



VOW
OF

THIEVES

NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE REMNANT CHRONICLES

MARY E. PEARSON



NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE REMNANT CHRONICLES

MARY E. PEARSON

Henry Holt and Company

NEW YORK



[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Henry Holt and Company ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

For Dennis and the vows you made and kept

The youngest ones ask me questions.

They want to know about the world Before.

I am the oldest. I should know.

Did you fly, Greyson? In the sky like a bird?

Yes. With my grandfather.

How?

I wasn't sure. I was only five, but I remember looking down, watching the ground disappear, my grandfather weeping as he held me in his arms.

I never saw him weep again.

After the first star fell, six more followed.

There was no time for weeping after that, or explaining things like flying.

There was only time for running.

Tai and Uella crawl into my lap.

Will you teach us to fly?

No. I will teach you other things.

Things that will keep you alive.

—Greyson Ballenger, 15

CHAPTER ONE

KAZIMYRAH OF BRIGHTMIST

A dusty beam of light wormed its way through the stone, and I leaned in, hoping to steal some warmth. I was a thief. It should have been easy, but the warmth eluded me. How long had I been here? Five days? A month? Eleven years? I called out to my mother and then I remembered. *That was a lifetime ago. She is gone.*

The narrow beam came only after long spells of darkness, maybe once a day? I wasn't sure, and even then it didn't stay for long, sneaking in like a curious onlooker. *What have we here?* It pointed at my belly now, my shirt stiff with dried blood. *My, that doesn't look good. Shouldn't you do something?* Was it a laugh I heard as the beam faded away? Or was it a quarterlord taunting me?

I wasn't dead yet, so I knew that the knife plunged into my belly had at least missed anything vital. But the wound wept yellow, and my brow was feverish, the filth of the cell seeping in.

My dreams seeping out.

Rats rustled in a dark unseen corner. Synové hadn't mentioned them. I remembered her telling me about her dream. *I saw you chained in a prison cell ... You were soaked in blood.* I remembered her worried eyes. I remembered dismissing her fears. *Sometimes dreams are only dreams.*

And sometimes dreams were so much more.

Where is Jase?

I heard a rattle and looked up. I had a visitor. He stood in the corner studying me.

"You," I said, my voice foreign to my ears, weak and brittle. "You're here for me. I've been expecting you."

He shook his head. *Not yet. Not today. I'm sorry.*

And then he was gone.

I lay down on the floor, the chains jangling against the cobbles, and I curled tight, trying to ease the ache in my gut.

I'm sorry.

An apology from Death?

Now I knew. Worse things than dying still lay ahead for me.

CHAPTER TWO

KAZI

Two Weeks Earlier

Jase walked through the door as naked as a peeled orange.

I soaked up the view as he crossed the room and snatched his trousers up from the floor. He began to pull them on, spotted me watching, and paused. “I can hold off on this if you’d like to take advantage of my vulnerable position?”

I raised a discerning brow. “I think I took quite enough advantage this morning. Get dressed, *Patrei*. We have miles to cover today.”

He pasted on a dejected frown. “As you command.”

I knew he was ready to be on his way too. We had made good time, but between the trip to Marabella and now our trek back, we’d been gone from Tor’s Watch for over two months. He pulled on his shirt, his skin still steaming against the brisk air. The tattooed wing on his chest glistened in a soft fog. Our lodgings had afforded us a hot spring. We had soaked miles of travel from our skin last night and again this morning. It was a luxury neither of us was eager to leave behind.

I walked to the window while Jase finished dressing. The manor was mostly in ruins now, but hints of its greatness shone through, intricate blue-veined marble floors that still had some shine in hidden corners, towering pillars, and a ceiling that once held a painting, bits of cloud, a horse’s eye, and a beautifully rendered but disembodied hand gracing the broken plaster. Was this the home of a ruling Ancient? Aaron Ballenger himself? The opulence whispered like a dying swan.

The surrounding grounds were sprinkled with crumbled outbuildings that seemed to extend for miles. They hadn’t withstood the ravages of falling stars and time, forests now pulling them back into the earth with their gentle emerald fingers. Even the manor, nested high on a rocky ledge, wore a leafy

headress of trees and vines. But at one time, long ago, it must have been perfectly beautiful and majestic. Whoever had once wandered these halls probably thought it would be perfect forever.

Before we left Marabella, the king's aide, Sven, had drawn out a northern route for us that paralleled the Infernaterr. The map included multiple shelters and even a few hot springs. It was a slightly longer route, but one he said would be less affected by weather. We were heading into the stormy season, and the Infernaterr exuded a permanent warmth. We had traveled fast and far in three weeks, and if we kept up our pace, we had less than a handful of days until we reached Tor's Watch. As we drew closer to home, I heard the excitement rise in Jase's voice. He was exuberant about the changes we would make.

We had a plan. He had things to do. I had things to do. And we had things we would do together. Even though I had fears about our return, I was mostly exuberant too. I could finally admit that I loved Hell's Mouth. It hummed in my blood like it had that first day I rode into it. Only this time I wouldn't be an intruder looking for trouble. I'd have trouble riding right beside me, and I would be a part of it all, helping Tor's Watch to become something more.

It was all we had talked about our first week on the trail—staking out the boundaries for this new tiny kingdom and revising the rules of trade. Any lingering hopes anyone entertained of taking over the arena and Hell's Mouth would be quashed—especially once they learned that Tor's Watch's sovereignty was to be formally recognized by the Alliance. It was to become the thirteenth kingdom. Or the first. I smiled, thinking of Jase's audacity in the face of the queen's generosity, to insist on being named the first.

My role as liaison was not just an honorary position. I was still Rahtan, and most important, I was still in the queen's employ. She had given me duties to perform to ensure the smooth transition of power. She also believed the presence of a representative from a major kingdom would carry weight and add stability as the changeover took place, and warned me that resistance could come from unexpected places.

She had given me an additional mission—to be my first priority when I reached there. I had told her about the youngest scholar’s final guilt-laden words: *I’m sorry. Destroy them.* While we’d believed all the documents burned, where there was even a fragment of doubt, there was a mountain of concern.

Secure those papers, Kazimyr, and if you can’t safely send them to me, destroy them. We have no idea what information the scholars escaped with after the fall of the Komizar, or what they have developed since. We don’t want these papers to fall into the wrong hands if there’s even the slightest chance for a repeat of the carnage—or worse.

Worse?

There was only one thing worse than the Great Battle. The devastation.

Only a handful had survived, and the world still bore its scars.

I promised her it would be the first matter that I addressed.

She also asked me to send a history book or two if there were any to spare. *I’d like to read more about this land. Greyson Ballenger was a brave leader. So very young, but determined to protect his charges against scavengers. It doesn’t always take an army to save the world. Sometimes it takes just one person who won’t let evil win. It is heroes like Greyson and those twenty-two children who inspire me.*

The queen, *inspired.* She didn’t seem to grasp that she inspired most of the continent. She inspired me. She made me see myself differently. She saw me as someone worth saving, in spite of my rags and past. She inspired me to be more than what others expected of me. I dared to believe I could make a difference because the queen had believed it first. Even when I landed our whole crew in prison, she didn’t give up on me.

And now, with some pride, I knew she counted on me.

I imagined that by now Gunner had found the mysterious papers and would be trying to decipher their secrets. But regardless of what they contained, Gunner would be required to hand them over to me—no matter how loudly he protested. Tor’s Watch would forfeit the recognition of the Alliance if the Ballengers didn’t comply. In any event I had my own means to make him hand them over. Nothing would stand in the way of me keeping my promise to the queen, or in the way of Tor’s Watch becoming a

recognized kingdom. It wasn't just Jase's dream, it was mine too. And it could be that by now the papers had been brushed aside while Gunner was consumed with other matters, like preparing for Jase's return.

Jase had sent Gunner a message saying he was on his way home and he had good news to share. That was all he was willing to tell him. As energized as Jase was by the prospect of Tor's Watch becoming a recognized kingdom at last, he wanted to explain everything personally, and not have Gunner impulsively announcing things to everyone that Jase—and the queen—weren't ready to publicly share. He also didn't mention that I would be with him. That would take some personal explaining too, more than a short note could convey. But at least for now Jase's family knew he was well and coming home.

The message sent by Valsprey would reach the Ballengers through the same circuitous black market route as all their messages did—first to the Valsprey handler in the Parsuss message office, where the Ballengers secretly had someone on their payroll. The queen had raised her eyebrows at this revelation, and Jase promised that little transgression would be remedied too. Of course, as a new kingdom that would soon be receiving trained Valsprey of their own, there would no longer be a need to pinch the birds from other sources. The king said we could expect the handler with Valsprey to follow on our heels within a few months.

I heard the scuff of footsteps on the gritty marble floor behind me, then felt Jase's heat at my back. He still radiated the warmth of the springs, and as he drew close, he rested his hands on my shoulders.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

“The perfect beauty. Things lost. Us.”

“Us?”

“These past weeks have been—”

I didn't know how to finish, but I knew there had been something in these days together that I didn't want to lose, something that was pristine and almost sacred. We'd had no outside influences to come between us. I feared that might change.

“I know, Kazi. No one knows more than I do.” He brushed aside my hair and kissed my neck. “But this isn't an end. It's just the beginning. I

promise. After all we've been through, nothing can pull us apart. I'm afraid you're stuck with me now."

I closed my eyes, breathing in his touch, his scent, and every word he spoke. *I promise.*

Things had changed between us in a way I hadn't thought possible.

Only now did I understand the unbearable weight of secrets. You can never know their true burden until they've been lifted from you. These past weeks we had been swept up in the near-giddy lightness of truth.

We shared everything freely, no longer stumbling over our words. As much as I thought I knew about Jase, I learned far more—all the day-to-day details that had shaped who he was, from the mundane to the agonizing. I discovered more about his vulnerable underside, his worries as his father lay dying, and the new responsibilities that had so recently fallen upon him. He had thought it would be years before he had to shoulder the weight of being *Patrei*, but at nineteen, all the decisions were suddenly up to him.

He told me a secret he had never shared with anyone else—about his sister Sylvey and her last pleas to him, his guilt over denying her, refusing to believe what Sylvey already knew—she was dying. Even after four years it was still a raw wound for him, and his voice cracked as he told me. It helped me to see myself better—the impossible choices of a fleeting moment—the regrets we bury deep within us, the things we would do differently if only we could have one more chance, if only we could rewind a moment like a card of yarn and weave it into something else. *Run, Kazi, run for the stick. Jam it in his groin, bash in his nose, smash his windpipe.* Why didn't I? One different choice might have changed everything. But my mother's voice was strong too. *Don't move. Say nothing.*

For Jase it was the opposite—he hadn't listened. The last look in Sylvey's watery eyes before she closed them forever still haunted him. He hesitated when he shared what was perhaps his darkest secret of all, that he had stolen her body from her tomb and buried her at the base of Breda's Tears in the Moro mountains. It was sacrilege in Hell's Mouth, in all of Eislandia in fact, to desecrate a tomb, a crime punishable by death. Not even his family knew what he had done. I tried to imagine the torment he

must have gone through as he traveled alone with her wrapped corpse slung over his saddle on a dark mountain trail.

Other truths were harder to share—they surfaced in layers—some buried so deep they were only a vague ache we had learned to ignore. We helped each other find those truths too. *How did you survive, Kazi? Alone?* He didn't just mean, how did I eat or clothe myself. I had already told him that. He meant the day-to-day loneliness of having no one to turn to. It was inconceivable to him. I didn't have an answer because I wasn't exactly sure myself. Some days it felt like all that was left of me was a hungry shadow, a thing that could disappear and no one would notice. Maybe believing that was what helped me slip away so easily.

Though our truthfulness was a heady elixir that I wanted more of, the closer we got to Tor's Watch, the more I felt the weight of new secrets creeping back in. I had concerns about Jase's family that I didn't want to share because I knew he would dismiss them. He was the head of the family, the *Patri*, after all. They would listen to him. But could hatred really be erased by a command? And his family's hatred toward me had been visceral. It consumed them to the core.

I will gouge your eyes out one at a time and feed them to the dogs.

This was the "family" I was returning to. It wasn't just Priya's threats that worried me, but the gulf of broken trust I wasn't sure could be bridged again, not even for Jase's sake. I had seen Vairlyn's gutted expression as I took her son at knifepoint. I would always be the girl who had invaded their home, the girl who had lied and stolen from them.

Even the sweet innocence of Lydia and Nash was probably tarnished now. It would have been impossible to keep the details of Jase's disappearance from them. There was also the matter of Gunner and his cruel taunts when he knew what Zane had done to *my* family. It didn't matter if he was Jase's brother. My hatred for him hadn't eased in these past weeks. I couldn't pretend that night was forgotten any more than they could.

"I know how much your family means to you, Jase. I don't want you to be caught in the middle or be forced to choose sides."

“Kazi, *you* are my family now. There is no choosing. You’re saddled with me forever. Understand? And so are they. That’s how families work. Trust me, they will come around. They loved you already. They will love you again. More important, they will be grateful. The Ballengers let their guard down. I have no doubt we’d all be dead if you hadn’t intervened.”

He had assured me before, recounting details of infamous past slaughters visited upon the Ballengers, and on this matter I had no doubt either. Jase would have been first. Kill the strongest and then move on to the rest. What would it have been? An unexpected knife in his back when he stopped in to check on Beaufort’s progress? It was imminent, that much I knew. Beaufort had expected his plan to come to fruition in only a week before I had intervened. More supplies had been ordered. Production was set to begin in earnest. Additional metalsmiths were being sought out to help Sarva fashion two dozen more launchers. But Jase’s family only knew what they saw, not what might have been, and they had witnessed my betrayal—not Beaufort’s. His plan to dominate the kingdoms—that would only be my false claim measured against his grand promises to them. I knew Jase would back me up, and yes, maybe that would be enough, but I wasn’t certain. I didn’t understand all the emotions and complexities of a family, and I worried that maybe it was too late for me to learn.

“I’ve never had a family before, Jase. I may not be good at—”

“You have Wren and Synové. They’re like family.”

A sharp tug pulled inside me when he mentioned them. I missed them already, far more than I’d thought I would. We were used to being separated for short periods as we went on different missions, but our beds in the bunk room, in a neat row together, always awaited our return. This time I wouldn’t be going back. These past weeks I had often wondered where they were and how they were doing. Wren and Synové, I supposed, were the closest thing that I had to family. They would lay their lives down for me, and I for them. We had become sisters in a very real sense, but we never said the word. Family was a risk that you might never recover from, and we led dangerous lives by choice. Justice burned in us, like a brand seared into our skin the day our families were taken from us. The unsaid words between us were our safety net. Jase’s family was a solid unit, all of them

the same, always together. I wasn't sure I could be part of that kind of family.

"And you had your mother," he added. "She was your family, no matter how short a time you two were together."

We had already talked about my mother. Even the oldest, most painful secrets were not held back between us. Lines deepened around his eyes when I told him, and I wondered if the telling was as painful for him as it was for me, his own regrets piling up beside mine, wishing his family had never given the Previzi safe haven—or employed them.

"It will all work out," he promised and kissed my earlobe. "And it all doesn't have to happen overnight. We have time. We'll ease into all the changes."

Which meant he knew there would be difficulties ahead. "Ready to go?" he asked.

I spun to face him, scrutinizing him from head to toe, and sighed. "Finally dressed, are you? Once I've settled in as magistrate, I'm going to have to rein you in, *Patrii*."

"So today it's magistrate? Yesterday you were Ambassador Brightmist."

"The queen left the roles to my discretion, depending on how you behave."

"Plan to arrest me?" he asked, a bit too eagerly.

I narrowed my eyes. "If you don't toe the line."

"If you weren't so impatient, you wouldn't be saddled with me now."

I laughed. "Me the impatient one? I seem to remember it was *you* who pulled the twine from Synové's package."

Jase shrugged, his eyes wide with innocence. "The twine practically unraveled on its own. Besides, I didn't know what was inside or what a simple red ribbon could lead to."

We hadn't even made it through one full day on the trail before he wanted to open Synové's going away gift for us.

"Never trust Rahtan bearing gifts," I warned. "What you don't know can get you into trouble, *Patrii*."

"But trouble is what we do best together." He gathered me into his arms, his eyes dancing with light, but then his playful expression turned serious.

“Are you sorry?”

I felt myself falling deeper into the world that was Jase Ballenger. “Never. Not through a thousand tomorrows could I ever be sorry. Trouble with you makes me glad for it. I love you with every breath I will ever breathe. I love you, Jase.”

“More than an orange?” he asked between kisses.

“Let’s not get carried away, *Patrii*.”

The words I had refused to even think before came surprisingly easy now. I said them often and in a hundred ways. Every time our lips met, every time my fingers raked his hair. *I love you*. Maybe part of it was a fear, fear of jealous gods and missed chances. I knew more than ever now that chances could be wrenched from your grasp in an instant, including chances for last words, and if there were to be any final words between Jase and me, I wanted them to be those.

My mother’s last words to me had been desperate with fear. *Shhh, Kazi, don’t say a word*. That’s what I always heard first when I thought of her, the fear.

We went downstairs to where Mije and Tigone were stabled in what might have once been a long, open dining hall. Indeed, it still was, the floor thick with clover, which both horses had effectively mowed down. We were headed into windswept plains where grazing would be harder to come by, so I was glad that they had eaten their fill.

We saddled up and left, and as we rode, I relived the magic of each day, determined not to let these weeks roll into oblivion. I kept track of where we had come from and where we were going, so no unexpected turn could push us down an uncharted path again. And throughout the miles I memorized every word between us so they could never be forgotten.

“What about us, Jase? Will someone write down our story?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like the hundreds that are on the vault’s walls, and the ones in your bookcases.”

An amused smile pulled at his mouth, as if it hadn’t occurred to him and he was intrigued by the thought. “We will, Kazi. You and I. We’ll write our

own story. And it will take a thousand volumes. We have a lifetime ahead of us.”

“That’s a lot of trees.”

He shrugged. “We own a mountainful, remember?”

We. Everything was we now.

We wove our dreams together like armor. Nothing could stop us now.

CHAPTER THREE

JASE

““A button?”

I laughed as Kazi described the full-cheeked blustering quarterlord howling at the end of an alley like his nose had been cut off.

“Why risk so much just to steal a useless button?” I asked.

