

CROWN OF OBLIVION

Prologue

Four years ago

Lightning flashes. For a moment, the nighttime world beyond this dormitory window is as bright as if it were noon. The green hedge that hems in the yard appears, and beyond it, the gray palace wall. Then just as quickly everything's black again, and I count under my breath.

One . . .

Two . . .

Three . . .

Four . . .

Five . . . Thunder rolls across the roof.

Five. The storm is almost here.

Another flash, but this time, there's something else out there. Between the hedge and the wall. A boy. I forget to count. It was just a glimpse, but I thought it could be my brother Jayden.

Then the thunder, so close my bones rattle, and then another flash, and the boy is gone. A tree branch scratches at the outside of the glass. *Not him, not him, not him*, I whisper to myself.

By the time the rain starts, I'm sure it wasn't Jayden, or anyone else. Something, but not a boy. A deer maybe. It doesn't matter. The rain is coming down so hard now I can't see out, even with the lightning, and this game I'm playing with myself is done. The rain roars against the slate roof, loud enough to wake the other girls, so I hurry back to my cot and pull the covers halfway over my face before anyone can catch a glimpse of me in my nightgown.

But being quick is not enough. A few of the girls are already awake. Behind me, Lily whispers something to the girl in the cot beside her. I tell myself she's talking about something else. But then Dina murmurs under her breath, "Did you see her scars?"

It's nothing, I tell myself. *Let it go*. But all I want to do is sit up and scream at them to mind their own business. I don't need their pity.

"Knock it off, you two." It's the voice of Mrs. Whittaker, and now it's so much worse. I wish she hadn't heard, but the storm is loud enough to wake most of the twenty girls in the room. I'm sure they're all listening now. "If Astrid weren't under that whip, don't you realize one of *you* might be? It's not just the princess she's sparing, but every one of you."

No one says a word after that.

Could she be right? I suppose if I weren't the princess's surrogate, one of these other girls would be, so maybe what she says is true. Maybe I'm not just suffering in Renya's place, but in theirs, too. Though I don't know if I want to think about that. I don't want to resent all these girls in the same way I already resent Renya.

The siren interrupts my thoughts.

It's so loud, it drowns out even the rain and wakes any of the girls who were still sleeping. Everyone sits up. Embers flash in the dark like red fireflies. Whispers pass from cot to cot. Everyone is wondering who the siren is for, who's been discovered missing. Lightning flashes again, and I remember the boy I thought I'd seen through the window. I pull the sheet off and sit up, and just at that moment a figure appears in the doorway with a light in her hands. The light points down, but even in the dark, the mix of authority and anxiety I feel flowing from her tells me it's Renya. I wonder how much she heard.

She flips on the overhead light.

“Princess!” cries Mrs. Whittaker, and I can tell she’s wondering, too.

“I’m sorry to disturb you all, Mrs. Whittaker,” Renya says, though it’s clear from her tone she’s not sorry at all. “I need to speak with Astrid right away.” She sounds like a schoolteacher speaking to a roomful of children, but I know her too well. There’s a shiver when she says my name. There’s more than a little fear in her.

“Of course!” Mrs. Whittaker’s voice is the chirp of an anxious bird.

Renya is in a hurry. She grabs me by the arm and pulls me out through the door.

“Slow down,” I say. I don’t ask why she’s come to drag me from my bed in the middle of the night. I think of the siren and the boy outside in the rain, and I decide I don’t want to know.

“You’re going to pull my arm off.”

But Princess Renya doesn’t slow, and it isn’t until we’re descending the back steps that she speaks to me at all. Here, tucked inside layers of the palace’s stone walls, the thunder’s just a muted murmur. The light Renya holds bounces off the smooth plaster walls of the narrow stairway, so that, wrapped in her white dressing gown, her auburn waves tossed across her shoulders, Renya’s silhouette suggests an angel or a ghost. I feel all too human beside her in my thin nightgown, my slipperless feet cold against the tiles. “It’s Jayden,” she whispers, and I know what she’s about to say, but I don’t want to hear it. I want to go back to my cot in the dormitory. “He wasn’t in his bed tonight. The siren is for Jayden.”

“I saw him,” I say, wishing I could just stay quiet, wishing I could keep it a secret and somehow make it not true. “Just before the storm. He was running toward the palace wall. I saw him through the dormitory window.”

Renya pulls me into a dark corner at the bottom of the second set of stairs and shuts off her light. It smells like mold down here, but that’s not the reason my stomach is sick. “They’re going

to be looking for you,” Renya says. Her fingers are digging into my arm. “Sir Arnaud will want you to help him find Jayden. He’ll want to use you to form a bridge.”

She’s talking about a Pontium bridge, strong magic. Magic that could be used to track my brother through his connection to me.

“So what are we doing? Hiding?”

“We’re going to find him first.” Renya drags me into a room at the end of the corridor. It’s windowless and pitch-black, but I don’t have to see to know where I am. This is the room with the whipping post. A room I know too well. Every cell in my body seems to flinch, as if even the darkness that fills this room could hurt me. “If I bridge to him, you can warn him. Convince him to come back before they drag him back.”

