

EVERYTHING

My engagement bash is the talk of the feeds.

It should be.

My dress is spectacular—an azure sheath orbited by hovering metal shards. My publicity team designed it, using crowd metrics and flash polls. It was big news, Rafia of Shreve letting randoms choose her outfit.

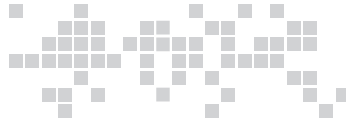
But the dress is nothing compared to my fiancé: Col Palafox, the first son of Victoria. The leader of a guerrilla army, until a month ago, when he attacked my father's city and lost everything.

Our families are at war, you see. Col is our prisoner as well as my betrothed. Engagements don't get much better than this.

The feeds love it. They're calling us the most logic-missing couple of the mind-rain. The scandal of the season.

Wait till they watch me kill my father on my wedding day.

Wait till they find out that I was never really me.



“Rafia?” my room asks. “Dona Oliver is here to see you.”

Rafia isn’t my name, but I answer, “Let her in.”

The door slides open. My father’s secretary wears a distracted look, her eyes glinting with data. All those details swirling around the party, like the hovercams around this tower, waiting for luminaries to arrive.

“We’ve added something to tomorrow’s schedule,” Dona says. “A public appearance, just the two of you.”

I try not to flinch. “Dad and me?”

She shakes her head. “You and Col, so the citizens of Shreve can see you together. Give them your *best* smile, he said.”

“This one?” My lips curl, a perfect imitation of my twin sister.

But the smile doesn’t impress Dona. Her eyes clear of data, and she lowers herself into the chair where I used to sit and watch Rafi do her makeup.

I keep my gaze on the mirror, letting a drone layer my foundation in smooth strokes. Dona stares at me, a little uncertain.

Maybe because Rafi would never allow a machine to do her makeup.

“It’ll be okay,” Dona finally says.

She’s wrong.

I’m a prisoner in this tower, just like Col. There’s a bomb collar around my neck, like the one around his. Spy dust watches my every move, tracks my every glance. Sooner or later, I’ll choose the wrong

dress or make the wrong joke and someone will realize I'm not my big sister, Rafia.

She's out in the wild. Free at last, but hunted by my father's forces. They think she's me, and have orders to kill her on sight.

Everything is a long way from okay.

"We'll have a dozen guards around you," Dona goes on. "A hundred security drones overhead. You'll be just as safe as when Frey was here to take your place."

That's almost funny. Dona thinks I'm scared of a crowd of randoms, because I don't have a body double anymore. But it was *me* in front of those crowds.

I was born to be sniper bait. My body resists sitting here motionless, letting a drone spray on my makeup. Dodging bullets was better.

And I miss my sister. Rafi deciding on our makeup, our hair. Telling me the gossip from a party the night before, trying to give me a life.

Living in her shadow wasn't so bad. Pretending to be her is a hundred times more lonely. In this whole city, only Col knows who I really am.

I hope Rafi's okay out there in the wild.

"I'm not afraid of crowds," I say.

"Maybe something else is making you nervous." Dona's voice goes soft, as if the spy dust won't hear. "Like marrying a boy you hardly know?"

Wrong again—Col and I love each other. We fought a war together. He was the first outsider to know my secret. I was there when his world crumbled.

Here in my father's tower, we see each other only at formal dinners and publicity events, never alone. Me playing the haughty Rafia, him the humbled prisoner. But the air still sparks between us.

I've fooled everyone else; he recognized me in the first five minutes.

It was worth it, staying here to save him.

"He really does seem to like you," Dona says. "That's more than we could hope for . . . given everything."

I give her one of Rafi's sidelong looks. *Everything* includes my father's missiles destroying Col's home and family. The army of Shreve occupying his city. Our forces still hunting his younger brother.

My publicity team was worried that our engagement would look like a sham, a spectacle to make the world forget my father's crimes. But it turns out people *live* for stories about lovers whose families are at war.

"Col's not a problem," I say.

"You hardly know him, Rafia. And marriage is serious."

"So is war. Allying our houses will end this one. Maybe the world will start to forgive us for invading Victoria."

"I know you're doing the strategic thing," Dona says. "But that doesn't always make it easy. This must be scary."

I put on my sister's imperious voice. "I'm not afraid of some *boy*."

"You've changed," Dona says gently.

Those words freeze me. I stare at the mirror, watching the drone sculpt my face with artful lines.

I am Rafia of Shreve.

I am always watched, but I am never seen.

“It’s no wonder, of course,” Dona continues. “Your home was invaded. You were forced to admit your oldest secret in front of everyone.”

She means my speech with Rafi, the night Col was captured. We sisters stood together in front of the hovercams, revealing at last that there were two of us—the heir and the body double. Explaining that our father used his own daughter as a decoy for snipers and kidnappers.

That speech was supposed to make the city rise up against him. But speeches don’t win wars, it turns out.

“What does that have to do with Col?” I ask.

“He came along just as all your certainties vanished. When you felt most exposed.”

I laugh. “You think I have a *crush* on him?”

“You persuaded him to accept your hand in marriage. That took some work.”

“Hardly.” One of Rafi’s shrugs. “Dad would’ve executed him. Col’s lucky he’s more useful as a son-in-law than a corpse.”

“But you still had to convince him, and your father, and the rest of the world that you wanted to be together. Maybe you convinced yourself too.”

I close my eyes, letting the drone work on my lashes while my heart settles in my chest.

Dona has seen the way I feel about Col.

She was always the most thoughtful of my father’s staff. Not just a

thug. I will need her on my side in the all-important seconds after he's dead. For now, she needs to think that Rafi remains as selfish as always.

"I have plans for that boy."

"I'm sure you do," she says. "You've worked hard on your part of the bargain."

She means my deal with my father—I get to marry Col, to keep him alive, as long as I'm the perfect daughter. Go to my classes. Do what Publicity tells me. No public mention of Frey.

"But sometimes the heart makes its own plans," Dona says. "You've fallen for him."

I keep my eyes closed, letting the drone work. She must have watched us in those early days—Col pretending to resist my offer of marriage, like a defeated, sullen captive. At first, we insulted each other, then we argued the merits of an alliance, only letting ourselves flirt a little at the end.

It made my skin hum, keeping a secret together while the spy dust watched.

But something true must have slipped out, caught by Dona's sharp eyes.

"Believe what you want," I say. "That boy is a means to an end."

"Of course, Rafia. Sorry to presume." She stands up, adding lightly, "By the way, he wanted to see you before the bash. He's waiting on the eighth-floor terrace. Alone."

I open my eyes too quickly, and the drone pings its disapproval.

My eye shadow is smeared, just a touch. Brain-missing of me, but the promise of a private moment with Col makes me want to run to the stairs.

Dona smiles, noticing everything. “Don’t do your hair yet. It’s windy out.”

Spy dust doesn’t work well in the breeze. But I stay in character—cursing softly, flicking the drone aside to inspect its work.

“Tell Col I’ll be there in forty minutes.”