Her smile faded, her gaze serene, her fingers moving across her palm as if she still held the prized button in her grasp. “It wasn’t useless,” she answered. “Sometimes you have to remind yourself that you’re not powerless. That you have some measure of control. That maybe your skills aren’t good just for filling your own stomach, but also for making others consider theirs. If a thief could steal a button straight off his belly in the middle of the day, how much more might they take from him in the dark corners of the night?” She chewed on the corner of her lip, her eyes narrowing. “I know he didn’t sleep well that evening, and that gave *me* the sweetest sleep ever. Sometimes you need to own one whole day. Maybe that’s what makes you brave enough to face another.”

I was still trying to understand her world, what she had been through, and the resolve it had taken for her stay alive. “Brave? You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met.” I looked sideways at her. “Of course, the most scheming too.”

She squeezed the seed from the date she was nibbling and threw it at me, hitting me directly on the chin.

I rubbed the spot. “A schemer with good aim?”

“Says the Grand Schemer himself, but I’ll take the compliment,” she said and looked ahead again, her shoulders swaying gently with each of Mije’s hoof falls. She was silent for a long while before she asked, “Will you tell them I was a thief?”

My family. I knew that was what she meant, but I sidetracked the question.

“Was? You still are a thief. I count my fingers every night before I go to sleep. But let’s not make them call you Ten.”

“*Jase.*”

I sighed. Truth between Kazi and me was one thing, but with my family, it was another. I’d have to talk them down from a furious ledge before I told them anything. I knew they would listen, but it would be hard for them to go from seething to open arms with just a few words. Not when their home had been invaded and their prized investment—and their *Patrei*—had been stolen from them by someone they thought they trusted. “Yes, I will tell them. Whenever you’re ready. Though it might be a good idea to dispense one truth at a time. Slowly.”

She grinned. “Agreed. I suppose we don’t need to hit them with everything at once.”

“Of course, you realize once you tell Lydia and Nash, they’ll want you to teach them everything you know.”

“We’ll stick to juggling and coins behind ears for now. Shadows are a bit harder to master.”

“Don’t forget the silent signals,” I reminded her. “They would love using those at the dinner table.”

She smiled. “Already on my list of priorities.”

Even before she was on her own, she had told me she and her mother had developed a silent language between them to survive the streets of Venda, because there were often risky moments when they had to remain silent. I had a few subtle gestures for my crew, but I was surprised at how many signals she and her mother had. A flick of the fingers meant *smile*, a tucked chin, *watch, be ready*, a rigid hand, *do not move*.

I told her stories about my childhood too, the trouble us older children would get into. She laughed, both appalled and amused. I told her about one hot summer when we were particularly bored. Our antics involved ropes, pulleys, and snatching hats from unsuspecting people passing below us on the boardwalk as we stalked them from high up in the tembris trees.

“A thief in training? No wonder that shopkeeper called you one of the untamable Ballenger brood.”

I shrugged. “We gave the hats back, but got a scolding from our mother. She said if we put half as much work into our studies as we did our pranks, we’d all be geniuses. But when she thought we weren’t looking, we saw her shoot our father an approving nod. They both thought we were quite clever.”

“Yes,” Kazi conceded. “Clever as little foxes stealing eggs from the henhouse.”

★ ★ ★

The forest had grown thicker, and the peculiar chirps of striped squirrels sounded overhead, disturbed by our presence. We fell into silence, and my thoughts drifted back to Beaufort, as they frequently did. Kazi and I had discussed him together many times, but we’d come to no conclusions.

Dominion over the kingdoms.

But how?

Yes, Beaufort was developing powerful weapons, but he had no army to use them. He came to Tor’s Watch empty-handed, rags on his back, and his hat in hand. He and his group were a pitiful sight. Even if he was working with one of the leagues and he armed every one of them with the launchers he had developed, he still couldn’t bring down an entire kingdom, much less all of them.

Was Beaufort delusional? Trying to speak his lost dreams of power into truth? If so, Kardos and the rest all had to be as mad as he was. But Sentinel Valley was no delusion. The mass graves were sickeningly real. Maybe it took madmen to concoct such schemes.

“Do you think this is Ogres Teeth?” Kazi asked.

We passed a row of broken columns rising up in the middle of the forest, their purpose long lost to the world, but they looked like they might be the ruins Sven had described to us. There were so many vestiges of another time in this forest, I pulled out the map and checked it again to be sure.

“Yes,” I answered. “This is it.”

You asked me why an open world frightens me, Jase? Because it gives me nowhere to hide.

According to the map, we were headed into another one of those open worlds soon. I think it bothered me more than it did her. I was used to solving problems, fixing them one way or another, and this one I couldn't fix. I couldn't undo the past and take away what had been done. Her fear weighed on me. I had already studied the map, trying to find any way around it, but there was none.

We turned on a switchback, and the mountains and forest ended abruptly. We found ourselves on a high trail, looking out at an endless plain that was a strange deep red. In the distant north the harsh land of Infernaterr shimmered like a silver sea lapping at its shores.

"Whoa, Mije." Kazi stopped and stared at the vast emptiness. It was our third time having to cross an empty landscape that offered no shelter.

I watched her eyes skim the miles, her chest rising in quicker breaths.

"You don't have to be afraid of Zane anymore, Kazi. He's in the family's custody. They won't let him go."

She blew out a disbelieving huff. "You so sure? Gunner seemed willing enough to trade him away the last time I saw him."

"I promise you, Gunner won't let him go." I wished I could tell her it was because of what Zane had done over a decade ago to her and her mother, but that wasn't why he would hold him. Zane had a connection to the labor hunters that had descended on Hell's Mouth and stolen me and other citizens away, and for that Gunner would never let him leave Tor's Watch—at least not alive.

I watched her focus on the horizon, on some tiny point in the distance, probably imagining a busy town full of shadows and dark corners and how only a flat landscape lay in the way of her getting there. Her chin lifted. "I'm not that powerless six-year-old anymore, Jase. I'm not afraid of Zane. I guarantee, he's the one who's afraid of me now. He's the one looking over his shoulder, waiting for a door to open and for me to walk through it. He's the one who's afraid to sleep at night."

I had no doubt of that. I'd seen his expression when he saw her that last night in Tor's Watch—when he saw *her* looking at *him*. Her eyes had glowed with a primal hunger, with the ferocity of a Candok bear that

couldn't be stopped. And yet I'd felt her heart pound beneath my arm when I pulled her close at night and a wide-open sky pressed down on us.

"But I've seen you—"

"Still struggling to sleep out here in the open? I know." Her expression darkened, her brows pulling together, as if she was perplexed by this too. She sighed. "I can't quite shake it. For now, I suppose, it's a part of who I am. My mind reasons that there's nothing to be afraid of, but something inside me I can't control reacts differently." I heard the confusion in her voice. She turned and looked at me. "I'm not sure how long it will take to convince my heart to stop racing every time I'm confronted with no place to hide. Maybe a lifetime. Are you up for that?"

"That's a lot of riddles."

"I still have a few in me."

I did too. Like how many of my brothers would it take to hold me back from Zane when we got home again? How would he ever answer my questions with my hands around his throat? He stole Kazi's mother. He left a six-year-old child to die on the streets of Venda. My pulse raced hot thinking about him, but I knew Zane wasn't mine to finish. I had only cultivated a few months' worth of hatred for him. Kazi had eleven years. Her anger trumped mine by a long shot.

Zane would be left for Kazi.

After she got her answers.

★ ★ ★

We made our way down to the plain quickly, the soil so red it looked like it was drenched with ripe cherries—or blood. Every part of this continent held new surprises. The landscapes we had passed through had been both breathtaking and tedious, and sometimes jarring. The most jarring was Stone Canyon, which Sven had marked clearly on the map. *Go around if you'd rather. Most do. It's a sight you won't forget soon, but it is the shortest route.* Kazi and I had opted for the shortest route, but every nerve I possessed prickled as we traveled through it. Tigone and Mije both stamped in protest. Even they could see the stones weren't just stones, and wind whistled eerily through the canyon like a stream of voices.

Sven said legend claimed that one of the stars of the devastation had sent molten rock spraying like a fountain. Ancient peoples were caught midstep as they ran to get away. Huddled crowds were grown together as one rock, forever anchored to the cliffs that rose above them. Distinct, horror-stricken faces sometimes emerged from the mass. There was no erasing this part of history. Faces frozen in time lined our path, and they were a grim reminder of how quickly the world of the Ancients had changed. Maybe how quickly all of our worlds could change.

In comparison, the red plain we traveled across now seemed almost tranquil, and if it took a few dozen riddles to get Kazi through it, or more Ballenger legends, I was ready. I wondered sometimes if, as we rode in silence, she was busy composing her next riddle. She never seemed to lack for one when I asked. I, on the other hand, didn't have a knack for composing them and had struggled mightily with the single one I had given her. But that one seemed sufficient for her. She asked for it over and over again.

Say it again, Jase.

But you already know the answer.

But it's an answer I will never grow tired of.

And maybe I never tired of telling it to her. I fingered the red ribbon tied to my saddle. *What is it for, Kazi?* Not since that first time I had seen her staring at my bare chest had I seen her face flush warm. *Tell me.* But in my gut, I think I had already known, and if gifts like that ribbon meant trouble, it was the kind that I wanted.

Kazi cleared her throat to gain my attention. "All right, here you go, *Patrei*," she said. "Listen up. I won't repeat myself."

Composing. Just as I thought.

*"I have two arms but not a bone,
I can't be hurt with knife or stone.
I have a head but lack a face,
I don't need eyes to match your pace.
I'm shifty, a thief, a trick of the eyes,
My robes are made of mystery and lies.*

*I am short, I am thin, I am monstrous and tall,
But when midnight comes, I am nothing at all.”*

“Let me think.” This time I wasn’t stalling for a kiss. I was stumped. Arms with no bones? A head but no face? I was mulling it over when something else caught my attention.

We both halted our horses and looked into the sky. “Valsprey,” Kazi whispered, almost as a question.

We’d seen it at the same time. A white speck in a blinding blue sky flying toward us, its massive wings gliding through the air, majestic and unearthly all at once. A wild bird? It seemed unlikely that it was a trained messenger bird, considering our location. It rapidly got closer, flying low enough that I could see the black slash of feathers above its eyes. It was a wondrous sight out here in the middle of nowhere, and it commanded our gazes. Then, suddenly, it violently catapulted backward as if hit by something. A spray of feathers exploded in the air, and it spun out of control, plummeting to the earth.

“Down!” I yelled, leaping and pulling Kazi to the ground with me. Someone had shot it out of the sky.

We weren’t alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

KAZI

Jase hovered over me, his hand protectively pressing on my back. Mije and Tigone pranced nervously on either side of us. Jase stood quickly, grabbing our quivers and bows from our packs, and dropped back to the ground beside me. We scanned the plain. There was nowhere for someone to hide. Where had the shot come from? There was no doubt the Valsprey had been shot from the sky. No bird changed its direction that dramatically then fell to the ground without something making it happen.

“I didn’t see an arrow,” Jase whispered. “Did you?”

“No. Nothing.”

But if not an arrow, what? A stone from a sling? But I didn’t see a stone either. A predator? But a Valsprey was large, with a five-foot wingspan. To take one down, the predator would have to be far larger, something like a racaa. There had been none.

We both eased up a bit on our elbows, looking for someone to emerge from a hole dug in the plain, but no one emerged. We finally stood, back to back, both of us nocking arrows, synchronizing our turns as we searched and waited to see something. The only thing that greeted us was the quiet hush of a gentle breeze sweeping the plain.

We went to where the bird had fallen, a white twisted splotch on the crimson landscape. One of its broken wings angled skyward as if hoping for a second chance. There was no flopping or lingering last movements. The bird was dead, which was no surprise. But as we neared and got a closer look, something about it was wrong.

“What—” Jase said.

We both stared at it.

The bird was quite dead. But it was clear it had been dead for weeks.

Its eyes were sunken leathery holes, and its ribs poked through decayed paper-thin skin, its breast mostly featherless. We both looked around,

thinking there had to be another bird somewhere else, but there was none. *This* was the bird we had seen fall from the sky.

A trick of the eyes?

Carried here by some baffling wind current?

We guessed at possibilities, but none made sense.

Jase nudged the dry carcass with his boot, flipping the bird over. A message case was attached to its leg. It was a trained Valsprey, after all. I bent down and pulled the case from its leg, then picked at the thread that sealed it shut. It came apart, and a small piece of parchment unfurled in my hands.

The words I read wrested the breath from my lungs.

“Who’s it from?” Jase asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Who is it for?”

I stared at the note, wondering how it was possible, but somewhere deep inside, I knew. Sometimes messages had a way of finding people. *The ghosts, they call to you in unexpected moments.* This wasn’t a message sent by a Valsprey. It was sent by a different kind of messenger. I held it tight, not wanting to give it to Jase.

“Kazi? What is it?”

No more secrets, we had promised.

I held the note out to him. “It’s for us,” I said.

Jase took it and read it carefully, several times, it seemed, because he just continued to stare at it. He shook his head, his lips paling. He blinked as if trying to clear his vision, trying to make the words reorder themselves into something that made sense.

*Jase, Kazi, anyone,
Come! Please! Samuel is dead.
They’re banging the door.
I have to—*

In an instant, his expression went from lost to angry. “It’s a hoax. Some kind of sick hoax.” He crumpled the paper in his fist and whipped around, scanning the landscape again for the perpetrator. “Come out!” he yelled. Only a haunting whine of wind answered back.

“Do you recognize the handwriting?” I asked. It was a desperate scrawl, written in haste. It didn’t seem like a hoax.

He looked at the message again. “I’m not sure. It might be Jalaine’s. We have Valsprey at the arena ... The office door there is...” He paced, shaking his head. “I had Samuel working there while his hand healed. He—” Jase grimaced, and I could almost see his thoughts spinning out of control, while mine were leaden, plummeting to one conclusion—

“Samuel is *not* dead,” Jase growled as if he had read my mind. “Jalaine overreacts. She thought I was dead once when I fell out of a tree and the air was knocked out of me. She ran to tell my parents and caused a panic.” He scanned the landscape again, thinking out loud. “Maybe Aram wrote it, or maybe someone we don’t even know, someone trying to trick you, to convince you to release me. Maybe they didn’t get the message that I was coming home and think you’re still holding me? Or maybe—” He stopped midthought and his shoulders slumped. He leaned forward, resting his arms on Tigone’s back like it was the only thing holding him up. “Samuel is not dead,” he said again, but this time so quietly only a ghost could have heard him.

I looked past him to where the bird had been and saw Death hunched over, his back bowed, lifting a body from the valley floor. He looked over his shoulder at me, and then bird, body, Death, they were all gone.

★ ★ ★

Who wrote the note, how it managed to get to us, or if it was even true became secondary questions. Getting home was what mattered now. We stopped at watering holes only for the sake of the horses. For us there was no rest until the evening when darkness closed in.

I looked back at the long path we had trampled in the sandy soil, a crooked line on the red landscape. Dying rays of sun puddled in our tracks.

We built a fire in silence, gathering twigs and sticks and breaking off branches from a dead bush. Jase wrestled angrily with one branch that refused to break free. “Dammit!” he yelled, yanking furiously.

I reached out and touched his arm. “Jase—”

He stopped, his chest heaving, his nostrils flared, his eyes still fixed on the brittle bush. “I don’t know how it could happen,” he said. “Except for his hand—” He turned and met my gaze. “Samuel was strong and sharp-eyed, but his injured hand—” His voice caught.

Was. Samuel was.

“It will be all right, Jase. We’ll figure it out together.” Every word I uttered was hollow and inadequate, but I wasn’t sure what else to do. I felt pathetically useless.

He looked away, and his chest rose in a slow, deliberate breath. He raked back his hair and squared his shoulders, and I could see him stitching back together whatever had come undone inside him, refusing to give in to despair. I opened my mouth to speak, but he shook his head and walked away, rifling through his gear. He pulled out his ax and in one fierce swing parted the branch from the bush.

“There,” he said and threw the conquered wood onto the fire. Sparks danced into the air. He turned his attention to the dead stump, hacking away at it with the same ferocity. The noise was bleak in the emptiness, and every *whack* juddered through my bones.

“Jase, talk to me. Please. Do you blame me? Because you weren’t there?”

He stopped mid-swing and stared at me, the fury draining from his face. “You? What are you talking about?” He lowered his ax to the ground. “This is not your fault, Kazi. This is us. Ballenger history. This is what I’ve tried to tell you all along. It’s always been the wolf at our door. Our history’s been riddled with violence since the beginning, but not because we want it that way. Now we finally have a real chance to end it. No more power plays. No more black markets. No more paying taxes to an absentee king who never does anything to improve the lives of people in Hell’s Mouth. Lydia and Nash are going to grow up differently than I did. They’re going to have different lives, ones where they’re not always having to watch their

backs. They won't need *straza* trailing them everywhere they go. Our history is about to change. *We* are going to change it, together, remember?"

I nodded, and he pulled me into his arms, the bush forgotten.

The wolf at the door. I couldn't help but think of Zane.

My history was about to change too.

*Lest we repeat history,
Let the stories be passed,
From father to son, from mother to daughter,
For with but one generation,
History and truth are lost forever.*

—Song of Jezelia

CHAPTER FIVE

JASE

The winds howled across the plain like a forlorn beast.

Kazi and I burrowed close together in our bedroll, the blankets pulled over our heads, sharing each other's warmth. Her sleep-filled breaths were moist against my chest.

Do you blame me?

I knew what silence could do, the fear and doubt it could sow. I used it with calculating purpose on prisoners, letting the long ticks of silence twist their imagination into something hideous and painful. I used it on traders and ambassadors to push a negotiation in my favor, making them think I was about to walk away. I used it on Zane to produce Devereux's name. I never meant to use it on Kazi, but I had been consumed, feeling my denial fade with every mile we traveled. I wrestled with the fact that the note could be true. The silence Kazi heard was only fear trapped inside me. But how was she to know that? I knew firsthand how silence had pushed me to a breaking point when my father wouldn't speak to me.

Give it time, Jase, Tiago had told me. He didn't mean anything by it. He's blind with grief right now.

Tiago's words had meant nothing to me.

