

HUNTER SAMPLE

VALIANT BOOK ONE

JOANNA WHITE

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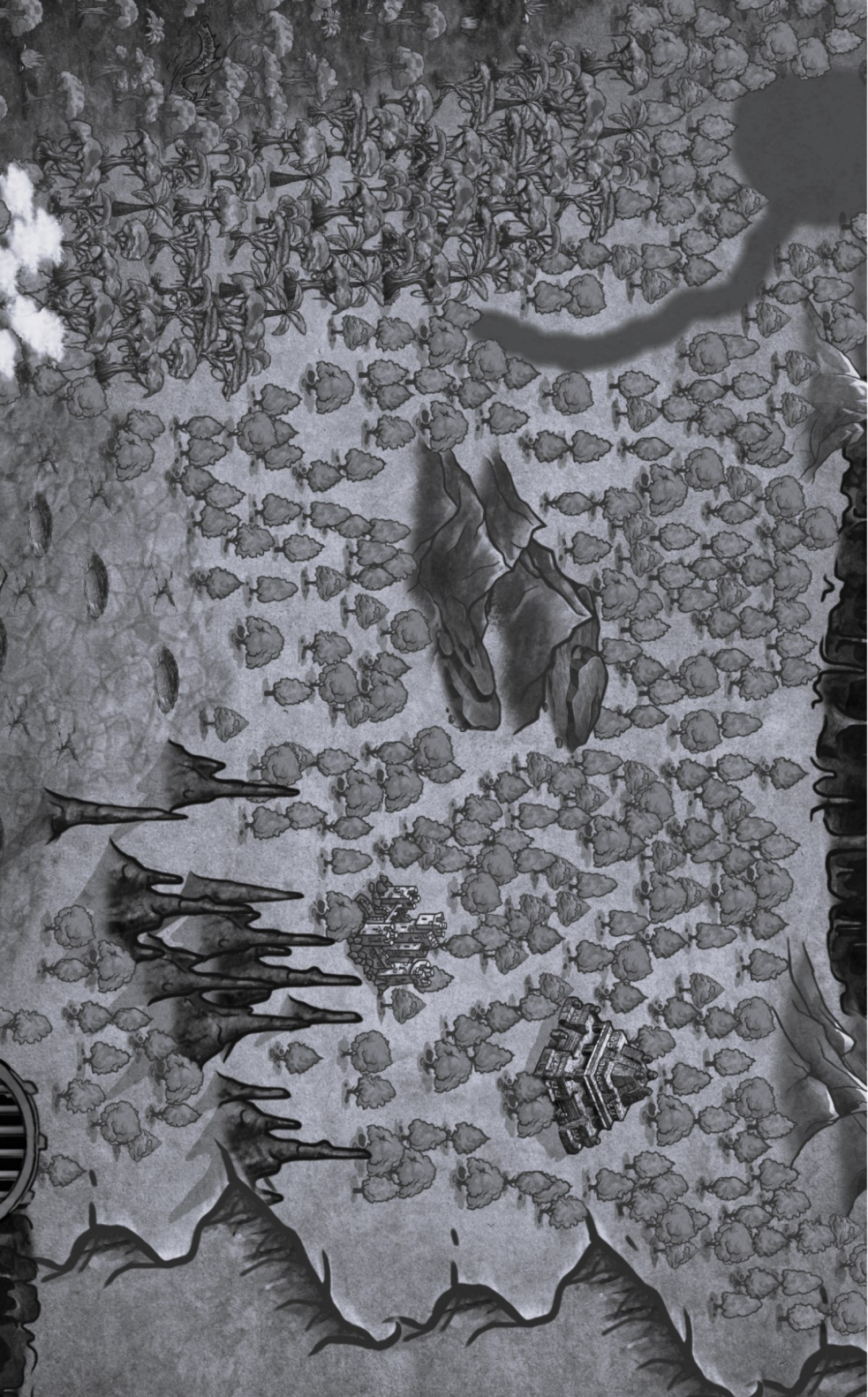
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THANKS TO GOD, FOR giving me this talent and guiding me through this series. To my family for all their support, and especially my husband Michael, for being my editor, for pushing me, and for all your help with ideas. This series wouldn't be where it is without all of you.