I shake my head, though in this thick darkness, Renya can’t see me. “I’ll try,” I say. I want to tell her he’s so stubborn I doubt he’ll listen to me, but she knows Jayden well enough to know. Still, the words are on my lips when I flip the switch and the overhead bulb throws light across the walls.

We both gasp, and my hand flies to my mouth. The whipping post stands in the center of the room, like the stump of a young tree that was cut down before it could grow. The sight of it never fails to make me sick, but that’s not what just punched me in the gut. I expected it. It’s always here. But I hadn’t expected to see wet blood splattered across the back wall, dark and red and angry.

Jayden’s blood. It must be. It’s not mine—Renya’s been on good behavior, and I haven’t received lashes in weeks—so it can only be Jayden’s. Like me, he’s a surrogate. I suffer for Renya’s wrongs, and my brother suffers for the wrongs of Prince Lars.

Something must have happened. Whatever Lars did, it must've been serious and it must've been tonight. Jayden and I walked back together from Papa's tiny apartment just a few hours ago. He'd been happy and whole, teasing me about the storm. Now he's out there in it, rain washing the blood down his back.

I spin to face Renya. "Are you sure you can?"

"Do you doubt me?" I think she'd smile if she weren't standing in a room splattered with my brother's blood.

"Of course not," I say.

Parents and children, siblings, lovers—all those bound by Pontium energy—can be connected by a Pontium bridge, but the bridge is only as strong as the practitioner's magic. I might not know a lot about Enchanted magic, but I know more than most Outsiders do, and I've never seen anyone with Pontium as strong as Renya's.

The slashes of red seem to pulse against the bright white walls, and I can't wait for the bridge to take me out of here.

Renya stands in the center of the room with her eyes closed and her hands upraised. I'll never get used to the sound. If the power that moves the highest clouds across the sky had a sound, this metallic hum would be it.

It's not long before the light changes. The white walls, the red stains, the bare bulb hanging by a wire overhead all dim as the room is washed white, bleached by a blinding light. By the time the sound fades to a reedy tone, a window of sorts opens in front of me.

And there he is.

My older brother, Jayden, crouches on his knees in front of an open cupboard, packing a knapsack with food, which honestly makes me quite angry, because I know our father can't

possibly have enough to spare. He's been sick—so sick he's in danger of losing his indenture at the foundry—but he would give any of his children his last piece of bread if they asked for it. I can't see anyone but Jayden, but I hear my seven-year-old brother, Marlon, singing a song.

Well, one line of a song, over and over. Marlon repeats a lot. The staff at the Outsider clinic call it a *vocal tic*. It gets worse when he's stressed, or sometimes when he's happy. Right now I'd guess he's excited his big brother is home in the middle of the night. He's too little to know what happens to an indentured Outsider who is caught running away.

Jayden's black hair is plastered to his forehead with rain, but he whips it out of his face and looks up when he notices the change in the light. His eyes meet mine, and though he tries to hide his true reaction, he can't fool me. I see his shoulders flinch and the rapid blinks before his eyes narrow.

"Renya," he says. "I was expecting you. Who's there with you, besides my sister?"

"It's just me," I say. "For now. But they'll find us soon enough, and when they do, they'll find you, too. There's no hiding from Pontium, Jayden. You know that. And if Renya can reach you through me, then Sir Arnaud, the prince, the king . . . all of them will be able to reach you through me, too."

"Thanks for the warning," he says, "but even Pontium has a limit, and I plan to stay out of its range."

I suppose I should feel encouraged by the thought of Jayden running so far away that Pontium can't reach him, but I just feel hollow, imagining my brother that far from me. Hollow, imagining the space in my heart that Jayden currently occupies, empty. I feel like I can see that space, like a bare bulb hangs inside it like the bare bulb above my head right now, and if I would

let myself look at it, it would terrify me, just like the empty space my mother used to occupy terrifies me.

“Tell him to come back,” says Renya, her voice thin and wispy, as though she’s far behind me, like the Pontium bridge is a long tunnel of energy and she hasn’t come all the way through.

“Please come back,” I say.

“Astrid, you know that’s silly. You know there’s no turning around for me now.”

He’s crouching beside the table where I sat with him at dinner tonight. There used to be five of us at that table when our mother was still alive. Starting tomorrow, there will never be more than three.

Jayden must hear something outside. His eyes widen as his body goes still. He reminds me of a feral cat, and at this moment, I know he won’t come back. Worse, I know he shouldn’t.

Maybe Renya thinks there’s hope in begging him to return, but really, what kind of hope is there? His previous life is over. I realize that now. If they catch him, he’s dead. Quickly, if he’s lucky. Slowly, if he’s not. The princess may believe she could convince them to be lenient, but she’s almost certainly wrong. That’s not a precedent they can afford to set.

I watch him as he closes up his knapsack, still crouching on the kitchen floor. The dim red pulse of his embed peeks out above the neckline of his tunic, like a heartbeat. I can hear our father, just outside the circle of the bridge, telling little Marlon to go hug his brother goodbye. After all this time I’d expect the bridge to shrink, but somehow Renya expands it, so that the circle engulfs my father in his chair with my younger brother on his lap.