My father had burst through the front door, yelling for my mother. The news of Sylvey's death had reached him. He'd been away, chasing down the perpetrators of an attack on our farmstead. He had stomped through the hall, muddy, dripping with the wet of a storm. I tried to stop him at the foot of the stairs to explain, and he shoved me aside. *Get away from me!*

As the following days went by, all energies were focused on my other brothers and sisters who were still sick. Micah died. The rest recovered. The fears I had wanted to share with my father stayed sealed up inside of me, especially once I stole Sylvey's body. My father couldn't have known the

guilt his silences had helped fuel. But Tiago did. *Give it time*, he repeated days later when the whole house could hear my parents arguing.

If I had been here—

You couldn't have changed anything!

I would have—

You are not a god, Karsen! Stop acting like one! You don't have a cure for the fever! No one does!

We should have had more healers! More—

For the gods' sakes, Karsen! What's done is done! What matters is what we do now!

Their screams had cut through me, colder than the icy wind that howled outside. It was true. He couldn't have changed the outcome. But what about me? Could I have changed the outcome for Samuel? I shouldn't have put him on at the arena, but I had thought the arena office was secure. We had well-armed guards posted because too much money traded hands there. Who had attacked him? Or did it happen somewhere else? An angry trader in a back alley? Another mysterious crew like Fertig's waiting on a deserted trail? Where were his *straza*?

"You're awake," Kazi whispered, her voice drowsy.

"Shhh," I said. "Go back to sleep."

"What are you thinking?"

My arm tightened around her. "I'm thinking how much I love you."

"Then I'm glad you're awake. Tell me again, Jase. Tell me the riddle..."

She mumbled a few more incoherent words and drifted back to sleep, her cheek nestling into my shoulder. I kissed the top of her head. My breath, my blood, my calm.

★ ★ ★

We were in the foothills, the sun warming my face. A sense of hope stirred in me, like we were back on course, back in the familiar, and no more dead birds would fall from the sky onto a bloody and barren landscape. We had returned to a world of reason I understood. Still, just in case, we altered our path so we'd approach Tor's Watch the back way, through Greyson Tunnel,

as a precaution. It was the longer route, but if a league was stirring up that much trouble, they would likely be in town, and we had no *straza* with us.

Kazi's lips parted with a sudden small gasp.

"What is it?" I asked, immediately scanning the landscape.

She smiled, wonder filling her face. "I just realized, Hell's Mouth won't be the only city within the borders of your new kingdom. There's another one."

I knew every hill, valley, and gorge of Tor's Watch. "No," I replied. "Hell's Mouth is the only city. That's it."

"There's the settlement."

The revelation sank in. It wasn't exactly a city yet, but it was within the new borders I had declared. I whistled out a worried breath. "What will Caemus think of that?"

"I don't think it will be a problem. In fact, I think he'll be fine with it. Now, Kerry, on the other hand, may take another swing at your kneecap when he learns you're his new sovereign."

"I'll be sure to wear my tall boots next time I visit. What about your queen?"

"She's grateful for what you did, Jase. You already know that."

I did. She had expressed it again when we'd had dinner with her and the king. "But that was before she knew that her settlement would be under my rule. I don't want any complications that will jeopardize—"

"It's going to need a name. Any ideas?"

"That should probably be left to Caemus."

"True." But she went ahead and tried out several anyway, her head cocked as she listened to their sounds on her tongue, her dreams as full as my own.

CHAPTER SIX

KAZI

Glints of autumn slivered through the trees, shaking the few sparse leaves with one last quiver as if saying good-bye. Winter was impatient, already frosting the early mornings in white. I wondered what Tor's Watch would look like in winter. The dark towers would be striking against a white, snowy landscape.

Today we would arrive. Jase thought it would be just before nightfall, but even darkness closing in could not stop him. He sat forward in his saddle as new vistas came into view, eager, scanning the horizon as if he expected to see someone he knew, his skin itching with the closeness of home. Tonight we would be sleeping in beds at Tor's Watch. We would be eating dinner at the family dining table. Our new life would be beginning.

The yearning stirring in me came as a surprise. Maybe Jase's unflagging belief that this was just the beginning was taking hold in me too. I was eager for what was to come, but at the same time, a swarm of nervous bees hummed in my chest. Somehow, I would have to fit into a close-knit family that shared a history and traditions. And there were other worries.

We'll get our answers soon, Jase had promised, because uncertainty was a worm that ate through both of us. We both desperately wanted to know the meaning of the note and what had really happened to Samuel, but my stomach twisted at the thought of Zane. It wasn't that I was afraid of him, at least not afraid of what he could do to me anymore. Natiya and Eben had taught me all the ways to kill someone, even without a weapon. I was far better trained than Zane. But I was afraid of what he might tell me.

I had been terrified the night that I asked him about my mother. In an instant I became a child again, my bones turned to liquid, the uncertainty I had punched down for years suddenly alive. And now I would have to face that moment all over again when I faced Zane. That fear had warped into a new question—could the answers be worse than not knowing?

Just kill him, Kazi, I told myself. It's what you always planned to do. Kill him and be done with it. You don't need answers. I had lived with doubt for this long—I could live with it forever. Justice was all I cared about. Answers wouldn't change anything. My mother was gone.

How can you be certain she's dead?

Jase's question had been as fragile as a robin's egg in his palm. He had held it out carefully to me, as if the shell were already cracked. Of course, I couldn't be certain she was dead. Not really. I had never seen her body, but I had taken a dream and molded it into a conclusion somewhere along the way, a carved piece of puzzle that fit into the shape of my life.

I had been certain, for so long, that one day she would find her way back to me, or if I only looked a little harder, one day I would find her. And then one bitter winter, when many Vendans had died already, I was curled up, shivering in my hovel, blue with the cold, thinking I might be next, and I heard a noise.

Shhh.

It was only wind, I told myself.

Kazi.

It was only my rumbling belly.

Shhh.

I was so cold already, frozen to the marrow, but I raced outside anyway, searching, desperate, not wanting to be alone, the snowflakes whirling in cutting blades, drifts numbing my feet, wind whipping at my face, and then ... there was a curious calm. Against the startling white that made the empty streets of Venda unrecognizable, I spotted something.

Had it been a shivering frozen dream? Delirium fueled by hunger? Even then, none of it had really seemed real. How could I explain to Jase something that even I didn't understand? I saw my mother, her long raven hair trailing in a loose braid down her back, with a crown of fresh green vines woven atop her head, like the kind she used to weave for me on holy days. She was spring in the middle of a harsh winter. She turned, her eyes warm amber pools, looking into mine as if trying to send me another one of her silent signals, her lips mouthing my name—*Kazi, my beloved, my chiadrah*—and then she turned and walked away from me, but now

someone was beside her. He looked at me too. Death. She looped her arm through his and then she was gone. But Death lingered a moment longer. He looked at me, then finally stomped his foot in warning, and I ran back to my hovel.

Maybe you saw what you needed to see so you could move forward? Jase suggested.

I had mulled that possibility over in my head countless times since then. Had it only been the desperate loneliness of a girl finally letting go? She had already been slipping away from me for months and years, my guilt rising as my memory of her faded, and that guilt would spike a renewal of my search for her.

Maybe seeing her that night was her message to me to stop waiting for her to return. So I would stop looking.

Except some time after that, I began looking for someone else.

One way or another, I couldn't quite let go.

Since that night I had seen Death many times—and that was no dream. Maybe he had always been there, and in the busyness of trying to survive, I simply hadn't noticed. Or maybe once a dark door has been opened it can't be shut again. Now in unexpected moments I heard the warning whispers of ghosts, and Death took pleasure in taunting me, pushing me. He became like a quarterlord I was determined to beat, and the prize was my life.

“Apples!” Jase called out suddenly. He was already steering Tigone to the low branches of the trees, plucking ripe red apples as he went. He tossed some to the ground for the horses and gathered more in the folds of his cloak before he dismounted. He bit into one, slurping up its goodness, then shrugged. “I called them first, but I might be convinced to share with you.”

I looked down at him from my elevated position. “For a price, I suppose?”

He grinned. “Everything comes with a price.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course it does.” I slid off Mije and ambled toward him. “But even for an ambassador?”

“First it's an apple. Next thing you know, you'll be wanting your own office.”

I wrinkled my nose. “A little office for an ambassador? Oh no. I had my eye on one of those big fancy apartments at the arena. Top level.”

“Those are quite costly, I’m afraid.” He circled his arm around my waist and gave me a bite of his apple, then kissed me, the sweet juice wet on our lips.

“Well, *Patrei*, just what might it cost me?”

His brows rose. “I think it’s better if I show you.”

We kissed again, banter still playing between our lips as he pulled me to the ground. I knew the lightness, the play, the laughter were his gifts to me, a promise that no matter how close we were to Tor’s Watch and whatever challenges it held or objections his family voiced, we would not lose the perfect beauty of these last weeks. It would not change anything between us. He didn’t need to say the words again. I felt them in every kiss. This was just the beginning.

★ ★ ★

It was as if Mije sensed we were near. Without a nudge, he picked up his pace, eager for his rest and fresh sweet hay, which the Ballenger stables always had in abundance. Jase had been right about the timing. The sky was striped with purple, dusk closing in fast as we headed for the back entrance at Greyson Tunnel. A shimmering black cloud, alive with bats heading out for their evening meal, streamed above us.

Jase looked at me, the dusky sky flecking his brown eyes with soft light. “Stay close beside me,” he said. “I don’t want Priya taking a crack at you. She has a temper, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Priya? A temper? *Noo*,” I mocked. “I never would have guessed.” I could handle Priya, but I really didn’t want to. I wanted to make our transition back into Tor’s Watch as uneventful as possible, and not antagonize the family any further.

“By the time we make it through the tunnel, the news will probably already have reached the house. I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole family is waiting on the front steps for us.”

He said it as a complaint, but I knew that was exactly what he was hoping for. The *whole* family—including Samuel. That if the note was

written by Jalaine, it had been a hasty overreaction, another case of panic that held no truth. That's what I was hoping for too, though the prospect of confronting his whole family on the front steps in just minutes snatched the breath from my chest. I knew I had to get it over with. Deal with their anger and move on. We had a plan. They would be part of it.

We finally rounded the last copse of trees and emerged on the open slope that led to Greyson Tunnel. The towering black silhouette of Tor's Watch loomed before us against the evening sky.

But something about it was wrong. Very wrong.

Jase pulled back on Tigone's reins, staring. I stopped too, trying to make sense of it.

The skyline had changed. The silhouette made no sense.

Between the spires of Riverbend and Raehouse there was a gaping hole, as if a hungry monster had taken a bite out of it. The center black spindle of the main house was gone, and as my eyes adjusted to the shock, I noticed there was more that was gone.

The wall.

The front fortress wall near the entrance to Tor's Watch—the solid rock wall that was four feet thick—had a cavernous gap, and jagged piles of rubble spilled down the mountain. The guard towers were gone too.

“This can't—” Words froze on Jase's lips. A shocked second passed and then he bolted toward the destruction.

“Jase! Stop!” I shouted. “It might not—”

A powerful whir split the air. And then another. Arrows. I circled in place, trying to see where they were coming from.

Jase heard them too and pulled back. He was about to turn Tigone around when an arrow struck his thigh. He grimaced, still trying to turn, and another pierced his shoulder, sending him recoiling backward. Tigone reared.

I still couldn't see where the shots were coming from. It seemed to be from everywhere. I raced toward Jase. “*Baricha!*” I yelled at Tigone. “*Baricha!*” The command for “run,” but the arrows kept whirring, and Tigone reared again, uncertain which direction to turn.

Jase was yelling the same to me: “Run, Kazi! Go back!” Then another arrow hit him in the chest. In a split second, two more lanced his side. He slumped forward.

“Jase!” I screamed as I reached him.

No arrows had struck me. They were only aiming for the *Patrei*. His eyes met mine, hazy. “Go, get out of here.” His last words before he fell forward on Tigone.

Dark cloaked figures descended upon us from all sides, surrounding us like yelping hyenas, shouting strategies to one another. *Get him*. I pulled a knife with one hand and my sword with the other and rolled from Mije, landing on my feet swinging, taking down the first cloaked figure that was already reaching to pull Jase from his horse. I doubled back, swinging at one coming at me from behind, slicing his head off, and yelled, “*Baricha!*” this time to Mije. He followed my command and galloped back toward the forest. Jase lay lifeless over Tigone’s withers. I rolled to avoid the swinging blade of a third attacker, jerking my knife upward to slash his hamstring, then stabbing him between the ribs as he stumbled forward. I shoved his body aside and prodded Tigone’s hindquarter, slapping her with the broad side of my sword, as I shouted, “*Baricha!*” again, praying she would follow Mije before more of the attackers closing in could grab Jase.

It worked. Tigone barreled through the cloaked figures, knocking three of them down. But almost in the same moment, I was caught from behind, a hood flying over my head, the world fully black now. My weapons were wrested from my hands, but I continued to fight and heard a snap like a melon cracking open when my boot connected with the firmness of someone’s skull. I pulled my small boot knife free and stabbed backward over my shoulder into the face of whoever held me around the throat. A scream split the air and the arm fell away, but as I reached up to yank off the hood, a fist punched into my belly, and a sharp pain doubled me over. I was thrown to the ground, and a knee pounded into my back, pinning me to the rocky ground.

The voices erupted in a new frenzy. How many were there? They had been lying in wait for us. An ambush. They knew we were coming. Who else knew Jase was coming home besides Gunner?

“Stay down, bitch!”

“After him!”

“She killed Iersaug!”

“That way! Go!”

“Bloody hell!”

“He won’t get far!”

“Stay with her! I’ll get him!”

“Search the grounds for others!”

I heard the fading gallop of someone chasing after Jase. I struggled against the weight that had me pinned. *Run, Mije. Deep into the forest where it is dark. Please, by all the mercies of the gods, run. Don’t stop. I can’t lose him.*

My head swam, nausea striking as my arms were jerked behind my back. They tied my wrists and legs with rope. The ground beneath me was warm and wet, and I smelled something—the salty tang of blood. *Mine?*

It was only then I realized that the fist that punched me had held a knife. And just before the chaos faded and the darkness deepened, I realized something else.

I recognized one of the voices.

It belonged to Paxton.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JASE

My eyes wouldn't focus. My head whirled, or maybe that was Tigone still circling in terror. I caught glimpses of Kazi fighting, Mije galloping, the distant fortress wall, a forest of trees as the world spun around me. And then I couldn't see anything at all.

This?

This was how it would end?

Maybe it already had. But my hand. My fingers. They held something. *Kazi? Where are you?*

My fingers ached. My arms. They burned with fire. *Hold on, Jase.* I had something in my grip. Tigone's mane? The reins? I squeezed tighter.

"Kazi—" I couldn't draw a breath. My chest. Then everything went cold. Frozen.

My fingers slipped. Horse, saddle, air, sliding past my hand. I fell, slamming to the ground. The arrow lodged in my chest jammed farther into my body. A burning jolt knifed through me, every part of me on fire again. Gurgling breath rattled through my lungs. A scream rolled from my throat, like a dying animal. I heard galloping, a horse getting closer. Footsteps. Rustling. They were close. I tried to roll to my side, crawl, get away, my fingers digging into a moldy bed of leaves, but no more breaths would come. I coughed blood, saltiness filling my mouth. This. This was how it would end.

Run, Kazi. Go—

Kazi—

The greenhouse. Please—

I love—

*The Dragon will conspire,
Wearing his many faces,
Deceiving the oppressed, gathering the wicked,
Wielding might like a god, unstoppable.*

—Song of Venda

CHAPTER EIGHT

KAZI

“Like this, Kazi. Put your hands here.”

I feel his hand in mine, warmth against the cold, Jase teaching me the jig, the way the Ballengers dance it. His face glows as we twirl around an empty, crumbling ballroom that once held ancient kings and queens and the most powerful people on the continent. And for this night, it still does. It seems our feet don't touch the ground. They all watch us, ghostly, willing it to never end, leaning forward the way ghosts do, wishing, remembering.

“Do you hear that, Jase? They're applauding us.”

He looks up at the empty balconies and smiles as if he sees and hears them too. “They're applauding you.”

Would my memorized steps impress his family? Was I nimble enough? Graceful enough? Enough of anything? Because I did want to impress them. I desperately wanted that. To show them I knew how to do other things besides steal their Patrei. Show them I could learn to be part of a family.

He spins me, lifting me into the air, the muscles of his shoulders flexing beneath my hands, then he lets me slide downward between his arms until our lips meet. The music we imagine together beats against our skin, the air, the swooning murmurs of those watching, Jase's boots tapping our promises into place, unassailable, enduring—

A crash jarred me awake, a door slamming into a wall. The ballroom we danced in vanished. I was back in my small dark cell, my dream dissolving in a quick gust, my arms cold again. Heavy footsteps clipped the cobbles in the hallway outside my cell door. I tried to use them as a measure for the passing days. They came as regularly as the taunting beam of light, but I was still uncertain how much time had passed. Some days were worse than others, delirium getting a strong foothold, it seemed, all the way into my soul. I fought against it. Sometimes it was Jase who brought me back from

the edge. His voice reached through the darkness. *Go with the current. Just a little farther. Keep going. You can do it.*

Had it been five days? Ten? Maybe far more. One dark day rolled into the next with no beginning or ending. The footsteps grew louder. Soon I would hear a faint *plop*, followed by the skitter of rats as a hard roll was dropped through the tiny opening at the top of the door. I had to hurry to get the meager lump of food before the rats did. It was all they fed me. One roll a day. Strangely, they wanted me to stay alive. But they wanted to keep me weak too.

They were afraid of me.

I had killed three of them, that much I knew—and maybe at least one more after I was captured. All the lessons from Natiya, Eben, Kaden, and Griz had become second nature in that chaotic moment when we were attacked. My desperation to save Jase had exploded through me like a hot flame. Every nerve blazed with one goal. Saving him was all that mattered. Had I? Had he gotten away? I couldn't fail again. Not this time.

Where are you, Jase?

I told myself he had made it into the cover of the forest. I told myself a lot of things, every day bolstering myself with a new possibility when both fear and logic shook me with their cold hands. *Five arrows. One in his chest. The chances of surviving that—*

I told myself that a hundred arrows couldn't stop him, not even one in his heart, that he had made his way to someone for help. I held on to that thought, fast and tight, like a rope keeping me from plunging off a cliff. But who would help him? Where would he go? Had our attackers breached the walls of Tor's Watch?