ONCE YOU TURN THIS page, you have no choice. You could be taken...you could be the next one to be thrown in Zagerah. Once you go in, chances are, you will never come out. If you're lucky, you'll win and have potential— potential to be a fighter, to become one of their assassins...one of the Hunters.

Either way, your fate is not up to you. If you want to take the easy way out, fine, don't turn the page. People need to know what's really going on; people need to find a way to stop the Aretul from creating new Hunters.

This is an impossible task. The Hunters are unstoppable. The only ones who can defeat them are, in fact, themselves. They're all bonded... together. The only way you could win your freedom is to outsmart them. If you can.

Godspeed.



PART ONE:

HUNTER





CHAPTER ONE

JARED

THE WHIP FLASHED ONCE as it snapped out and lashed my target across the back.

My lips slid up into a devious smile. It was hard enough to knock him down. I slipped the whip back in its place on my belt and looked back up. Novarch had his sword already unsheathed and held it against the man's throat.

The man glared up at us as he leaned on his arms for support on the dry, cracked earth. Sweat covered his body, along with thick patches of dirt and grime.

"Your name," Hindah, our second-in-command, demanded.

"Gabriel," the man hissed.

"Age." Hindah sneered down at the prisoner.

"Twenty-four." The man glared up at Hindah as he spoke. Hatred blazed from his dilated eyes.

Hindah glanced at Novarch. “Jared,” he called.
I zipped to his side in an instant.
“You do it,” he said, smirking at some joke I didn’t get.
Unsheathing my Inquiri blade, I sliced Gabriel’s throat
without hesitation or regret.
Killing was all I ever knew.



A DAY EARLIER

AVERELLA

“AVERELLA! I NEED the weeds plucked! If you don’t get it finished, then we’ll have nothing to eat,” my mother called.

I sighed and rolled my eyes, but grudgingly walked outside and knelt beside our garden. It was larger than most of the ones in our village, which was why most of the people traded their items for vegetables from us. They would pay us with what we didn’t have—wool for clothes and blankets.

Without even saying a word, my brother Gabriel knelt on my left and began tugging on weeds.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Gabe, you know you shouldn’t be working.”

He sighed and plucked a weed, throwing it behind him. “Just because I’m sick doesn’t mean I have to lie in bed all day.”

“Yes, it does!” I hissed under my breath. If Mother heard... “Working is only going to make your condition worse.”

“My *condition*?”

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant!”

His eyes softened. “Yeah, I know.”

It wasn’t often he became angry, and it was even less than that when he held a grudge. Even if someone said anything to offend him. Fortunately, he knew I hadn’t meant it, and more than that: he knew I was right.

No one knew much about diseases or how they worked. When anyone became sick, they were just... sick. An older woman in the village named Ganna knew a little about herbs, but most of the time, the herbs only cured coughing. Anything beyond that and...

People died.

“Where’s your mother?” Our neighbor, Vanese, walked up behind us. Her light brown hair looked matted, and her puffy, bloodshot eyes implied she’d been crying.

I gestured to the door. “Inside.”

She nodded and shoved open the door.

Gabriel and I exchanged a look. “Do you think this means that Matthex was taken?”

He clenched his jaw but stood. As he did, his body collapsed, and his eyes fluttered. As his body twitched and jerked, I held him.

It was all I could do when the fits happened.

My greatest fear was that one day, I would hold him, and the fit would take his life. I constantly prayed to God that it wouldn’t happen, that He would protect my brother, but I had no way of knowing if He would answer my prayer. Or if He had a different plan in mind.

Gabriel’s eyes rolled back in his head, so I just sat there quietly, hoping and praying.

Later that night, Gabriel was lying in bed asleep. Mother and I knelt by the fire, silent as we tried to keep warm. Nights became cold—eerily cold. Howls and wails from Zagerah reverberated through the night air, and I shuddered to think of what horrors existed inside the prison.

“Did Matt get taken?” I glanced up from where I stirred the soup.

