborn knots.

“Thank you for bringing me back to the village,” I said. “I don’t know that I’ve ever fainted before. I guess I was more overwhelmed than I thought.”

“And here I thought you swooned at the sight of me.” He gave me a crooked smile.

“Do you do this a lot?” he asked, when I had finally pulled the cloaks free and placed them in his arms. I didn’t answer, but accepted the yellow cloak as he handed it to me. They were made from a thin wool: rough but sturdy. I set to work immediately, sinking down next to him on my small pile of bedding. He glanced around the room, at my half-finished blankets and the small scenes of Clifton I had created with yellow, brown, and red thread. His eyes fell on the silver circle on my wall, a larger version of my necklace. I would have to pray beneath the one in my parents’ room that night.

“It’s not much,” I said. “I’m sorry I don’t have a bed for you.”

“No, no,” North said quickly. “It’s not that. I’m just surprised that you’re a weaver.”

“Why is that?” I asked, pulling together a jagged tear in the stained yellow cloak.

“I just meant that you’re very young to be so good. At weaving, I mean.”

“I’ll have you know that I just turned sixteen,” I said, knotting the thread and cutting the excess. “Aren’t *you* a little young to be a wizard?”

“I’ll have you know that I just turned eighteen,” he said, mimicking my tone almost perfectly. “That’s four years out of apprenticeship and two years your elder.”

So much for wizards and their legendary kindness and

courtesy. He was no different than any of the boys I had grown up with.

“Very funny,” I said. “A wizard *and* a joker.”

North shrugged, still looking around. “I see red . . . yellow . . . brown . . . ah, a little green, and of course Palmarta purple—no blue?”

“Why would I have blue?” I asked, giving him a sidelong glance. “We haven’t seen a drop of rain in years.”

He glanced up, toward the old blanket I had strung over my bed. What had once been an expertly woven image of Provincia’s castle and its surrounding lake was now faded and stained.

“Ah, but there’s a little blue!” he said, craning his neck for a better look. “That’s a decent likeness. Have you been to the capital?”

“Of course not,” I said. “That was given to me by a woman who was traveling across the country selling her work. She gave me the blanket and told me to meet her in Andover when I was old enough.”

“And when will you be old enough?”

“When I’m born in a different village in another lifetime,” I said.

“But you want to go,” North said. He bit the side of his thumb, his expression troubled. It was not long before his eyes found the old map of Palmarta tacked up in the soft plaster of my wall. Each circle of string marked a city where Henry had traveled, making deliveries of our yellow dust. With Auster

to the east and Saldorra to the west, our country looked ready to be swallowed whole.

“What I want will always be different from what everyone else wants for me,” I said, knotting the thread.

“You’re talented enough, if you really do want it,” North said. “You could support yourself if you settled in a city.”

I shook my head, surprised at the prick of anger inside me. He could flit in and out of towns and cities at will. I should never have brought the old woman up in the first place, but every time I looked at the blanket, I could feel her soft, wrinkled palms as she had brushed the dirt from my cheeks.

“Would you leave,” he asked, “if you could?”

“It’s not my choice,” I said. “It must be nice to go wherever you want. Have you decided how you’re getting to Provincia?”

He shrugged. “I’m taking the most direct route possible, cutting straight through the center of the country. There are a few cities like Dellark and Fairwell along the way, but I’ll be spending most of my time outdoors. You could start over, buy yourself a new, bigger loom—”

“Never,” I said. “That’s my loom, and it’s the only one I want to use.”

The loom had been with me since I was a little girl, watching my grandmother weave her own blankets and stories into it. It was an extension of me, as familiar as the face of my father. It had always been an escape—from drought and from every painful emotion.

I handed him the yellow cloak, watching as he turned it over in his hands, inspecting my work.

“Your father wasn’t lying,” he said. “But now comes the real test.”

He threw the yellow cloak into the air, and it disappeared from sight. Impossibly, a strong breeze blew past us. It shook the hanging blankets and sent my mass of red curls up around my face. A moment later, the yellow cloak reappeared in front of the wizard, floating gently back into his hands.

The wizard turned his face toward me, his dark eyes studying me with a mixture of shock and fascination. His pale face was drained of what little color it had possessed before, and he twisted the yellow fabric so roughly between his fists that I thought it might tear. He didn’t move—he looked to be barely breathing.

“You . . . ,” he began, his voice low with disbelief. “You’re really . . . ”

I waited for him to continue, but the words never came and his eyes never left mine.

“Sleep well,” I said, standing. “Let me know if you need something. There’s a basin in the corner if you’d like to wash up before praying.”

“I don’t,” he said.

“Don’t what?” I said incredulously. “Don’t pray?”

He lowered his eyes.

“Sydelle?” he said, just as I was about to step through the doorway. He was still holding the yellow cloak in his hands.

“I know you were listening to what I told your father. If you can find the courage to leave, then you need to go soon . . . before things are set in motion.”

“Then the war . . .” I almost couldn’t get the words out. “Then it’ll really happen?”

“It’s happening now,” he said. “Your village must prepare for the worst. Saldorra is Auster’s western ally. It’s only a matter of time before they reach you.”

“Astraea will protect us,” I said. “We trade with Saldorra, they’d never—”

“It would be better if you could protect yourself,” he said, and blew out the candle.

Hours later, as I turned restlessly on a blanket on my parents’ floor, his words returned, until I was sure that they would be burned there forever, that they would follow me into sleep every night. *It would be better if you could protect yourself.*

I listened to the rain and wondered.