The *thump, thump, thump* of the arrows still vibrated in my throat, steel piercing his bone and flesh again and again. Blood ran everywhere. A familiar voice crept in, my own, whispering cruel thoughts that had haunted me my whole life. *Sometimes people vanish from our lives and we never see them again.*

No! I argued with myself and struggled to my feet. I pushed the lid off the water barrel and cupped some water into my hands. It had an earthy, ripe taste, like cider had once been stored in it. The barrel hadn't been

refilled since I was thrown in here. Maybe once the water was gone I would be too. I leaned against the wall and slid back to the floor, out of breath from the small effort. My festering wound throbbed, my brow was on fire, and yet I trembled with cold. I didn't know much about injuries, which only now surprised me, considering the life I had lived. Even my two months in a Reux Lau prison cell hadn't resulted in any injury. Had my mother made a wish upon a wish stalk? Many wishes to protect me? Maybe now they were all used up. *My chiadrah. Is she coming? Is that her I hear walking closer?* I swiped my hand over my sweaty brow. *No, Kazi, that was before. You're in a cell now, and Jase is—*

There was shuffling outside the door as my captor paused and slid open the lock on the peephole. But this time there were two sounds, first the soft *plop* of the roll and then a second sound. A firm *slap*. Something heavy hitting the ground. I pulled in a breath, bracing myself, then crawled on all fours toward the door, the chains on my ankles rattling behind me. I pressed on the wound, sticky ooze wetting my fingers.

“Cowards!” I screamed, pounding on the door before the footsteps retreated. My daily response was proof that I wasn't too weak or dead yet. That I would kill them all. *I would*. And Paxton would be first.

But the burst of anger against the door took more energy than I had to spare, and I collapsed against it, dizzy with pain, then fell in a heap to the floor. *One more day, Kazi. Make it one more day*. How could I steal keys from my jailors if they never opened the door? How could I do anything when I grew weaker by the minute? *Jase, where are you? I have to know*. Maybe needing to know was all that kept me going. I still needed to be there for him. Which meant eating.

I reached out, feeling for the roll, and my fingers closed around it. I could live on a single measly roll far longer than they could imagine. *As long as it takes*. My stomach was no stranger to emptiness. I had years of experience at this. I tucked the roll in my shirt and felt for the second item I'd heard fall. Had I imagined it? Dreams and delusions were my constant companions in this devilish place.

My hand touched something soft. I snatched it up and examined it with my fingers. Knotted cloth? A handkerchief? I squeezed. It contained

something pliable. I sniffed. Sweet. Food? Some sugary delicacy? A trick? I unknotted the cloth and dabbed my finger into the thick sticky paste, then tapped it to my tongue. Honey—laced with leafy herbs? This was not food. It was medicine. A poultice to leach away infection.

Medicine, from one of them?

Maybe at least one person on the other side of that door wanted me to live. Someone who was afraid too.

★ ★ ★

More medicine came the next day, and the next, and next. Some of it I ate. I guessed that it couldn't hurt and might actually help. The oozing stopped. My brow cooled. My mind cleared. The wound seemed to be shrinking, the skin weaving itself back together. An extra roll was also dropped each day—with a chunk of cheese hidden inside. I eagerly devoured it, but I was still weak from days of being chained and starved. And darkness. Complete soul-sucking darkness. It seeped into my bones like a numbing liqueur.

My benefactor didn't reveal himself, but each day I felt the fear through the door, dread that I might call out and reveal him—or her. I sensed they were taking a great risk for me. Who was smuggling medicine and extra food? Who wanted me to stay alive?

I heard the daily signal that food was on its way, footsteps, and I knelt near the door, ready to retrieve my roll and medicine, when I noticed a rumble. A different sound. Many footsteps. The rumble grew louder, and the door flew open. My hand shot up to protect my eyes from the piercing brightness. I squinted and blinked several times, trying to adjust to light I hadn't seen in days, maybe weeks, and finally I saw what appeared to be a squad of guards crowding outside the doorway. All heavily armed.

“Get to feet,” one of them ordered. “We go for walk.”

“And if too weak to walk, we drag you.”

“By hair.”

“Your choice.”

I looked at my half dozen captors, uniformed soldiers, all with shaved heads, tall, hard, and muscled, looking like they'd been carved from the trunks of giant trees instead of being fashioned from flesh. Three of them

were a head taller than the others. There was something unnatural about them. Their skin pulled tight and their eyes were dull, like worn pewter plates. Soldiers? They spoke Landese with a strong accent that I didn't recognize.

I winced as I pushed up from the ground, holding my side, forcing strength into muscles and bones that shivered with weakness. I steadied myself against the wall. "I'll walk."

CHAPTER NINE

KAZI

Clink. Clink. Clink.

The chain jumped along the cobbles behind me, monotonous musical notes filling the grim air. The guards made me walk in front of them. The floor was cold and damp against my bare feet. The long musty passage we lumbered through still gave no hint to where I was.

“My gods, she stinks,” the guard behind me complained.

Good, I thought. Get a nice long whiff, asshole. It might be your last.

I reached up and fluffed my hair, hoping to release more of my rotting cell perfume. I was immediately butted in the back with a halberd and sent sprawling to the ground. I hunched as I fell, trying to protect my gut.

“No sudden moves!” he yelled. “Keep your hands at sides!”

Another guard mocked him for being so jumpy. “Can’t you see she can barely walk?”

“And half your size!” Another one laughed.

“She’s Rahtan. They can’t be trusted.”

I gathered my breath and what paltry clues I could. Jumpy. Sensitive noses. And they distrusted Rahtan. So they weren’t entirely stupid. But they had the stature of tree trunks. I wasn’t sure any of my tricks could bring them down. I managed to get to my feet again, using the wall as support, my hands shaking from the exertion, sweat springing to my chest. I turned to face them, focusing on each one after the next. Since I was sure introductions weren’t imminent, I tried to catalog their distinguishing features: *broken nose, black teeth, divot in forehead, no neck, hairy knuckles, and scar eye*. I also noted which accoutrements hung at their sides, the usual course of weapons, but also some that were unique, regional—a region I didn’t know. These soldiers were from somewhere other than Eislandia.

There were no keys hanging from their sides that were readily visible, but an ax that might break my chains hung from No Neck's belt. Which of them had shot Jase? Maybe all of them, but then I remembered—*no*—the voices I heard during the attack didn't have accents. And the man whose head I had parted from his shoulders had white hair and a beard. These were not the attackers who had stabbed me, but they must be in collusion with them. Just how many cutthroats was I dealing with? And what did they want?

"I apologize for the stink," I said, trying to get them to loosen their scowling lips. "I guess I forgot to bathe this morning, and it's been a very long day. Or has it been two weeks?"

Broken Nose, the smallest of the bunch, grinned. Divot Head glared.

"I'm Kazi. Such a pleasure to meet you all. Do you have names?"

They weren't amused. "Shut up!" Black Teeth snapped. The names I bestowed would have to stand.

"Move," No Neck ordered. "The general is waiting to question you. But bath first. He don't want to smell your stink either."

His accent. The familiarity struck me. Two of the men in Fertig's gang of raiders had called to each other and sounded like these soldiers. What accent was it? And who was this general? The one who had attacked Tor's Watch? We reached a bath chamber, and Scar Eye dug deep into a vest pocket to produce a key that unlocked my leg chains, then shoved me inside and told me to hurry. I had five minutes, and I had better come out smelling like roses. Black Teeth laughed like it was an impossibility. Scar Eye didn't smile. His expression never changed.

Alabaster sconces lit the chamber with warm flickering light. The chamber wasn't what I expected. Soap? Fluffy towels? Fresh, clean clothes folded on a settee? A large copper tub with steaming water? Shoes? Was this a bribe? Who was this general with the sensitive nose? I almost felt like I was being courted—if not for the stab wound and scowling guards. More likely I was being prepared for something, and I doubted it was anything good.

I peeled off my clothes and then, very carefully, the sticky poultice from my wound, getting a good look at the one-inch puncture for the first time.

The skin was puckered, angry, and a portion of it still oozed. Leftover pieces of honey and herbs clung to the stained skin around it. The hot water stung as I eased into the tub, and the strong soap stung more. I scrubbed gently and quickly, wincing as I cleaned around the wound. At the same time, my eyes swept every corner of the room, searching for anything that might be used as a weapon. There was nothing. The only possibility was breaking off a leg of the settee to use as a club, which would not be a quiet endeavor, nor highly effective against their long halberds. But then I noted the edge of the tufted settee. Decorative nails held the fabric in place. Still worthless against halberds and swords, but they might be useful at some point.

“One more minute!” No Neck shouted through the door.

I quickly hopped out of the tub, dried off, and threw on the shirt and trousers that had been left for me, then worked and pulled at the fabric on the settee to pop out the nails.

“Enough time!” The door flew open.

I sat on the settee, my back to the guard, the loosened nails between my legs. “I was just putting on my shoes,” I said.

“Hurry up! No fast moves.”

I palmed two small nails and shoved them into the hem of my shirt as I bent over to slip on my shoes.

I noted the chains weren't returned to my feet. Maybe they deemed me weak enough to be little threat.

“Are we going to see Paxton?” I asked as I walked ahead of them again.

“Quiet!”

“The general?”

“I said no questions!”

And no fast moves. They were a wary lot. There would be no juggling, at least not with oranges, to distract them. One advanced ahead as we climbed a narrow stone staircase. I had barely moved in days, much less climbed flights of stairs. Halfway up, the exertion made my head swim. If not for the extra food and medicine I had received, I wouldn't have even been able to make it this far. My knees shook. On the next step I stumbled and had to grab the wall to steady myself. It forced the soldier behind me to

stop short, and he cursed as he ran into me. I fell against him and he pushed me away. The rest of them chuckled. I was exactly as they wanted me to be. Weak and at their mercy.

“Stupid clod!”

“Not much of a soldier now, is she?”

“Scrawny weakling.”

“Keep moving!” another shouted.

I did. I put one foot in front of the other, pulled in one breath after another. Weakness didn't stop me from being a soldier. Maybe it even made me a better one. I knew how to use everything, even a momentary stumble.

The soldier's tiny push knife now hung heavy in my pocket.

★ ★ ★

We emerged into an expansive room busy with activity. Soldiers were hunched over tables, and their fingers followed lines on what I guessed were maps. Others wheeled large steaming kettles to where lines of more soldiers waited. My cheeks ached with my first smell of real food. Hot parrich, sweet corn muffins, smoked meats. Even my knees turned warm and wobbly with the scents wafting through the air, as if they recognized food too. When I saw a fat ham sitting on a table near the kettles it took all my self-control not to bolt for it. Hairy Knuckles was sturdy, well fed, and indifferent to the abundance of food. He led the way without lagging.

I searched the room, looking for people I might recognize, like Paxton, or any of his muscle-bound *straza*. But then my eyes settled into the *details* of the room. They suddenly blossomed, all of them out of place. The high-timbered ceilings, the enormous iron chandeliers hanging from them, the heavy tapestries covering the walls with hunting scenes and picnics, racaa, and tembris. It was a beautiful, well-appointed room, with stuffed couches along walls and beautiful woven rugs on the floors—not a soldiers' barracks.

At one end of the room were ornate sideboards loaded with fine dishes, and on the far wall was a painted crest—the *Ballenger crest*. My throat went dry. *This was their inn*. We were in the rambling dining hall of the Ballenger Inn, but there were no Ballengers. No Gunner, no Priya, no

customers, only more soldiers who looked like the ones who escorted me, at least a hundred of them. *I'm in Hell's Mouth*. What madness was this? Who were these people? This was not just Paxton and his league of thugs I was dealing with. Had Paxton joined forces with others? Had they taken over the whole town?

The missing spires of Tor's Watch and the gaping fortress wall burned behind my eyes. A sour taste rose in my throat. What had happened while we were gone? The words in the note skipped through my head. *They're banging at the door*.

My steps must have slowed, and No Neck gave me a rough shove forward, his knuckles digging into my back. Above the din of voices I heard shouting.

"He was riddled with arrows, for gods' sakes! No more excuses! Find him! Today!"

Jase. Whoever was yelling had to be talking about Jase. Which meant he had gotten away. My first full breath in days filled my lungs.

Divot Head grumbled and shook his head. Black Teeth sighed. Neither appeared to be eager to reach the angry voice, and yet that appeared to be exactly where we were headed. We turned at a large center pillar and walked toward a smaller dining room that adjoined the main hall. The wide arched opening gave a clear view of several people inside, including the one who was shouting. His back was to me, but his hands waved in fury. I spotted Oleez in the middle of the room, her distinct silver braid trailing over her shoulder. Beside her was Dinah, a timid girl who helped Aunt Dolise in the kitchen. They gathered up dirty dishes at a long table that ran down the center of the room. Oleez spotted me too. Her head bobbed slightly and then her expression grew sharp, and she looked away. Was it fear or hate I saw in her eyes? Her message was clear: *Don't speak to me*. Was I just another enemy in the midst of many more?

"Go on! You too! Get out of here!" the man seethed. "Don't return until —"

"General Banques?" Broken Nose called meekly. "We have the prisoner you asked for."

His back still to me, the man stopped yelling. His shoulders squared and his head jerked slightly to the side as if his neck had a kink—or he was trying to tamp down his anger. He remained still, seconds ticking away, then finally turned, his expression icy and calm, a stark contrast to who he had been just seconds earlier. This was a man who loathed being caught unaware in a moment of unrestrained wrath. He wanted to present some other kind of image to me—an image of complete control—but the sheen of sweat on his pale forehead betrayed him. He shot an almost imperceptible glare at Broken Nose as a warning. *Don't sneak up on me.* Another clue. Someone was new to this job, either Broken Nose or General Banques. Maybe both.

His cool gray eyes crept over me, trying to intimidate me before he ever spoke, every blink calculated. His upper lip lifted. He was tall and I guessed in his mid-thirties, or maybe the creases around his eyes weren't from age but ingrained anger. His hair was thick and black and slicked back with balm.

I returned his stare. Something about him was eerily familiar. Maybe it was his voice, the tone—

“So you're the one who—” He let the thought dangle. The one who *what*? “You're not what I expected,” he said, stepping closer. He nodded to Black Teeth and No Neck, and they both grabbed me by my arms. Really? I was starved and weak and recovering from a knife wound, and though I may have wanted to leap at him, I had already expended all of my energy just walking to meet him. Even Rahtan were human and had their limitations. I made a show by taking a long look at the hands gripping my arms, then turned back to him, raising my brows. Coward much?

“You're one of Paxton's lackeys, I presume,” I said.

He smiled. “I'm in charge here.”

“And you are?”

“It doesn't matter who I am. I know who you are. A co-conspirator with the Ballengers—”

“Conspirator to what? You have no—”

He reached out and clutched my neck. Rage pulsed in his fingers. *Die tomorrow, Kazi. Whatever game he's playing, learn it. Jase still needs you.*

And now it seemed other Ballengers might too.

“Listen carefully,” he ordered. “Unless you tell me exactly what I want to know, you’ll face a rope just like all the other conspirators we’ve already hanged. Do you understand?”

Already hanged? My mind sprinted like a gazelle, trying to grasp what he was saying. Was he mad? Ballengers? Had he executed Ballengers?

“I thought that would get your attention.”

I resisted swallowing. Resisted drawing in a breath. I met his stare. *Blink last, Kazi.* Push lightly. Attempt to bring him back to reality. I began to recite kingdom protocol.

“You are in violation of Alliance treaties by—”

He pulled me away from the guards and slammed me up against the wall, his grip on my neck tightening. “Where is he?” he hissed. The room quieted in an instant, and I struggled to breathe. Everyone was watching now. “You yelled a command to his horse! To both horses! What did you say?”

“Run,” I rasped.

He loosened his grip. “Run where?”

“Anywhere. Just run. Get away. I don’t know where they went.”

Which was true. And while I thought he saw the truth in what I said, he was not pleased by this news. It was as if I was his last hope of finding Jase. Maybe that was why they finally pulled me from the cell. Their other efforts hadn’t panned out. His nostrils flared, and his eyes widened, making him look crazed. His fingers tightened on my neck again. If he couldn’t find Jase, my neck would do. I guessed that I could take him down—I’d only have one shot at it—but I knew that I would die in the process. I was too weak and surrounded by too many to fight them all off.

“We found him!” a voice called.

The general released his hold on me, and I gasped for breath. His interest shifted to someone else in the crowded room. I recognized the voice and turned. Paxton and three other men wove their way through soldiers. Paxton’s appearance had changed dramatically. He wasn’t his usual cool, polished self. His normally neat ponytail was oily and tangled and his clothes rumpled and dirty. A sheen of gritty sweat coated his face. As he

pushed through the milling soldiers who had pressed closer for a better look, he spotted me. His steps faltered for a moment, but then he pushed past me too. He threw a sack on the table. “At least we found what was left of him. It looks like he fell down a ravine and animals got to him before we did.”

Another man confirmed Paxton’s story, saying it appeared that a pack of hyenas had gotten to him.

Banques left my side and looked at the sack on the table. “This?” He lifted the sack and turned it upside down. A swollen, blood-smeared hand fell out, landing with a thud on the table. Oleez gagged and turned away. Several of the soldiers blanched.

I leaned back against the wall, sweat springing to my palms. “No,” I said. “It’s not him. That is not his hand. That is not the *Patrei*’s hand.” The words clanged over and over again in my head. *It is not him.*

“Really? How can you be so sure?” Banques replied, his tone suddenly turned sickeningly sweet. “Come, take a closer look.” I didn’t move. He crooked his head to the side, looking it over. “I agree, it’s in pretty bad shape, but I guess that’s to be expected with animals fighting over it.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and flipped the mutilated hand over, then smiled at Paxton. “At last. Well done, men.” Paxton’s attention turned to me, stone steady, silent, none of his usual cocky replies rolling off his tongue, but his last warning months back at the arena skipped through me again: *Tread carefully, cousin. Remember, everyone is not always what they seem to be.* Paxton had hunted down his own kin? Was he more vile than I had even imagined?

