

Shielded

KAYLYNN FLANDERS



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For all the storymakers.

Chapter One



EVEN THOUGH MY THROAT WAS AS DRY AS THE STONE walls of the castle, a silvery ray of hope kept me anchored to the center of the crowded dining hall. Courtiers pressed in all around me, a sea of golden hair and sharp smiles. But none of them were my brother. And none of them were his best friend.

“Princess Jennesara!” a shrill voice rang out.

The conversations around me dimmed for a brief moment. I ducked my head and pretended to fiddle with the delicate chain lacing the front of my too-tight bodice. A couple moved between us and I took my chance to sidle away from the girl pushing her way to me.

I’d endured Lady Isarr’s poorly veiled interest in my brother through all four courses of dinner already. I almost told her where she could corner Ren so she’d let me eat in peace. If he’d truly left me to fend for myself, maybe I still would.

I rose up on tiptoe, my hand clenched in the soft wool skirt of my dress, dismissing one blonde head after another.

“Pardon me,” I murmured as I brushed by a lord and lady whose names I’d forgotten.

My seventeenth birthday was tomorrow, and most of my father’s court had come into Hálénborg when they’d learned we’d still celebrate despite the attacks at our northern border we couldn’t seem to quell. Most thought they’d be over in a month. It’d already been seven.

The spectacle was not what I wanted. But the kingdom needed it, or so my father’d told me. I’d rather be manning the upper battlements of the castle in a blizzard than chatting or dancing with courtiers. Because even if the white streak in my fair hair was hidden—and I made sure it was always hidden—their discerning scrutiny always left me feeling exposed. But maybe it wouldn’t be so bad this year. Maybe Cris would ask me to partner with him.

The haunting notes of the fidlah players mingled with the voices of too many people trying to be heard and pounded against my skull. My stomach flopped and churned, the delicious food weighing heavy now. Ren and Cris weren’t here.

I touched my hair, making sure the elaborate plait was in place, and dodged around a woman’s skirt, admiring the ornamental dagger at her waist. My hand rubbed against the skirt of my dress where I wished my sword hung. My father and his court didn’t have a problem with women being soldiers; just with me being one.

Lady Isarr stopped near the Turian ambassador, his black hair and olive skin standing in sharp contrast to everyone else. Her eyes raked over the room.

I ducked down and squeezed between a courtier's dress and the cold wall.

“—first messenger of the season arrived from Turia, and the king sent him straight back again,” the woman hiding me said to her companion.

My ears perked up at that. What message had my father been so eager to send to our southern neighbors?

“I heard—” her companion started, but stopped when she caught sight of me crouching behind them.

I jerked up and tried to sidestep out the door, but an iron sconce caught my braided hair, jerking me back. My attempt to extricate myself only tightened the sconce's hold. Some of Ren's more colorful curses ran through my mind as my cheeks heated. Maybe it was better he wasn't here—he'd tease me about this for the next ten years.

“Your Highness,” a man from the kitchens interrupted my frantic tugging. The candle in the sconce wobbled. “Let me help.”

I tugged harder, wincing as several hairs tore loose. “No, no, I'm all right,” I responded with a smile as fake as any courtier. One last pull, and at last I was free.

Those closest watched me with surprised stares and barely concealed smirks. Or worse, pity. I kept one hand at my hair and picked up my heavy skirt in the other. My cheeks must have been flaming red by now. “Excuse me,” I stuttered, and darted into the hallway. Had anyone seen the white strands?

Cool air blasted into me, sending bumps and shivers along my neck. Spring should have warmed the castle more by now.

“Princess!” Isarr's screech rang above the muted conversation in the hall behind me.

About the Author



KAYLYNN FLANDERS IS A GRADUATE OF BRIGHAM YOUNG University, with a degree in English Language and a minor in editing. When she's not writing, she spends her time playing volleyball, reading, and traveling. She lives in Utah with her family, and thinks there's nothing better than a spur-of-the-moment road trip. Her debut novel is *Shielded*. To learn more about KayLynn, go to kaylynnflanders.com or follow [@kaylynnflanders](https://twitter.com/kaylynnflanders) on Twitter and Instagram.