Mother nodded. "Vanese is a wreck. After her husband was taken two years ago..."

I swallowed. "She has no one."

Mother nodded, running a hand through her thick black hair.

No one knew why the Aretul arrested villagers. They only ever took men and boys, for no reason and at seemingly random. Everyone feared it, but no one could explain it.

Though I would never admit this to Mother, I often went to Ganna, the oldest woman in the village. We spoke for hours on end, about the Aretul, about the legends of Zagerah... About why we were oppressed and why they did this to us.

Her husband had been taken twenty-five years ago. Nine years ago, her son had been taken.

"Why? Why do they take them? They don't even do anything wrong!" I shouted in frustration.

Mother stared at me in horror, before she walked over and smacked my mouth. "Averella! Don't say such things! If they heard you say that, they would kill you."

I glared at her, left the ladle in the pot, and stormed off to my room.

That night my whole world came crashing down.

The Gredi guards of the Aretul stormed inside, knocking things aside, leaving the room cluttered. One of them kicked over the bowl of soup Mother kept warm over the fire. The precious soup formed a puddle on the floor, which another Gredi stepped in.

The Gredi rushed toward Gabriel's room. I charged in that direction, reaching for a sword that had belonged to my father. Before I even had a chance to grab it, the Gredi had pinned me to the ground.

Mother screamed, shoving at one bulky man from what I could see, but two more grabbed her arms. Four more tore the door to Gabe's room off the hinges, dragging Gabriel through the house and out the door.

Mother sobbed hysterically, especially as they dragged us outside to watch them take Gabriel away. I lunged at the

men, thrashing and trying to fight them, but they held me back with grips of iron.

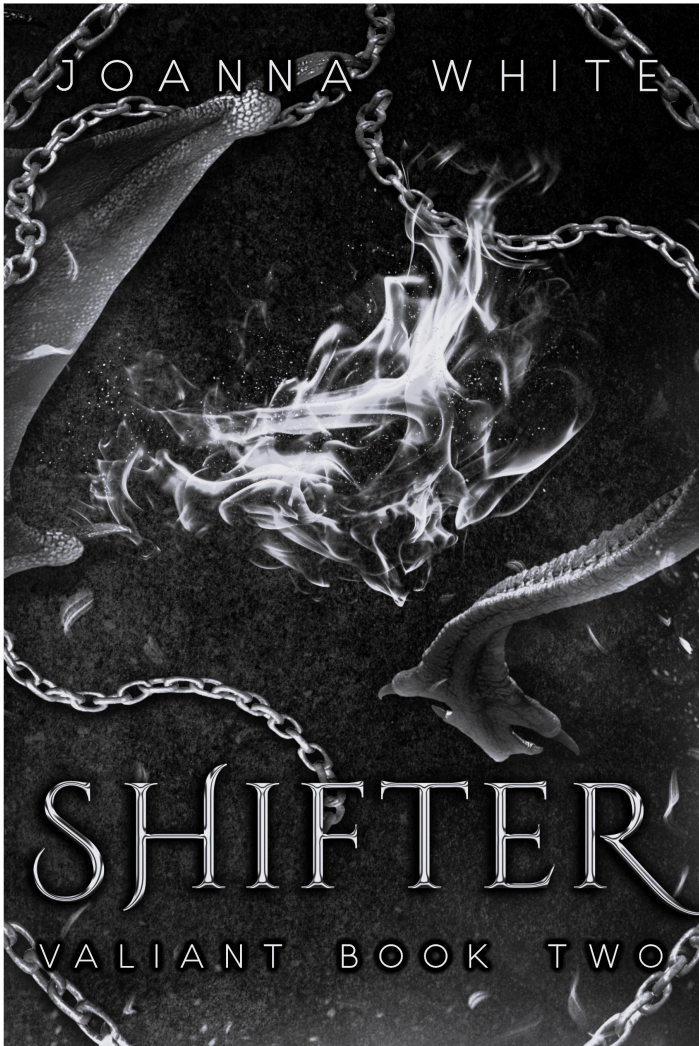
Gabriel shook his head at me, wincing as they chained his hands to the creatures they used to drag prisoners to Zagerah. Even as he coughed, and struggled to stay on his feet, they left him there. Despite that his knees buckled, and he collapsed onto the ground, he still held my gaze. I realized what he was trying to tell me: *don't do it.*

“No! Please, don't... don't take him!” I screamed, violently thrashing against the two men that held me back.