“No,” I said more firmly. “You’re wrong. And you will be answering to the *Patrei*. He is the law of Hell’s Mouth and—”

“Not anymore.” Banques picked up the hand carefully with the handkerchief and tugged at one of the fingers. “Here, it’s only a cheap piece of jewelry to me. You can have it. Call it your trophy.” He gave the bloated finger another strong yank, pulled something free, and threw it at me. It clinked across the floor and came to rest at my feet. Something gold. I stooped to pick it up but then couldn’t stand again.

I held the ring in my palm.

A gold signet ring.

Jase's ring.

This is just the beginning, Kazi.

I promise.

We have a whole lifetime ahead of us.

Saltiness swelled in my mouth. My teeth clenched and the soft flesh of my cheek was crushed between them. The floor of the room tilted. I stumbled to my knees. *Animals got to him.* The light went dim. Voices warped, my ears pounding with unintelligible words. I looked up at Paxton, but my eyes wouldn't focus. His face was a blur, and then hands gathered under each of my arms, lifting, dragging me, but I couldn't see where we were going. It was all a cold muffled haze, like I had fallen deep into a river, no words, no breaths, sinking, and I couldn't find my way back to the surface, and there was no one there to reach down and pull me up.

Greyson writes our names in large letters on the wall, all twenty-three of us. It looks big and important. Permanent. He writes our ages too. The youngest is only three.

Greyson says, *We are strong, but together we are stronger.*

Every day when I look at all our names together, I feel taller, smarter, stronger.

—Razim, 12

CHAPTER TEN

KAZI

“Lean back against me. I’ve got you. Go with the “current.”

Jase’s arms wrap around me, holding me tight, righting me every time I dip below the surface. “I’ve got you, Kazi. Feet forward. Just a little farther. You can do it.”

“I can’t, Jase, I can’t without you.”

I feel myself sink, go deeper, not caring, not wanting to breathe. Letting go. It is easier to let go, give in, everything about me numb and heavy. I watch air bubbles slip from my nose, my mouth, bright spheres against the darkness, swirling upward like shining strands of white pearls.

“You can do it, Kazi. Go with the current.”

“Not without you, Jase,” I whispered. “Not without you.”

“You’re awake?”

The pearls vanished, and I gasped as I sat up. An apple-cheeked woman sat in a chair in the corner of the room. She rose and lifted a tray from the table beside her. “Broth,” she said as she came toward me. “King’s orders. He wants you to eat and get your strength back.”

I looked around the beautifully furnished room. Where was I? Had it been a dream? I instinctively assessed the woman and my surroundings. She was unarmed and there were no guards, but my will to run was gone. I felt the swollen flesh on the inside of my cheek with my tongue. It wasn’t a dream. What did it matter? Run where? To whom? Into what other nightmare?

Her jumble of words were just coming together in my head.

“The king? The king is here?”

“He’ll explain. I’ll let him know you’re awake.” She set the tray down on the bed beside me and left.

I felt for the push knife in my pocket, and the nails I had pulled from the settee. They were gone. Was she the one who took them? I sat in the middle

of a four-poster bed, surrounded by luxurious linens. Was I in a room at the inn? I stared at the glistening bowl of broth. Instead of feeling hunger, bile swelled in my throat. I swung my feet over the bed, but with one step, my legs collapsed beneath me and I fell facedown onto the floor. Jase's ring tumbled from my palm, the clink of gold ringing in my ears again. It was a sharp sound, a knife running under my skin. *Deeper*, I thought, *cut deep*. I wanted to die. I wanted to sink into the floor and disappear, but old habits and rules surfaced.

Tomorrow, Kazi, die tomorrow.

"No," I choked. "Not this time."

Pain rumbled through my chest, and I inhaled sharply, struggling to hold it back. *Don't, Kazi. Don't. He is not dead.* If I sobbed, it would be an admission that it was real, but my chest tore open anyway, a flood of dying sounds pouring out of me, and it seemed there was no question, *I was dying*. I had taken a risk and lost. Everything I had finally allowed myself to feel these past months spilled through the room, disappearing. There would be no tomorrows, not ones that mattered. I was empty, and I would never be full again.

Make a wish, Kazi, one will always come true.

My wish had already come true, and the jealous gods snatched it away, just like they had taken away my mother. There would be no more wishes, no more stars, no more anything. I lay there, staring at the ring just out of my reach, the floor icy against my cheek, too afraid to get up. I couldn't do this again. I couldn't drag myself back to a place where I cared to go on.

The ring glowed on the floor, reflecting all the light the world held, the shine of Jase's eyes, the glint of his hair in the sun. A ring that was not just a ring. The general had called it a worthless piece of jewelry, but he was wrong. It was the reworked gold of countless *Patreis*. Its worth was not in its scratched metal but in its history and honor. Its promise. *I made a blood vow to protect them, Kazi. And the Patrei's vow is his family's vow.*

I forced myself to my feet and retrieved it. My hand shook as I slipped it on my finger. "You made a vow to me too, Jase. You promised me a lifetime of—" My voice broke. I had also made a vow, that I would keep him safe always. And I had failed.

The door opened, and the king walked in. Just as the woman had said. King Montegue, the bumbling King of Eislandia who didn't know Hell's Mouth from his own ass. But he'd apparently managed to find it today.

He stared at me, his eyes dark and deep, contemplative, a hesitation in his step. His oafish grin was gone, but neither was he the sly king I had glimpsed at the arena. His shoulders drooped. He appeared to be a very tired king. He raked back his hair, unruly like the first time I met him, loose strands falling forward.

"This was not how I hoped to cross your path again," he said. "I am truly sorry. I know you've been through a terrible ordeal. I'm afraid General Banques can be crude and harsh, especially after everything we've been through. I've spoken with him. I apologize for his treatment of you, but these are very hard times."

My mind was fuzzy, still trying to navigate through something thick and suffocating. I spun the too-large ring on my finger. Hard times? I finally looked up, "*Why* are these hard times?" I asked. "What have you done? Why is Banques hanging people? Who is he hanging?"

Why have you killed the Patrei? But that was a question I couldn't ask aloud. It was an impossible thought.

The king glanced at my untouched broth and sighed. "You deserve answers, and you'll get them. But first you do need to eat."

"I can't—"

"Please." He came over and took my hand, gently nudging me forward. "I have a lot to tell you, but it will take strength to hear it all. You'll feel better once you eat. I promise. And I understand you were wounded. I've called for our healer to come take a look." He guided me to the chair and table in the corner, then brought the tray of broth to me as if he were a servant.

He sat on a stool opposite me, his eyes creased with concern, waiting for me to lift my spoon.

It will take strength to hear it all?

I didn't want strength. I wasn't sure what I wanted. I used to know. I wanted what Jase wanted. A home. A family. Answers. Did any of that matter anymore? Would answers bring Jase back to me? I'd thought I

wanted certainty, that it would be freeing, but now certainty was the anchor that pulled me under. I stared at the broth, still drowning, lost, that girl wandering the streets again, weak and not sure where to turn.

“Please,” the king repeated.

Go with the current, Kazi. Keep your head up.

I picked up the spoon and ate.

★ ★ ★

I had almost finished the bowl and was ready to hear the explanation he promised me, when there was a tap at the door. He stood. “I’m sorry. That’s probably the healer. I’ll give you two some privacy. I’m sure she’ll need you to disrobe.”

“But you said—”

“I’ll be back. As soon as she’s done.”

If someone could be the opposite of General Banques, the king was that person. He was soft-spoken, and his movements were quiet, pensive. Apologetic. Had something sobered him since our first meeting? *These are hard times*. Did he really comprehend what was going on here? A tyrant was on the loose, hanging people. Was this another case of the king being oblivious to whom and what he ruled?

As he left, the healer entered, a woman I had never seen in Hell’s Mouth before. Somehow I was expecting, or maybe hoping, to see Rhea, the healer who had treated my dog bites.

This woman was pinched and angled, with a stout leather bag clutched in her fist. I realized she might become suspicious when she saw how well my wound was healing ... unless she was the one who had slipped me the medicine? A healer. Of course. Who else would know about a poultice to treat an oozing wound? Who else would even know the likely state of a wound without examining the patient?

“Thank you,” I said, hoping to prompt some admission from her.

“For what?”

“For coming, of course. Treating me.”

She looked down at me, her lips tight against her teeth, and offered a curt reply. “King’s orders.” She rummaged roughly through her supplies, a hiss

escaping through her teeth.

Was it me she didn't like? Or was it the king? Or maybe it was the whole state of affairs outside the inn. How far had this madness spread?

"Who was hanged?" I asked.

"Traitors," she answered. "Now show me your wound. I have other duties to attend to besides the likes of you."

The *likes* of me? She stared at me as if I were a roach crossing her path and she was the high queen of everything. Did I have something written on my face? Street trash? Vermin? Or was it just Vendans she disliked? Those mysterious barbarians who wore tethers of bones at their sides? I was used to insults, some even from my own countrymen who looked down on me. When you are on the lowest rung of society, you are a comforting reminder to those just a bit above you that life could always be worse, that they are not you. The healer's movements were sharp, efficient. She was here unwillingly at best, and certainly not my benefactor.

I lifted my shirt, and she gave the wound a cursory glance before applying stinging tincture and a bandage. Her hands were rough and the wound still tender, but I hid a wince behind a clenched jaw. She scribbled something out on a piece of paper, then frowned as if she remembered something. "I'd rather not have to come back. Do you know how to read?"

My shoulders pulled back. "I'm afraid only in three languages," I replied. "Fluently, that is. Five altogether." It was only a small stretch. "*Caz ena*, beetch?" I added.

Her brow squiggled for a moment, uncertain what I had said, but I was sure that the unsettling familiarity of at least one word confounded her. She put the piece of paper on the table along with a small vial of tincture and left. I watched her walk out the door unaware that her bag of remedies was one small item lighter.

When the door banged shut, I looked at the scalpel in my hand, not sure why, at this point, I even took it from her bag. A habit of survival? On the streets of Venda, I had never passed by an easy steal. It all added up to something that could help me survive for one more day. Even if it was something I didn't want, it could be used for trade later. I couldn't trade this scapel for anything, and a thousand slit throats wouldn't give me back Jase.

An ache gnawed beneath my ribs, like an animal trying to escape. I remembered my last frantic seconds with Jase, but they only amounted to disconnected glimpses that I couldn't put together. What had been my last words to him? *Stop? Run?* Those minutes had been stricken with fear and anger. *Rewind it, Kazi. Make it all different.* One more chance. But the moment was gone. Someone had stolen the last words I wanted Jase to hear from me. *I love you. I will always love you.* I had tried to save him. I had fought for all I was worth, but it hadn't been enough.

I turned the scalpel over in my hand. It gleamed sharp and deadly. It was meant to slice flesh so cleanly you barely felt it. I nicked my fingertip, and a bright red bead bloomed against my skin.

A blood vow. And the Patrei's vow is his family's vow.

The bead grew larger, like a glistening red ruby, and I lifted my finger to my lips, rubbing the warm blood across them, tasting it with my tongue. The saltiness, the centuries of vows, the promises. And Jase.

You are my family now, Kazi.

I wiped the blood from the scalpel and slipped it beneath the chair cushion for safekeeping. This weapon would not be taken from me.

The *Patrei's* blood vow was my vow. Protect at all costs.

And I had nothing left to lose.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KAZI

Instead of returning to see me himself as he'd promised, the king had me brought to him. But not before I was given another change of clothes, curiously complete with leather vest, high boots, and a weapon belt—minus the weapons. I looked almost like a real soldier again. My escort was unarmed. The king had a very different regard for my talents than Banques and his goons. As I padded forward, a fog ebbed in and out around me. It wasn't hunger, but memories and words I couldn't flush from my head. I squeezed my eyes, trying to make horrific images vanish. *Animals got him.* I made myself focus on a distant point down the hall. The faraway point was all that mattered. It kept the world from turning upside down.

The guard stopped at a door, and I was led into what appeared to be the king's private dining room, the drapes drawn against the bright of day. Tall candles glowed atop golden candlesticks on a table set for two.

The king turned as I entered the room, his hand absently pressed to his side, and I wondered if there was a pocket inside his vest that held treasure—or were his ribs simply aching? *These are hard times.* Had he been injured? His eyes swept over me, and he smiled. "I see they brought you proper clothes this time. Good. You deserve to look like the premier soldier you are."

"You mean the premier soldier who was stabbed, starved, and held in a dark cell for countless days?"

He grimaced. "Fair enough, but if I could explain." He pulled a chair out for me to sit.

I shook my head, refusing his offer.

"It was a mistake," he said. "They didn't know who you were."

"I screamed it through the door every day."

He looked down and sighed as if dismayed. "Prisoners scream a lot of things, I'm afraid."

“Why do you have prisoners? Why are you here?”

He stepped from behind the chair, walking closer to me, taller than I remembered. “I mean no disrespect,” he said, “but if you don’t mind, that’s a question I would like to ask. Why are *you* here? At the arena I saw you slug the *Patrei* in the jaw, and then shortly after that, you arrested him at knifepoint and hauled him back to Venda to face trial for harboring fugitives.”

“At knifepoint? How would you know that last part?”

“Oleez, a servant who was there, told General Banques about the confrontation.”

Had Oleez been there that night? I didn’t remember seeing her, but she could have been hanging back in the shadows. It would explain her sharp look in my direction.

I studied the king. He was an enigma. Different. He was still the tall, broad-shouldered king I had met at the arena, though more well-groomed now, and with an air and presence about him I hadn’t seen before. It wasn’t his clothes or how he carried himself—it was his demeanor that had changed. The king before me was brooding, almost meditative, his words calm and even. Thoughtful. Where was the clueless buffoon who shrugged and grinned and tapped his fingers together like a child? Was it the hard times he had mentioned that made that king disappear?

“I’m here because I had orders from the Queen of Venda to escort the *Patrei* back to his home,” I answered, still uncertain how much truth was safe to share. “She said I had overstepped my bounds by arresting him. There was no evidence he knew who the fugitives were that he harbored. Some of them didn’t even have warrants.”

“So hunting down fugitives is what you were really here for all along? Not treaty violations?”

I nodded.

Color flushed his neck. “And you didn’t think to tell me?” His eyes were hard steel looking into mine, and his words clipped. “I *am* the king, after all. But maybe you only saw me as a simple farmer shopping for Suri.” He looked away and a deep breath filled his chest as if he was trying to shake the resentment I’d heard in his tone. But where there was resentment, there

was awareness. He wasn't completely oblivious. He knew how others viewed him and his reign.

"Please," he said, walking back to the chair. He pulled it out a little farther. "I thought you should have a more substantial meal. You have some catching up to do."

I eyed the chair, and then him. I remembered the luxurious bath and the fine bed linens and didn't move. "Why am I feeling like a goose being fattened up for a holiday dinner?"

He sighed. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe I'm trying to make up for overstepping *my* boundaries? For the egregious break in protocol? For being busy with other matters and not paying attention to who was taken prisoner and how she was treated?"

Had he only been juggling—and dropping a few balls in the process? I knew from Jase that Montegue had become king unexpectedly a few years ago when a draft horse crushed his father. He was only a little older than Jase, who would be—

An angry fist grabbed my heart and shook it. I still expected Jase to walk through a door. I couldn't stop thinking of him as alive, busy, vibrant, taking care of what needed to be done, already scouting out borders, drawing up new trading rules, explaining to his family about me. None of that was going to happen. I felt myself being pulled under the current once more, everything about me unsteady, trying to breathe. I reached up and felt his ring on my finger.

Don't fight it, Kazi, lean back, feet forward.

His voice, so clear in my head. So close. So determined.

The king's eyes remained fixed on me. Curious. And, strangely, patient.

I walked over to the chair and sat, but it felt more like I was collapsing into it. Every word, every effort, drained me. Jase was not coming through that door. Not through any door ever again. *He's alive, Kazi. He has to be alive.* My head ached with the battle going on inside. I had lived through this battle before. I couldn't do it again. Did anything the king had to say even matter?

Head up. Breathe. Jase pulling me up again and again.

"Explain," I said.

“Please, let me serve you first.” He lifted a silver cover from a dish and spooned some perfect, tiny roasted potatoes onto my plate that were delicately coated with herbs, and then beside them he set three boiled quail eggs. He drizzled a smoky golden sauce over it all, making it look like a piece of artwork rather than something to be eaten. It made me want to laugh. It was a glaring contrast to the grim news coating my mouth.

As he returned the silver cover to the dish, he hesitated, spotting my hand on the arm of the chair. “You’re wearing the signet ring?”

“Your general pulled it off the—” I blinked away the sting in my eyes. “He gave it to me. He called it a trophy.”

His brows pulled down and he shook his head. “He shouldn’t have done that. I can dispose of it if you’d like?”

I stared at the ring. Dispose of it? *It’s only a cheap piece of jewelry to me.* Did either the king or his general have any idea of the history this ring held? *It’s been in my family for generations. Once it’s put on, it never comes off.* I spun it on my thumb.

“Are you all right?” The king stared at me, waiting for my answer.

“I’ll keep it.”

He sat opposite from me and explained that almost two months ago, Hell’s Mouth had come under siege by miscreants who raided businesses, burned homes, and preyed on its citizens. He was in Parsuss, and by the time news reached him, the lawlessness was out of control. A league run by a fellow named Rybart was conducting an all-out war, trying to gain control of Hell’s Mouth and the arena. Citizens were panicked. Some were dying. Worse, the Ballengers were doing nothing to help them, instead demanding more protection money first.

Impossible. Jase would never do such a thing—but would Gunner? I already knew he was impulsive and short-tempered. Trying to blackmail me to send a letter to the queen had been his idea. And I would never forget how low he had stooped when he held Zane out to me as a bribe. But would he break the Ballenger vow to protect the town and hold the citizens hostage for more money? Surely the rest of the family wouldn’t allow him to do that.

“It seems they had to find some way to finance their latest illegal endeavors,” the king went on. “As you are aware, they’d been harboring fugitives for some time, but it was for a very specific purpose. They conspired together to build weapons. They had stockpiled quite an arsenal.”

“But that’s not possible. There were no weapons. Beaufort said—”

“They were there, all right. Luckily one of General Banques’s advance squads of soldiers found the stockpile in a Ballenger warehouse and confiscated them. There was some damage done to the town in the battle for retrieval, but we used the weapons to eliminate Rybart and his ruffians. That’s what the army’s using now to protect the town.”