“Astrid!” Marlon, so innocently ignorant, laughs with glee, and the sound cracks my heart like it’s made of glass. He reaches for me, but pouts when he can’t quite feel my hand.

Here in the palace I hear voices at my back, just beyond the closed door. It swings open and bangs against the wall, and Sir Arnaud is suddenly breathing on my hair, peering over my shoulder at Jayden as he climbs to his feet. Prince Lars is right on his heels. He tumbles through the door and groans when his eyes land on Jayden.

“Perfect,” Arnaud says. “You’ve already formed the bridge.” He looks into my face, and somehow he smiles at what he sees there. “Don’t look so surprised,” he says. “You should’ve known I’d find you, Astrid. My skills with Cientia may be nowhere near as strong as the princess’s skills with Pontium, but I was able to track your fear from three floors above.”

I refuse to cry, especially not here in front of Arnaud, who I’m quite certain held the whip as this insane amount of my brother’s blood was flung across these walls. Or in front of Prince Lars, either. One word slips though the prince’s lips—my brother’s name, as if it were a prayer. The rest of us stand as still and silent as the whipping post.

But Marlon, still grasping at the Pontium shadow of my hand, has something to say. “Look, Jayden!” He needs a haircut. His straight black hair, so much like Jayden’s, hangs in his eyes. With one movement, he swipes it away and points to Lars. “Your friend.”

“No,” says Jayden. “He’s not my friend. Not anymore.”

Marlon says something else. “*Weeooo, weeooo, weeooo.*” He’s mimicking a siren he hears. The Enchanted Authority must already be searching the streets of the camp.

Right beside my ear, Arnaud is switching on his comm. He tips the camera end toward Jayden, broadcasting an image of his face. “This is a general call to all units of the Authority,” he says. “The runaway has been located by Pontium bridge. He is inside a residence in Camp Hope. . . .” Arnaud turns the comm toward me and swipes it once in front of the embed that flashes red at the base of my throat. My family’s address appears on his screen and he reads it out loud.

“Three Front Street. Unit twenty-seven.” He has the nerve to look me in the eye again. For a moment, there is a tiny fragment of compassion in his gaze, but his mouth is set in a hard, merciless line. “As always, deadly force is authorized if the runaway cannot be apprehended alive.”

Shouts can be heard from beyond the boundaries of the Pontium bridge. Guards are already hammering on my father’s front door. Renya’s bridge shifts and focuses, and my eyes lock on my father—so frail I had to help him to the dinner table tonight—as he struggles to get to his feet. Marlon tugs at his hands, playfully trying to help him from the chair. Something splinters loudly, and men’s voices fill the room. Marlon begins to wail.

“Where is the boy?!” It’s one of the King’s Knights, pulling Marlon off his feet by his belt.

“Hey!” I shout. “He’s only a child!”

Marlon’s legs pump the air like they’re treading the sea. The Knight screams into his face, “Where is the runaway?!”

“Where is the runaway?!” Marlon repeats. I cringe, afraid the Knight will slap him for this perceived insolence, but he only drops him and shoves him out of sight.

The Knight, a big man drenched through with rain, turns and faces Arnaud. I notice for the first time that the bridge has been steadily shrinking. Now it’s no wider than the shoulders of this man. I can’t remember when it last showed Jayden.

“Make a thorough search!” Arnaud shouts. Water drips from the Knight’s scarlet-lined cape, collecting into a puddle at his feet. “He was just there. I saw him with my own eyes.”

Authority guards push into the apartment, the first Knight moves out of view, and my father’s chair is knocked into the frame, spilling him to the floor. Marlon stumbles toward him,

his forehead bloody. “Papa!” he cries, struggling to help him up. But Papa stays down. His only reply is a ragged cough.

“Extend the bridge!” Sir Arnaud demands, as I drop to my knees and reach for my father, but of course I can’t touch him.

All at once the Pontium bridge collapses. Marlon, my father, the Authority guards, and the Knight—they are all gone.

The room goes silent. My ears are ringing. Sir Arnaud shouts at Renya to reopen the bridge, but she shakes her head. She is ashen and breathing hard. “Out of strength,” she says.

Arnaud is not a large man. I’ve always thought of him as dignified and fine, like a sculpture of a man come to life. This may be the first time I’ve seen his hair—wavy and quite thick for a man old enough to be my own father—so disheveled and out of place. His eyes blaze, but then he runs a hand across his mouth and sets his jaw. “This is not personal,” he says to me. He doesn’t know my secret, that I have Cientia myself. That I knew at the moment Jayden slipped away and bested him, it became quite personal to him indeed.

“We know where he is, and he won’t be able to outrun us,” he says, but I know he’s not as sure as he sounds, and that fills me with hope. “We’ll get him.”

The echoes of his boots recede as he follows Lars along the corridor. Still on my knees, I cover my face with my hands.

“Not if he’s fast enough,” Renya whispers.

“Run, Jayden,” I say into my cupped palms. I know I should be quiet, but I can’t help but scream, “Run!”