Gabe just met my gaze and smiled.

Then they rode off, taking my brother with them.

“Please, no!”



JOANNA WHITE

SHIFTER

VALIANT BOOK TWO



SNEAK PEEK AT SHIFTER

CHAPTER 1

BEROAN

FLYING WAS THE ONLY time I experienced true freedom. It gave me a chance to feel distanced from the earth, distanced from the endless fighting and destruction. During the time when I soared through the sky, I saw the world from a vibrant perspective.

I gazed at the clouds swirling in the air around me. The pure blue sky felt comfortable and light. The cool, crisp air felt damp against my scales. My rather intensified eyesight allowed me to see everything with crystal clarity; from horizon to horizon. As a result, I viewed the massive pack of wolves hunting below, mixtures of gray, white, and

black. They together ran in perfect harmony, one body, which flowed and moved together.

In that same manner, all of us were as they were; to each other loyal, placing others above ourselves. Loyalty to our clan first and then to other shapeshifters. Those beyond the clans, such as humans, were not worth our time or loyalty.

I was of the Dragon Clan, those who could shift into the form of a majestic dragon. I preferred my dragon form because it allowed me to view the earth at a distance; to see it as a whole, than as separate pieces. My father had always reminded me to view the world as such, a puzzle that had been fashioned by God.

Fire burned bright, sending to my nose the smell of ash. In the distant forest beyond the wolves, dark, raging colors of death and heat consumed all in their path. I swung powerful wings, speeding my descent. The presence of others from my clan pulsed from far ahead of me. Over the treetops, three large dragons used their fire to burn a village until there was nothing left but ash. They were all fire dragons, their scales as red as the flame that came from their breath. Sirath, our clan's Alpha, lit hut after hut ablaze, the reflections of the fearful humans visible inside his eyes.

I narrowed eyes at him and stood firm while watching; I would not do as they did. My wings folded inward as the chaos and terror rained in the air around me. As my vision followed Sirath, heat bubbled inside, as did anger. Feelings such as those toward him were unacceptable by any in our clan; he was Alpha; it was his right. Though, I disagreed.

Perhaps he had the right to be Alpha, but not to murder innocents. He believed the humans to be weak creatures, undeserving of this land. Nearly a decade he had been slaughtering them and it began to appear never-ending.

"Watch them burn. S'aa-fah't." Sirath's voice spoke in our minds as one; it was how we communicated in our dragon forms.

My wings extended as my mind wanted nothing more but to return to the sky. Sirath sensed my restlessness and I felt the weight of the Alpha's gaze. I returned his gaze with

one of my own. I was the only one who had the power to do it, due to my father's bloodline inside me.

"S'aa-mi'r, Beroan. Immediately!" His voice was pure command; ordering me to burn them, as did the other fire dragons around me. My tail twitched at the force of the command, but my gaze held steady against his. I would not back down.

One of the humans, a young woman, hid under debris, unknowing that her smell flared in our noses of sweat and tears. We all knew she was there. Sirath's eyes were wild with glee in anticipation. He swung his tail around, whipping it across a nearby hut, shattering the wood to splinters. He roared, piercing and violent, into the air. My body hunched as he whipped his tail again to move the debris. He grabbed the woman in his mouth and threw her into the air. He reached his neck upwards and caught her in his jaws, tossing her body back-and-forth; just a tattered rag that meant nothing.

We could all sense that life had fled her body. He ate her greedily, and when done, met my eyes with his raging gaze. I growled, deep in my throat—a low sound—and stayed in a defensive position.

"You are a shame to the clan. Leave my sight." Sirath turned from me, back to his murderous play.

I stared at him, snarling for another minute, before pushing off with my legs and taking off into the air once more.