My mind reeled with a different truth. I knew what I had heard. Kardos had complained that Jase had taken their only working weapon, and we had arrested them before their arsenal could become a reality. There were no weapons, except for the one prototype that Sarva had fashioned—*one* weapon—and Jase had taken and hidden it. Who had made additional weapons? Had it been Rybart’s league all along, working with Beaufort to terrorize the town and turn them against the Ballengers? And now a whole army was—

That was another thing that made no sense. “But you don’t have an army,” I said. “How can—”

“I do now. I needed one quickly and had to hire private militia. My advisors recommended it and—”

“*Mercenaries?* You have hired mercenaries roaming the streets of Hell’s Mouth?”

“I’ve been assured they are professional qualified militia, and really, I had no choice. You have to understand, there was a war going on here. As I mentioned, property was being destroyed. Citizens were dying. I had to do something. It’s costing me a fortune, but Paxton assures me that profits from the arena will help me recoup some of the expense. If not, I will have no fields to plant next season.”

Everything had spun out of control. “You’ve taken control of the arena too?”

“Someone had to. Too many citizens rely on it for their income. If the arena fails, so does the town.”

“And the Ballengers? Where are they?” I asked. “Are they the prisoners you spoke of?”

He shook his head. “As soon as they knew their scheme had been uncovered, the whole clan managed to retreat into that vault of theirs in the mountain to avoid arrest. They won’t come out, and there’s no reaching them without blasting our way in, and that might bring the whole mountain down on them. We don’t know exactly who all is in there, and I really don’t want innocents to die.”

“You can’t blast through a mountain of solid rock.”

“The weapons we confiscated are frighteningly powerful. Some are handheld, but a few are similar to ballistae. They’re not like anything we’ve ever seen. We don’t know what the Ballengers planned to do with them. My one fear is that some papers have gone missing. I’m afraid the Ballengers may still have the plans in their possession in order to build more. We need to find those papers.”

“I burned the plans.”

He set his fork down and his chin lifted slightly. “So it was you who did that? I saw the burned-out workshop.”

“How did you know it was a workshop? Did Oleez tell you that too?”

“No, it was another servant. Several of the staff were left behind when the Ballengers fled. We’ve taken them in and given them work to help make their lives normal again. That’s what we’re trying to do with the whole town. We mostly have it back under control now.” He sighed and took a long drink of the wine he had poured. He added more to my untouched glass, filling it to the brim. “The problem is, the Ballengers have a few loyalists,” he explained, “and those few keep stirring up more trouble, making it harder to calm nerves. Commerce is suffering. Livelihoods diminished. Some citizens are afraid to go about their business as usual. I can’t blame them. The few violent loyalists are keeping the whole town hostage. I understand their loyalty. It’s all they’ve ever known, but the Ballengers have sealed their own fate. Their reign is over, and my loyalty is to Hell’s Mouth, to get it back on its feet again. What the townspeople need is some sort of conclusion. A finality to this horrible mess, so they can move on.”

He looked down and scooted a potato across his plate, examining it like it held the answer to his problems. “I may as well say it right now. I need your help. I’m ashamed I didn’t tell you up front.” His gaze rose to meet mine, the candlelight flickering in his pupils. There was a weight in them, something that made him look younger, a boy king who was overwhelmed. “This is all new to me,” he finally admitted. “I’m trying to step up and do what I should have done all along. Be the leader my subjects have always needed me to be, even the ones in the far reaches like Hell’s Mouth. Maybe if I had done it sooner, none of this would have happened.”

His dark eyes never left mine, searching my face like I held some coveted key that would fix everything.

“What do you want from me?”

He was direct. “Tell the town that the last *Patri* is dead. But say that Jase Ballenger was found guilty of crimes against the Alliance of Kingdoms and executed in Venda by order of the queen. That justice has been served.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

KAZI

I stared at him, unable to look away. Say that Jase was executed in Venda? Was he serious? His eyes remained fixed on mine, unflinching. Long seconds passed as I tried to absorb why he would want me to tell such a ludicrous, evil lie.

“But we both know that is not what happened,” I finally answered.

“Is the truth really better? Torn apart by animals? Tell the town he was a scavenged meal in his last valiant effort to return home? I don’t want to make a martyr out of him like the first Ballenger—the mythic man who died saving the last remnant of humanity. That only begs for the loyalists or another Ballenger to rise up with more self-righteous violence. This senseless war could go on forever. Is that really what anyone needs? For the good of the town, it’s best that this chapter of history be closed for good. Seeing him as a convicted criminal who was served justice by the Alliance would do that—especially hearing it from the queen’s own guard who witnessed the execution. It will be done and over with. It’s the kindest truth, and will help the town let go and move forward into a new era. I’m only asking you for the sake of the people. They’ve been through so much, and the seer has already predicted a bitter season coming. We don’t want a starving winter ahead of us. The people need closure.” He reached out and squeezed my hand. “Can you help me give them that?”

I looked at his hand clasping mine. Large, warm, gentle. I slowly pulled mine free. “Closure,” I repeated, a placeholder for the storm whirling in my head.

He nodded.

“I’m wondering ... just how did you know the *Patrei* was returning?”

“He sent a message.”

“A message that you intercepted?”

“The man in the message office who had been on the take from the Ballengers turned it over to us. He wanted the bloodshed to end too.”

“And that’s when you ordered the ambush.”

“The last thing we needed was for him to rouse more violence in the town. Or bring commerce to a halt again. Revenue was just beginning to pick up again. Too many have been hurt already. We didn’t know you would be with him.” There was no denial in his answer, only justification. He had murdered Jase.

I stood and wandered around the room, feeling the wobble of my knees and the shallowness of my breaths. The wound in my gut stabbed again, reminding me I was weak. I was nothing. The king was right. Food. I needed food. Strength.

I felt Jase’s arm’s around me, holding me, keeping my head above the water.

Steady.

I’ve got you. I promise.

I turned to face the king.

I smiled to reassure him.

Juggled the words in my head into the perfect order, then stacked them into a neat pile. These were the things I knew how to do, the things that were second nature to me while everything else swirled wildly out of control.

I needed control.

“I do see your point,” I said. “The town does need to move forward. Into a new era.” I walked back to the table, the king’s plate empty, mine still full. I remained standing and stabbed a quail’s egg and ate it, then stabbed one of the tiny potatoes. I ate it too and washed it down with a long sip of wine, draining half the glass. Some of it dribbled down my chin, and I wiped it away with the back of my sleeve. Heat and recklessness rushed into my fingertips and toes. “One thing surprises me, though, Your Majesty. You’re a gambler, aren’t you? I wouldn’t have expected it.”

“No,” he replied uncertainly, “I never gamble.”

“I killed at least three of your soldiers, and yet you took a chance that I wouldn’t kill you the minute you stepped into my room earlier.” I looked

around the empty dining room, my hands raised in a question, the fork still in my hand, acting as a pointer. “And here? No weapons? No guards, even though you just admitted murdering the *Patrei* of Hell’s Mouth, the true ruler that my sovereign entrusted me to return to his home. Yes, you’re a gambler, a foolhardy one perhaps.” I leaned forward on the table. “Or maybe you’re just a very *stupid* one.”

His chin lifted. Angled.

The sly king. Ah, there he was. Back again. Slinking out from the shadows. All he needed was a little prod.

My gaze burned into his. “You’re nothing but an opportunist who moved in on an unstable situation for your own gain and employed wolves like Paxton and Truko to help you get it. All you care about is your newly acquired wealth at the arena. You think you can tell me you are responsible for orchestrating the ambush of the *Patrei*, without benefit of trial, and I will just lie and do your bidding?”

He pushed against the arms of his chair and slowly stood, the sly king unfurling, taller, imposing, in control. No juggling. Not caring. He was fully exposed. His skin seemed to stretch tighter across his face, his cheekbones sharper, his eyes darker and deeper.

“I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. Your vacillations between kissing, attacking, and arresting the *Patrei* left me with some doubt about which side you were really on. Vendan soldier—or traitor to the Alliance in league with the Ballengers? I guess I have my answer now.”

He stepped toward me, and I jerked the fork in my hand upward, a warning.

A grin lit his eyes. “You think you’re going to kill me with a pickle fork?”

“You’d be surprised at the creative places I know to shove a simple small fork. I’m not saying your death would be quick. On the contrary, it would be ugly and slow—maybe something like being torn apart by animals.”

I swallowed, the last few words clawing in my throat.

“I didn’t order that part,” he said. “That was fate, ordered by the gods.” He took another step toward me. “Put down the fork. You know that I’m stronger and could overtake you easily.”

“And yet here we are,” I replied. “I’m the one holding a pickle fork, and I can see the veins rising in your neck. Your pulse is racing. There are many kinds of strength, Your Majesty. Maybe you should become acquainted with them all instead of dwelling on your biceps and that useless muscle between your ears.”

The door to the dining room flew open, and his cronies rushed in.

“I should have known,” I said. “Listening in?”

They slowed when they saw the fork in my hand. They began to spread out. “Not behind me,” I warned. “In front of me where I can see you—unless you want me to plunge this fork into the king’s throat immediately.” I was closer to him than they were to me, and I was still a lethal yet unknown factor who had killed at least three of their soldiers.

“Stay where she can see you,” the king ordered.

I really had no plan beyond this moment. Wren would hate this. No escape. No juggling. But if I were to die, the king would die first. Of that much I was certain.

They created a half circle in front of me, and I eyed each one carefully. Banques, Truko, Divot Head. And Paxton. My eyes rested on him the longest. My only regret was I couldn’t kill them all.

“Put the fork down,” the king repeated. “You’ll never get out of here alive.”

“Maybe that was your greatest miscalculation. That I ever planned to.”

“Don’t be foolish,” Paxton warned, edging closer. “The king might have a position here for you, one that could be lucrative. He’s very generous. You’re looking at this all wrong. Don’t make a rash decision.”

I glared at Paxton. “You just might be the worst of them all, you worthless pile of dung. You’re a Ballenger too.”

“Barely,” Paxton answered. “My family was cast out generations ago.”

“Let’s show her,” Banques said. “Show her why she should agree to your proposition.”

I felt the numbing heat of the wine in my belly, wishing it could numb far more. “I will never agree to any proposition.”

Banques smiled. “Oh, I think there’s something that might change your mind.”

“Maybe I’m a bit of a gambler after all,” the king said, stepping forward, unafraid, “and the best gamblers always hold back a bit of negotiating gold.”

I stared at him, his eyes like hard glass, and icy fingers clutched my spine. Was his bumbling, oafish manner just a part of the façade he had carefully groomed for years? *Suri. Such is the life of a farmer king.* I remembered his shrug and clownish grin. That was not remotely the man who stood before me now. There was awareness in his gaze, and a swagger in his stance. He knew what I was thinking, and it seemed to energize him, the sly king at last taking center stage.

“Go,” he said. “Look out the window. There are other guests here at the inn whom I think you know.” He nodded to Truko.

Truko was a hulk of a man with unruly hair and wiry black brows always pulled in a scowl. His eyes were wide and unblinking. When I had told Jase about one of my rules of survival, *blink last*, he was amused, laughing that it was one of the things he hated about Truko—the man never blinked. Jase never knew what was going on in his head. As I met his frozen stare now, there was nothing amusing about it. His steps wheezed against the floor as he plodded to the window and whisked back the drapes.

This was no bluff. I knew before I even lowered the fork or walked to the window that the king had won. That Death had seen all of this coming and that was why he shook his head at me.

“Go,” the king repeated. “See who is out there. I think you’ll be surprised.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JASE

It was the sound of water rushing over stones. A sucking, gurgling noise like a tide rushing out. It came again. And again. It ebbed and rose with the stab in my chest and then I realized it was not stones and water I heard. It was my own breaths, liquid, wet, the sounds of me trying to breathe.

There were other sounds, distant, garbled voices, but those didn't matter. Only the stones, the water, the next breath.

Write it down, before you forget.

And each day we do.

But we can only write about Now.

Before is already gone, except for the nightmares.

Every night we must comfort the younger ones.

All they know of Before is the After.

They are afraid it will happen again, that our new family will be torn apart.

That is the reason we hide in here, Nisa cries.

She is right.

I am afraid too.

My grandfather believed in me.

I try to believe like he did, but some nights, after Nisa is asleep, I cry too.

—Greyson Ballenger, 14

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KAZI

The window looked down on a small enclosed courtyard. A guard stood in each corner. Long swords hung at their sides. In the center two children played, rolling a hoop back and forth to each other. Oleez sat off to the side. She saw me looking down from the window, but her expression remained blank.

Someone took the fork from my hand. Paxton, I think. I didn't resist. The message was clear, and the king held the winning card. Do as he said, or there would be consequences. There was no changing his mind. I felt like I had been caught, a quarterlord passing sentence, and a fingertip was about to be snipped. I couldn't talk my way out of this one.

The king came over and stood close behind me. His chest was fire at my back. He pushed the drape back farther. "They look happy, don't they? They've actually become very fond of me. I give them attention, presents. More than he ever did. They're quite content. Trust me on this."

I could barely absorb his nonsense. I only imagined their faces as I told a crowd that Jase was a convicted criminal who had been hanged. "Don't make me say it in front of them. I don't want them to hear."

"They have to know about their brother sooner or later," Banques said. "They've mostly forgotten him already. They'll take it well."

"Please," I said.

The king stepped away and said to Banques as he left, "Explain to her the rules of the game. Make sure she understands them, then return her to her room."

A game? This was no game. The outcome was already assured. There was only one winner.

With the king gone, I turned to Banques. "You can't do this. This violates everything that the Alliance—"

“This violates absolutely nothing,” he snarled. “I will remind you that this is the Kingdom of Eislandia, and Montegue is its rightful and true ruler. It is not only under his jurisdiction to rule and protect as he sees fit, it is his moral duty to ensure the peace for his citizens. He is doing his job and doing it well. He does not take the advice of a thief or barbarian soldier, especially not one who is sympathetic to the Ballengers, who brought about this carnage in the first place. We are still trying to stamp out a war and restore order and must use every means at our disposal for the good of all.”

Every means? He glanced down at the children, then glared at me, his hand curling into a fist in like he wanted to smash it into my face. He warned me to be silent while he explained everything. The rules, it turned out, were easy to remember. They were nearly all the same.

1. If you ever leave as much as a small bruise on the king ...
2. If you ever leave a bruise on any of his cabinet or soldiers ...
3. If you are ever found outside your room without an approved escort ...
4. If you ever steal so much as a hairpin ...
5. If you ever lie to the king ... one of the children will die, and you will be forced to choose which one.

“Understand?” he asked.

I nodded. But I would slit my own throat before I would choose between Lydia and Nash.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JASE

The tide, there was a rhythm to it.

In.

Out.

It was winning. I felt it pulling me under.

★ ★ ★

Blackness. It was all I knew. And silence. Had I stopped breathing? But the pain was still there. The pain was everywhere.

I had to be alive.

★ ★ ★

Burning. Wet. My skin, my lips, everything on fire.

Hell. I had to be in hell. And I couldn't find my way out.

★ ★ ★

He's coming to.

Bloody saints. Not now. Keep him quiet.

I tried to reach up, to feel my eyes, to see if they were open, because I still only saw blackness, but the slight movement ignited a red-hot poker stabbing into my shoulder. I groaned and a hand pressed hard over my mouth.

“Shhh,” a voice hissed. “Unless you want to die!”

I was still because I couldn't move. I couldn't reach up to push the hand away. I heard something creak over my head. A wooden floor? Muffled voices.

No love lost between us and the Ballengers ...

... burned us out ...

If any were here, we'd be the first to hand them over ...

Good riddance, I say.

If you do see him, you're to report it immediately.

I heard the sound of horses riding away, and the hand lifted from my mouth.

I felt myself slipping again, falling back into some dark cave. "Who are you?" I whispered.

"Kerry."

"Kerry of Fogswallow?"

"How many Kerrys do you know?"

Only one. A small child was able to hold me down.

★ ★ ★

The heavy scent of burning tallow stirred me awake. When I opened my eyes, a candle flickered in a glass lamp and shadows shifted on walls. Barrels lined the room, and there were rushes scattered across the floor. I was lying on a pallet. Caemus sat next to me on a milking stool. Shadows filled the hollows of his face. None of it made sense. What was I doing here? What had happened to me? And then, bit by bit, the black fog rolled back. We had been attacked. Kazi and I—

I tried to rise, but instead I sucked in a sharp breath, coughed, and pain shot through my chest.

"Hold on, there," Caemus said, gently holding me down. "You've barely got one foot out of that underworld. Don't go stepping back into it."

"Where am I?" I whispered.

"The root cellar. Lucky thing you dug it. Don't know where else we'd hide you." He poured water from a pitcher into a cup. "Here," he said, bringing the water to my lips. I struggled to drink. Even my tongue ached. It was dry, coated, and salty. My lips were cracked, and I shook with the effort of lifting my head, even with Caemus's help.

He set the cup aside. "That's enough for now. We didn't think you were going to make it at all. You've been in and out for days now."

I couldn't remember any of it. "Where's Kazi? Why isn't she here?"

And then the fog rolled back a little farther. *Baricha*. I had told her to run, to get away, but instead she jumped from her horse and fought them, beating them away from me, ordering the horses to run. She killed one, and then another, and then a fist—a fist punched into her stomach—but I couldn't move. I couldn't get to her. I couldn't do anything. I had never felt more helpless. *Baricha*. Tigone ran into the forest. Metal flashed, voices shouted, the world faded in and out. Pieces were all I could remember—slamming to the ground, footsteps, someone lifting me.

“He only brought you.”

“He? Someone brought me here? Who was it?”

“I don't know. It was dark, the middle of the night. He didn't say his name, and it was hard to get a good look at him. I think he wanted it that way. He told me to take care of you—to do my best, but not to call a healer. He said they were watching all the healers, following them. He tried to give me coin for your safekeeping, but I wouldn't take it. Before he left, he wiggled your ring off your finger. Said he needed it, and I didn't argue, seeing as he was trying to save your life.”

They.

They were watching healers.

“Who are *they*?”

“I don't know. We haven't gone back since the fires. We're making do with what supplies we have here. It's too dangerous in town.”

He had to tell me twice. Maybe three times. I was still drifting in and out, trying to grasp his details. Taking sips of water. Coughing. Still feeling like I had a foot in an underworld that didn't want to let me go.

