

# THE FINAL DECREE by Shami Stovall

## EXCERPT

Once I reached a patch of iced-over shrubs, I eased myself into the detritus beneath them. I would die here. In nature. Away from everything I had grown to hate. It was how my father had died, after all. I supposed I deserved no better.

Before my wish was granted, the clink of metal returned. I closed my eyes, hoping to feign death, and I listened as the soldier easily followed my furrow through the dirt. He pushed the branches of the bushes aside and stepped close to my body. I couldn't help but shudder.

He knelt again and turned me onto my back, his now bare hands warm and powerful. I opened my eyes, confused by the gentle way he lifted my head. My vision, blurred with hunger, took in a young man with a hard, neutral expression. Calm brown eyes, dark chestnut hair, red maple leaf scarf—or maybe I was looking at a tree, I couldn't tell through the delirium—and I relaxed a bit, amused by my own skewed perceptions.

Knowing I would die had removed the stress of trying to live.

The soldier placed the lip of a canteen at my mouth and poured. I gulped down the water—warm water, not hot—and the heat coated my insides with comfort. It was only after a second gulp that I realized it was soup. The fragrant herbs and shreds of meat were like distant memories returning to me after having been long forgotten. I had never tasted anything so delicious in my life.

“Everything will be fine,” the soldier said.