He said that about two months ago there had been a bad fire. The north livery burned down. All the horses inside died. The next night there was another fire and then a raid on a caravan. More trouble came after that, but he and the rest of the settlers had stayed away, afraid of being hit on the trail, not to mention that since five Vendan soldiers had absconded with the *Patrei*, Vendans hadn't exactly been welcome in town. Except for a hurried trip to get some medicine at the apothecary, they hadn't been back. Caemus mostly kept his head down, not wanting to be noticed, but from the little he gathered from whispers at the apothecary, it seemed the Ballengers had

been running everywhere, trying to stop whoever was stirring up the mayhem before an army had marched in and taken everything over.

“*An army?*” I asked. Each new bit of information he gave me seemed to twist into something more impossible. “What army?”

“I don’t know, but I heard there’s a lot of them. I got a glimpse of a few as I rode in.”

An army from where? A neighboring kingdom? Or had the leagues joined forces? I thought about Fertig’s gang and Kazi’s observation that they were well trained.

“And Tor’s Watch?” I already knew the answer. I had seen the broken spires, the walls. But I still couldn’t understand *how*. Our defenses were impenetrable. Our walls, our guards, our vantage point, and the steep grade leading to Tor’s Watch—an army with a dozen ballistae couldn’t breach our walls. Our archers would take them out before they were even in range. “How did they bring down the wall?”

Again, he said he didn’t know for sure, but he said they had weapons unlike anything he had ever seen. “Word is, the whole nave of the temple is gone and that one shot brought it down. The apothecary’s wife said they did it just to get everyone’s attention. It worked. No one’s challenging them now.”

This was not an army coming in to rescue a town. It was an invasion. Paxton, Rybart, and Truko. It had to be. They had joined forces.

I was afraid to ask, but more afraid not to. “What did the weapons look like?”

“That was the strange part,” he said. “They weren’t that large. They carried them on their shoulders.” He went on in some detail. They sounded exactly like the launchers Beaufort was designing for us—the ones we never got.

“What about Kazi? Do you know where she is? Do they have her?”

He shook his head. “Don’t know. The man who brought you didn’t say, and like I said, we haven’t been back to town.”

But I did know. They had her. She was their prisoner. That was the only way Kazi wouldn’t be here beside me. Unless—

I remembered them swarming over us, black shadows moving over the dark hillside.

“I have to get to—” I leaned over on an elbow, trying to sit up, then fell back, unable to breathe. Caemus cursed, saying I was going to break open the wounds that Jurga had stitched shut.

“You’re not going anywhere. Even if she is in town you wouldn’t be any help to her, not with the shape you’re in. And not with just one of you, and hundreds of them.”

“But my family. They could—”

“They’re not helping either. They’re all hiding inside that mountain of yours. I know that much.”

The vault. And that meant it was really bad.

“I have to get to them. They’ll know what we were up against. They’ll help me find—” But then I felt the black fog rolling back in, and my eyelids eased shut against my will. I was afraid I might not open them again, afraid that this time the underworld might pull me under and not let go.

The cellar, the musty air, the pain, everything slipped away.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KAZI

I was returned to my room and left alone in my “fine” accommodations for two full days. I was told I would be summoned when they were ready for me. My door wasn’t locked. It felt like a test. But there was no worry that I would leave. I cracked it open and peeked out, but I didn’t dare step through it. Food was brought to me in abundance. More clothing. More medicine. But no one came to speak to me—or give me more rules. The waiting and wondering and being able to do nothing drove me to near madness. *Summon me, for gods’ sakes!*

My hours were filled with a thousand questions. Who had been hanged? How many had died? How could there be a warehouse of weapons? Was Gunner truly responsible for all the carnage? Had he blackmailed the town for more money as he let Rybart pillage it?

But the *Patri’s* vow was his family’s vow, and as much as I hated Gunner, I couldn’t believe he would do this. Though he *was* impulsive. He had lied to the town and said the queen was coming.

On the other hand, as much as he hated the idea, he did help rebuild the settlement. Jase’s promise was his promise too. And surely Vairlyn would never allow—

A cloud of locusts batted in my head, details flying around in a mad, scattered mess. I couldn’t sort out the truth. I searched for solutions, one thought crashing into another. Ultimately, only one thought rose above the others again and again—I had to get Lydia and Nash out of their grip. That was the most important thing. But my skills as thief and soldier offered me nothing. Stealing a tiger or even Beaufort was one thing, but stealing two small children who were under heavy guard was another. And where would I take them? The city crawled with enemy soldiers. Tor’s Watch was destroyed and abandoned. There was only one of me and hundreds of them. And there was the possibility they wouldn’t even come with me. I

remembered Gunner's and Priya's last bitter words. Had they poisoned Lydia and Nash against me? Everything pointed to failure, and failure carried too great a downside. If I could get a message to the queen—

But the arena had been taken over too. *Traders*. I could slip a message to a trading caravan. But when? I was under heavy guard, and even a trading caravan might be sympathetic toward the king, and then, if my treachery were discovered—

This violates nothing. It's within his rights.

I felt the same panic as I had that day when I spit in the queen's face, useless, lost, a bird with plucked wings. The world I knew how to navigate had disappeared. I had to follow the rules Banques laid out. It was my only option.

As bad as the panic and questions were, at times it seemed they were all that saved me from another kind of madness. *Jase*. He was gone. It was a crushing thought that would slam into me unexpectedly and rob me of what little sanity I had. Only thinking of how I could save Nash and Lydia allowed me to shove the madness away.

On the third afternoon, guards knocked loudly on my door and told me the king required my presence. I had been summoned. They told me specifically what to wear. My mind raced once again as Black Teeth and Broken Nose escorted me to another wing of the inn.

"Here," Broken Nose said, stopping at an open door and nudging me inside.

The king's chambers bustled with activity as if last minute preparations were being made. A bevy of nervous servants hovered around him, adjusting his baldrick, lacing boots, buckling breastplates, filling scabbards with knives and swords. He seemed to drink in the attention, and I guessed this was all new to him. But it was clear there was an urgency too, a rush to slip the king into another new persona.

His head turned as I entered the room. He waved me over and gave more orders for servants to "prepare" me. A long sword and dagger were slid into my weapon belt. There was no worry that I would use them. It had been clearly outlined what would happen if I made the slightest aggressive move. Any weapon was useless to me. However, I did note these were dull. Very

dull. They were more suited for beating dust from a rug than for stabbing anyone. But when sheathed, they certainly gave the appearance of strength.

“What are you staring at?” he asked, though it had to be obvious. He was dressed in full military regalia. The black leather pauldron on his shoulder gleamed with polish. “Don’t be so surprised. Of course I’m a soldier. I’ve been under Banques’s tutelage for years now, and it’s not an exaggeration to say he’s the finest swordsman on the continent.” A farmer under the tutelage of a swordsman? For years?

He paused to look at himself in a mirror, tugging on his tunic and adjusting the baldrick across his chest. “And I think it’s fair to say, too, that the student has now surpassed the master.” He turned to look at me, his expression solemn. “I’m the leader and protector of my kingdom. I need to convey that in my attire, to inspire confidence.”

He painted an imposing and impressive picture. No doubt Synové—and maybe any girl in Hell’s Mouth—would swoon over his transformation. His dark hair was trimmed and combed, a single strand falling forward as if he had just swung a sword. His cheeks glowed with a fresh shave, and his leather breastplate was cut to accent his wide shoulders. Every detail conveyed strength, leadership, and a message that this was a king who was fit and able to lead.

I didn’t respond and he paused, waving away a servant who was tending him. He stepped closer to me. “I’m not the monster you think I am. I am a just ruler and have to listen to my advisors. That is what they are paid for.”

“Using children as hostages is vile. Your advisors are vile. And if you listen to them, that makes you vile too.”

“That’s easy enough for a bystander to say. Words and lofty accusations are easy, aren’t they, when you haven’t watched people die? You don’t run a troubled kingdom beset by marauders where hard decisions must be made every day—and I have made one. Sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good.”

I couldn’t restrain a deep roll of my eyes. “Is that another gem your well-paid advisors vomited into your hands?”

His dark lashes fluttered, and his eyes ignited with fury.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Does bruising your delicate ego count as a transgression too? Will the children now suffer for it?”

He stepped closer, his face inches from mine, his chest heaving. “Rybart preyed on the town, pillaging and burning it while the Ballengers and their henchmen blackmailed it for more protection money. Those are the facts! And *I* am the King of Eislandia.” He lowered his voice so only I could hear him. “*You will show me respect,*” he hissed between clenched teeth. “*Do you understand?*”

This was no show. The man who had courteously pulled out a chair for me just days ago now fumed with hot rage. He had stepped into the role of powerful monarch in a ravenous way.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I answered cautiously. In that moment, looking into his dark eyes, I was afraid that bruising his ego might be what mattered most of all. I was usually good at judging temperaments, knowing just how far I could push, but this king seemed to be many different people, and I didn’t understand even one of them.

He looked away, grabbed a paper from a table, and handed it to me. “Here, Banques prepared this. It’s what you will be reading to the town. Read it word for word. We have to leave soon, before the last bell rings.”

Servants swarmed in again, making final adjustments to his uniform. One young woman fussed over him, picking away imaginary threads. I wasn’t sure if she was afraid of him or completely enamored, but when he turned his back, she quickly fluffed her hair with her fingers and smoothed out her bodice, and my question was answered.

When he was satisfied with his appearance, he shooed her and the other servants away and studied me—from the sword hanging at my side to the long, tailored woolen jacket that servants had dressed me in. His inspection was slow and searing. He finally nodded as if pleased. “Yes, you look like you just rode in, maybe a bit gaunt from the journey. We’ll fill out those cheeks with a tasty celebration afterward. Trust me, this is all for the best. Let’s go share your news.”

He pulled my hood up to cover my head and took hold of my arm firmly but gently, leading me to the door, playing the role of a soldier king leading

a respected messenger of a foreign monarch to share the important news of the *Patrei's* execution. A new era was beginning.

★ ★ ★

The entourage gathered in the large foyer of the inn. Just before we emerged onto the street for the procession to the plaza, I was pushed forward to walk with Banques and two soldiers, while the king hung back. More soldiers filled the space between us, but I glimpsed Lydia and Nash being brought to him. Nash ran happily into the king's arms. The king lifted him up, holding him on his hip with one arm and grabbing Lydia's hand with the other. Lydia's smile was more reserved, but it was there, and somehow it stabbed me with stinging jealousy. She should be smiling at Jase. Oleez stood off to the side. She smiled at the king, and they shared a few whispered words. She avoided my burning gaze, though I know she felt it.

Banques called for the entourage to move forward, and we proceeded out the front door of the Ballenger Inn. I eyed Banques as we walked—the king's tutor for years? What else had he been teaching him besides swordsmanship? But mostly I wondered who was really in charge, the king or Banques?

I thought I had known what to expect, a town confused by the sudden change in power. A town wondering where their *Patrei* was. A town waiting for something to happen. Anything.

But it already had.

The first thing I saw was the damage. The remains of a building that once housed a pub and apartments stood abandoned, splintered timbers poking out of the rubble like broken bones. A little farther down, an eight-foot crater gouged out half the cobbled street. Wagons maneuvered around, pretending it wasn't there.

But the damage was the least of it. When I looked up, I saw soldiers stationed overhead. Everywhere. They manned the skywalks and roofs like birds of prey, their dark cloaks waving in the wind. How many mercenaries did he hire? Where did he get the money? The power astounded me.

The soldiers on the ground carried the usual types of weapons, swords, halberds, and such, but the ones on rooftops or skywalks were equipped differently. Slung over their shoulders were shiny metallic weapons, each about four feet long. I had never seen anything like them before, but I was certain these were the launchers that Jase had described to me. From their vantage points, they saw everything—and they were strategically out of reach of anyone who might try to overcome them and seize their formidable weapons. This wasn't a town that was being protected. Rybart and his men were dead and gone. Now it was a town that had been invaded, and these soldiers were there to squelch any opposition.

A pervading grimness hung in the air. The sky was gray with winter. Frost dulled the windows and cobbles. Even the people were gray, their cloaks pulled tightly about them against the cold, their faces shadowed by scarves, hoods, and hats as they went about their business. A few heads turned as I passed, curious, but unable to get a good glimpse of me beneath my hood.

A bell rang out. Last bell. The clang shivered through my teeth. People stopped what they were doing and headed toward the plaza. By order of the king? Or from genuine hunger for news? Some sort of hope? The hope I could not give them.

I turned the corner and was stopped by the sight of the temple, another gaping hole in the city. Only the bell tower and the altar remained standing—the rest was rubble. The broken statues of saints stared heavenward. The air was punched from me, and I stared, not quite believing it. It had been the beautiful focal point of the entire plaza, its white marble walls casting an ethereal glow over everything. Now, instead of a sanctuary, it looked like a passage into hell. Jase had told me what his launcher was capable of—and it was not this. Unless Beaufort hadn't been honest about what it could do. And of course, Beaufort was not honest about anything.

“The temple was a rat's nest for loyalists. It had to go,” Banques explained. “It will be rebuilt when the last of them are gone.”

I had been so consumed with the temple I didn't see what was above me—not until Banques glanced up. I followed the line of his sight and immediately turned my head and gagged. He grabbed my arm.

“Steady now,” he whispered. “Remember, you’re being watched, and you are the messenger who brings news of justice.” He lowered his voice. “Most important, remember who walks not far behind you. Take a deep breath now, and walk up those stairs with your head held high. Play your role respectably, as you should have done in the first place.”

My stomach churned as I climbed the steps to a platform overlooking the plaza. When I reached the top, I was surprised to find Garvin standing there. His eyes combed the streets and the approaching citizens.

“You’re working for them?”

His head dipped in acknowledgment. “Nothing personal. Someone else is meeting payroll now.”

“And that’s all it takes? A weekly wage?”

He shrugged. “It’s all business.”

“I suppose I should expect as much from someone who sells starving tigers to butchers.”

He grinned. “So you did recognize me after all those years.” He nodded like he was pleased that he wasn’t so forgettable after all.

“I mentioned your name to the queen. She said it was a pity I didn’t haul you back too. Something about trying to slit her throat?”

He shook his head. “That was only business too. A hired job. She took it too personally.”

He turned back to the streets he was eyeing. Looking for whom? Ballengers who had once employed him? I had to resist the urge to throw him over the rail.

Banques nudged me forward, and when I turned, I found I was now eye level with at least a dozen bodies that hung from the high branches of the tembris. I tried to force back the bile rising in my throat. The body closest to me was gray, his face covered with frost, small icicles hanging from his chin. I didn’t recognize him and began to avert my eyes from the rest, but not soon enough. A sick saltiness swelled inside my mouth. Hanging just past him was a body I recognized. Drake. One of Jase’s *straza*. *Of course he was a loyalist. It was his job to be loyal!*

I skimmed the other faces, afraid of who else I might find hanging, but more afraid not to look. Three bodies over from Drake I recognized another

one. It was the dressmaker who had measured me for clothes. Her eyes were still open, sightless. My nails dug into my palms.

“She was hiding agitators,” Banques explained, as if that justified it. “We give every citizen a chance to cooperate and do what’s right. She chose not to, which made her a Ballenger accomplice and a danger to other citizens. Our job is to restore order and to make everyone feel safe again.”

I turned and looked at him. His voice again, *familiar*. Each syllable made the hairs on my neck rise. I knew him, but I didn’t. He went on, giving all the justifications. His story was almost word for word like the king’s, a repeated narrative, like an awl working wood, deepening a groove until it became a truth of their own making. *We are keeping the town safe*.

If they repeated it often enough, did they think that would make it true? That I would be fooled? That it would wash the blood from their hands?

“This is no way to protect a city,” I said. “You’re nothing but opportunists here to seize its wealth.”

He waved his hand, dismissing my accusation. “Let’s hurry this along, shall we? It’s cold and it’s getting late. The people want to go home. Let’s not keep our good citizens waiting.”

The king walked up the platform steps behind us with Nash still in his arms and Lydia at his side. Nash and Lydia didn’t seem to even notice the hanging bodies, or maybe they had become numb to them. What horrors had they already endured? Neither looked my way, as if they had been instructed not to, or perhaps before the city was seized, the family had made it known to them who had taken Jase away. Maybe they didn’t look at me because they couldn’t stand the sight of me.

The three of them moved to the opposite end of the platform, and the king set Nash down just in front of him, resting one hand on Lydia’s shoulder. He addressed the crowd, telling them that a premier soldier of the Queen of Venda had arrived with news that would help them to move forward, news that would close the door on the troublesome times they had been through. Better times lay ahead. His voice was assured, the timbre promising, his expression genuine, a small crease of concern deepening between his brows, and then with a motion of his hand, he deferred to me, inviting me to step forward.

Banques indicated that I should go out onto the skywalk where the citizens could get a better view of me. The wood planks creaked beneath my feet. When I got to the center, I turned and pushed back my hood so they could see me. A low murmur rippled through the crowd. *That soldier. The one who took the Patrei.* Maybe the last time they saw me I was juggling oranges outside the mercantile, or I was kissing the *Patrei* in front of the apothecary. Or maybe they saw me slugging him at the arena. I was a mystery to them.

The wind whipped at my hair, and the air fogged with my breath. This was hardly the same city it had been just months ago when it had been full of color, and noise, and light, and warmth. Now it was a dreary sea of long woolen cloaks. Scarves covered noses and mouths, and only bare slivers of eyes looked up at me. Was it because of the harsh weather, or did they want to hide their identities? I wondered how many loyalists stood among them, still waiting for the *Patrei* to return. I saw the tired slump of their shoulders, and the gloom in their downcast faces. The paper the king had given me shook in my hands. How could I do this? Tell lies about Jase? Tell them in front of Lydia and Nash?

I gave the king one last pleading look. *Don't do this to them.* His head angled slightly to the side, unrelenting. He placed a hand on Nash's shoulder, pulling him closer. Was it a gesture to comfort Nash, or was it a warning to me?

I looked back at the crowd. I read the words. "Citizens of Hell's Mouth, I bring you news of Jase Ballenger." Each word floated in the air, unreal, untrue, impossible, and yet they came from my mouth. *Jase, I need you.* This couldn't be happening, but it was. "The former *Patrei* of your city will not be returning," I went on. "He was arrested and delivered to the Queen of Venda and a tribunal court of law to be tried for crimes against the Alliance of Kingdoms. He was found guilty by that court and sentenced to hang by a rope until dead. I witnessed his confession, his prayers to the gods for forgiveness for his crimes, and his subsequent execution. Jase Ballenger is dead."

A low, muffled moan, impossible to pinpoint, rolled upward, and then a cry and someone fell to their knees. Soldiers on skywalks and roofs lifted

the launchers, ready. Soldiers on the ground moved in closer.

Banques motioned for me to continue.

I spoke louder, trying to rise above the murmur. “The rightful and true ruler of Hell’s Mouth, King Montegue, is restoring order and working to make Hell’s Mouth greater than it ever was. The Alliance and I both urge you to help him keep your city safe by turning in traitors. As you can see, innocents do not suffer under his rule.”

I paused and looked over at Nash and Lydia, and the armed guards standing so close to them. The king nodded for me to go on. “Only the guilty who have put you all at risk will suffer a penalty,” I said. “If you know of any other Ballengers or sympathizers in hiding, you are called to turn them in or risk being charged with crimes against the kingdoms yourself. It is time for Hell’s Mouth to move forward and embrace a promising new future.”

There was a noticeable lull, a stillness settling over the plaza, and then a voice screamed out, “*Murderer!*”

Almost at the same time, something struck me and my head exploded with pain. I fell back, catching myself on the rail. A rock tumbled over the planks.

There were more shouts and then a resounding hush as the crowd shifted, absorbing whoever had called out. Soldiers moved in, trying to find the perpetrators, but in a fluid sea of gray, they were lost as the crowd dispersed.

I reached up and felt my head, and when I pulled my hand away, there was blood on my fingers. I looked back at Lydia and Nash. Their faces were blank. Any emotion about the news I had delivered was buried deep beneath some new hardened armor they had never worn before. The king lifted Nash again and pulled Lydia close, saying it was time to go. Nash nestled his head on the king’s shoulder, but his gaze turned toward me. The intense hunger in his eyes carved a hole in my gut. Was it hunger for revenge that I saw? The fire in them made him look just like Jase. I watched them all depart down the stairs in a tight knot. Lydia never looked my way, but I knew she missed nothing. She heard what I had said about her brother.

Banques handed me a handkerchief for my head. “Well done. Believe it or not, it went surprisingly well. There might be a place in this kingdom for you, after all. The *Patrei* and his whole lawbreaking family will soon be forgotten.”

I stared at him as I pressed the cloth to my temple and imagined how I would kill him. There were slow ways. Eben had described them to us on dark nights around a campfire. Ways the Rahtan were no longer authorized to use. Ways he had learned from the Komizar that were far slower than a pickle fork. Ways I had never dreamed of using before, thinking them depraved. They didn’t seem so anymore.

I stare at the spears. We have pulled apart bed frames and sharpened the ends. I threw one today, past the gate at a screaming scavenger. I felt strong and powerful. I missed him and he picked it up and ran away. Now he has a spear to use against me. I think his aim is better than mine.

—Greyson, 15

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JASE

I sat on the edge of my pallet, ready to stand for the first time. It was a milestone.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Kerry scolded. “Stop grimacing. You want to get up and pee on your own, or not?”

I did. I forced the grimace from my face. “That better?”

He grunted. Kerry had become my nursemaid, sitting with me, washing me, feeding me—and regularly berating me. He showed me no mercy. Sometimes I wondered if it was his revenge for the post holes I had made him dig. Four days ago, he started giving me weights to lift so I would regain my strength. The sacks of potatoes he handed me couldn’t have weighed more than five pounds each, but the strain of lifting them burned all the way down to my thigh, where one of the arrows had struck. My arms shook as I lifted them. *You’re turning to flab*, he had chided as he squeezed my upper arm. If Caemus was within earshot, he would counter, *Leave him be. He’s doing just fine*, much more sympathetic than my warden. But I was frustrated with my progress, and in some ways, I appreciated my relentless taskmaster. I had to get out of here and find Kazi. If they were holding her —

It was something I couldn’t allow myself to think about for too long, but there was still no word. Caemus had finally taken a chance and gone into town—maybe just to keep me from crawling there myself. With soldiers on every corner, he had to keep the hood of his cloak up, his head down, and his words few, but there was still no word or sign of her. Or of my family. I asked him what he did see, and he said nothing but grim-faced soldiers, and as far as news went, it seemed that everyone was tight-lipped and afraid to talk. The town had gone unusually quiet. He was afraid to pry for fear of drawing attention, but he did overhear a shopkeeper grumbling that Paxton and Truko were running the arena now.

It was like being hit with another arrow. I shouldn't have been surprised. We knew someone was challenging us, and I had always suspected one of the leagues was behind the fires and raids. But now they had names. I never seriously thought they could pull something like this off—or even that they would try. Yes, they grumbled. We grumbled. But we all made money and we had fallen into a comfortable—if rocky—routine in our dealings, until they began working with Beaufort. The Ballengers themselves had financed this takeover. Zane must have been their go-between. How long had they been planning this? I would kill both Paxton and Truko if they had harmed Kazi. And I wouldn't make it quick. I didn't need a powerful weapon to—

Caemus's description stopped me. I remembered him saying one shot brought down the nave of the temple. Was he mistaken? *One?* The launcher I tested was powerful. It could take down a man with accuracy at two hundred yards, probably three men if they were standing close together, but one shot couldn't take down a temple. I remembered the destruction in Sentinel Valley and Beaufort's boasting about dominion over the kingdoms. Was Hell's Mouth the starting point for his campaign? The Ballenger histories described in detail the rubble the town had been made from. Centuries of rebuilding transformed the wreckage into the wonder it was today, but now someone like Beaufort and his conspirators could hold it hostage and return it to the rubble it had once been? And there was an army to carry out his plans. That part still didn't add up.

“Ready?” Kerry asked, handing me a crutch he had fashioned for me.

It had taken me over a week just to get to the point of sitting up. I had no shirt on, but had bandages wrapped around half of my upper body. Paxton and his crew had been determined to kill me.

“Hold your breath, and I'll help you to your feet.” I used the crutch as leverage, and Kerry tucked his fingers beneath a bandage and pulled. The pressure felt like a bull sitting on my chest. I clenched my teeth.

“Kerry! What do you think you're doing?” Jurga yelled. She was frozen halfway down the cellar steps. We were both in trouble.

“He's got to get up sooner or later.”

“He's right,” I said, coming to his defense. “I have to get my strength back.” Words poured out of me then, desperate words I didn't even know

were there. “Kazi is alone, maybe hurt, they’re holding her against her will, my family’s in hiding, the town’s overrun, and when they all need me the most, I’m here helpless. I have to get stronger, I have to go.”

Jurga listened to me, wide-eyed. I felt like a child begging for the impossible, even though I knew it was not something that either Jurga or Kerry could give me.

I blinked, trying to clear my vision. “I have to find her.”

Jurga stared at me, her mouth pursed like she had sucked on a lemon, then she looked long and hard at Kerry. “Come on, help me get him up these steps. A little sunshine will do him good.”

★ ★ ★

The first several days, I never strayed far from the storage shed, always ready to retreat back inside if a warning signal of riders came, but none ever did. It was like they had stopped looking for me, which meant they probably thought I was dead.

It wasn’t only Kerry who put me through my paces. The other settlers took turns as well, walking me in circles around the shed and helping me to ease back down on a bench when I needed to rest. Eventually they took me a little farther to view their finished homes that I had never gotten to see. They showed me the raised foundations, the wooden floors that they never had before, the supplies that filled their shelves. They invited me in, they fed me, they added bones to my tether that I now wore the same as them. *Meunter ijotande*, they would say. Never forgotten. Day by day, I learned more of their language. I was ashamed that I had ever protested the rebuilding of the settlement, and was glad for the extra work we had put into it. Glad for my blood vow and alms. There was so much I didn’t know back then, that I knew now. Things I never would have known if not for Kazi.

“Another set,” Kerry ordered. His eyes gleamed. He loved watching me suffer. But I was getting stronger. He had me lifting buckets of water now—only half full—but the pain in my abdomen had at least become tolerable, or maybe I was just getting used to it. How much longer before I’d be ready to leave? But I knew there would be no second chances. I had to get this

right the first time. I had to be strong enough to do what I needed to do. I turned my frustration into work—more sets, more food, more walking.

When we finished my daily regimen, I usually sat on a bench in the sun and read to Kerry. The teacher we sent had brought books, some filled with legends of other worlds far from Tor's Watch, but the ones he liked best were the ones I told about the Ballenger history and Greyson, who was little more than a child himself when given the task of keeping everyone safe. Kerry's eyes glowed with admiration and intense curiosity, maybe the way mine had when my father first told them to me. I didn't embellish. I didn't need to. The truth was astonishing enough.

"How do you know all these stories?" he asked.

"I've written them down—every one. It was part of my schooling. I have a whole library of Ballenger history at my home. Someday I'll show you."

Home. If it was still there.

If anything was there.

Who will write our story, Jase?

We will, Kazi, and it will take a thousand volumes. We have a lifetime ahead of us.

Last night more of the fog had rolled back. A glimpse. A fist going into Kazi's stomach—but there was a glint of light too. What was it? I couldn't stop worrying about what I hadn't seen and didn't know.

"I'm going with you when you go to find her," Kerry said as if he knew where my mind had wandered. His chin jutted out, cocky and determined. Unafraid. His fingers absently rubbed his scarred arm. I guessed that whatever monsters were out there, they might not be any worse than the ones he had already faced. No wonder he liked hearing stories about Greyson. Like the first *Patrei*, Kerry didn't let his young age hold him back from what needed to be done.

"We'll see," I answered.

I had an army of two, and one was a seven-year-old child.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KAZI

Years ago, when I stole the tiger, it was necessary for me to employ a different tactic from my other thefts. I needed help and had to procure the favors of many. Of course, I made sure no one ever knew exactly what purpose their favor served—it was important that they weren't implicated—but I knew that many guessed. That was how the whispers began. *It was Ten. Ten stole the tiger.* And then others would scoff at the notion. *That scraggly strip of a girl wrestle a tiger? She'd be nothing but a nibble in the beast's stomach by now. Besides, why would she?* And still others would speculate about more malevolent culprits. *They say a circle of devil's dust was found in the storage shed. A demon ate the beast whole.*

Bribing the tiger was the first order of business. It turned out that getting the tiger's trust was the easiest part. By the fourth afternoon, his nose twitched when he saw me coming with a morsel of meat tucked in a ball of dough. But all the other steps—from decoy wagons, to distracting brawls, to heavy sleep elixirs, to black devil's dust—those steps multiplied one after another. *Trade this for that, and that for this,* and then someone would decide it wasn't enough and they needed more. Sometimes I had to trade with people I despised, smiling and jumping through their endless hoops. I got through it by always remembering the end goal, what it was all for—a chained beast with haunting amber eyes.

I ended up hiding the tiger right beneath the butcher's nose in a storage shed behind his shop that he only went in once a week to sharpen his cleavers and knives. And then I went back and spirited the animal out in the middle of the night once the streets were deserted. A planned distraction drew the butcher's attention away—along with most of the *jehendra*—for no more than half a minute. He had moved only steps away from his shop front, but that was all I needed. It was the escape route I spent the most time working on, finding the darkest, most assuredly deserted streets, the places

that gave me somewhere to duck if I had to, finally walking one route seven nights in a row to be sure it held no surprises, something that might startle a tiger and make him roar.

Today my eyes had never stopped scanning the streets, the trees, the shadows, but I only felt my spirits sink lower with every step. There weren't enough bribes or enough favors in the world to evade the soldiers on every street and rooftop. Not to mention I had no favors to offer in the first place and, most important, no one to offer favors *to*. Except, perhaps, the person who had secretly passed me the medicine in my cell, but even they were too afraid to come forward.

As soon as we returned to the inn, my head was tended, and then I was escorted to the private dining room at the inn for the “celebratory” dinner the king had promised. Apparently he agreed with Banques that the delivery of the news had gone well. I guessed that a rock thrown at my head was of little consequence to them, nor the ringing pain between my ears, but maybe other addresses to the crowd had drawn a barrage of rocks. In comparison, my injury was trivial—or maybe the whole point was to shift anger to someone else—me. In that case, I guessed the day was a roaring success. The word *murderer* still ate away at me, and the things I had uttered about Jase remained foul in my mouth, but I'd had no choice. I would do it again, and no doubt, Banques had plans for more of these addresses from me until the last of the resistance was stamped out.

The same positive sentiments about the day were repeated by guests. Apparently none of them thought that corpses hanging from trees in the middle of the town plaza were anything to be bothered about. I didn't recognize any of the attendees at this intimate dinner gathering, and I wondered if they had come from Parsuss—the king's own loyal followers—or if they were Hell's Mouth citizens who turned with the tide as easily as Garvin did.

Everyone seated at the long table fawned over the king and Banques, treating them like true saviors. The four women were elegantly dressed, as if we were attending a grand party, their faces painted with powders in a way I had never seen before, and their necks and wrists adorned with

glittering jewels. The room was a thief's paradise—if only rules didn't have to be obeyed.

Each guest laughed and smiled and hung on every word that spilled from Montegue's mouth. Halfway through dinner, one of the women, who had already drunk too much, danced around the table and conveniently fell into his lap. The hair piled atop her head fell loose, and more fawning ensued. *Your Majesty* this, *Your Majesty* that, followed by a slurred feigned apology and a protracted kiss on his lips. He soaked it up like a dry sponge, his lips stuck to hers for a good half minute, his hands roaming over her hips, until Banques finally cleared his throat, reminding them we were all there watching.

Throughout dinner, Montegue had glanced at me numerous times, expecting what, I wasn't sure. To join in the praise? I contemplated it. At some point I knew I had to backtrack and gain his confidence, pretend that I'd been won over and was ready to take "a place" in this new kingdom, as Banques put it. Pretend that I was one of Montegue's admirers. I knew how to do it. This was my specialty. Even the wary were not impervious to flattery—because they deserved it, after all. It was all about making them believe. But the timing had to be right. It was a delicate matter that had to be carried out smoothly, like sliding a razor-sharp knife beneath the thin skin of a fish to separate it from the flesh. And I was not feeling delicate nor smooth right now. Instead I was a miserable jumble of hesitation and second-guessing.

Why was this so different? I remembered trembling with fear the first time I engaged a quarterlord, certain that my intended larceny blazed in my eyes. I'd had to lock my knees to keep them from shaking. The quarterlord was huge and powerful and intimidating, and I was none of those things, only a disgusting six-year-old bug to be crushed and forgotten. But I hadn't let that stop me. Hunger had already honed a sharp edge within me. In spite of my fear and knocking knees, I'd found a way to disarm his suspicions and make off with two juicy figs. I glanced up at Banques and Montegue. *Think of them as quarterlords, Kazi. Play them. Feed their egos. Earn their trust. Throw them crumbs, then hook them behind the gills like openmouthed fish.*

And then cut their throats.

But this game had a different risk. Back then, I only had myself to lose. Maybe that was what had made me bold. Now I was playing for far more than one dirty street urchin's life. I was playing for Lydia's and Nash's freedom—and their lives. I was playing for Jase, and the vows I made to him and, by default, his family. His blood vow was mine. And I had yet another vow—to the queen. Find the papers and destroy them. *You can juggle all that now, can't you, Kazi? Just don't drop an orange. Not a single one, or you're done.*

Laughter erupted around the table. Something Montegue said was apparently quite entertaining, and I had missed it. I was failing miserably. Another glance from him. Expectation shimmered in his eyes. Was I shaming him with my silence? *Grovel, Kazi. Smile. Juggle. Compliment the bastard. Make him believe. You can do it one more time.*

I searched my mind, trying to think of one small thing to add to the conversation, the first seed to plant, but only hatred bubbled up.

Such a creative use of the tembris, Your Majesty. How did you get all those nooses up on those high branches?

Nice work of demolishing the temple.

So convenient that the corpses aren't stinking yet. I guess the cold weather helps. The gods must be with you.

"The stew is quite good," I commented. "My compliments to the chef." The tinkling of crystal and laughter around the table came to a dead stop. They were the first words I had spoken. I made eye contact with Montegue. "And my compliments to His Majesty for choosing such a fine menu." It was pathetic, I knew. It was not my smoothest moment. I had to do better.

The compliment seemed to eat away at his concentration. After a few minutes, he leaned back and set his napkin beside his plate, done with his meal.

When the foolishness around the dining table grew tedious, the king announced we were finished and leaving for the arena. A carriage was brought around because the evening was cold. "We" included Banques. Oleez and the children were called from their rooms to join us. Everywhere he went, they went.



“What do you think of it?” The sweet earthiness of wine was on his breath. His hair was disheveled, and his eyes, glassy.

It was just the two of us in the Ballenger apartment. He had dismissed Banques, Oleez, and the children to go check on some other quarters he had acquired. He sauntered around with a wineglass in one hand and running his other down marble pillars, or peering up at the high ceilings and chandeliers. His boots clicked heel to toe, deliberate on the polished floors like he was tapping out ownership. “Far more elegant and fitting for a king than the inn,” he mused. “And more secure too. I’m having the bedchambers refurbished and then we’ll move over.”

We. I didn’t know whom that meant.

When I didn’t answer, he paused from his inspection of a drape panel and faced me. “Are you still upset about the children? I promise you, I did ask them, but they continue to refuse to speak to you.”

“If you’d just let me—”

“I’ll ask again tomorrow. Maybe they’ll change their minds, but I’m afraid the Ballengers poisoned them against you. It may take a while. You need to give them the time they need. They’re only children.”

His concern appeared genuine, and yet he used them as leverage against me? I wondered if the threat to harm them was only a hollow one crafted by Banques to make me comply. “Would you really kill them if I stepped out of line?”

His brows rose with interest. “Do you plan to step out of line?”

“No.”

“Then it’s a moot point, isn’t it?”

“Maybe so, but it’s a terrible pressure to live under minute by minute, afraid that I might do something inadvertently that could bring them harm.”

He grinned as if amused, letting the brocade drape slip leisurely from his grasp, and turned to face me fully. “Rahtan are quite well trained, I understand, and you don’t strike me as the kind of person who does anything *inadvertently*. I’m sure you needn’t worry.”

“But I do.”