

Kazi

The queen had been walking the narrow, dirty streets of the Brightmist quarter when I had spotted her. I hadn't planned it, but even events unplanned can whisk us down paths that we never expected to travel, changing our destinies and what defines us. Kazimyrrah: orphan, invisible street rat, girl who defied the queen, Rahtan.

I had already been shoved down one path when I was six, and the day I spit in the new queen's face I was sent reeling down another. That moment had not only defined my future, but the queen's unexpected response—a smile—had defined her reign. Her sword hung ready in the scabbard at her side. A breathless crowd had waited to see what would happen. They knew what would have happened before. If she were the Komizar, I would have already been lying headless on the ground. Her smile had frightened me more than if she had drawn her sword. I knew at that moment, with certainty, that the old Venda I knew how to navigate was gone, and I would never get it back again. I hated her for it.

When she learned I had no family to summon, she told the guards who had grabbed me to bring me along to Sanctum Hall. I thought I was so very clever back then. Too clever for this young queen. I was eleven years of grit and grovel by then, and impervious to an interloper. I would outwit her just as I did everyone else. It was my realm after all. I had all my fingertips—and a reputation to go with it. In the streets of Venda, they called me "Ten" with whispered respect.

A complete set of fingers was legendary for a thief, or an alleged thief, because if I had ever been caught with stolen goods, my nickname would have been Nine. The eight quarterlords who dispensed the punishment for stealing had a different name for me and growled when they saw me coming. To them, I was the Shadowmaker, because even at high noon they swore I could conjure a shadow to swallow me up. A few even rubbed hidden amulets when they saw me coming. But just as useful as the shadows was knowing the strategies of street politics and personalities. I perfected my craft, playing the quarterlords and merchants against one another as if I was a musician and they were crude drums rumbling beneath my hands, making one boast to another that I had never pulled anything over on him, making them all feel so very smart, even as I relieved them of items I could put to better use elsewhere. Their egos were my accomplices. The twisting alleyways, tunnels, and catwalks were where I learned my trade, and my stomach was my relentless taskmaster. But there was another kind of hunger that drove me, too, a hunger for answers that were not as easily plucked from the wares of a bloated lord. That was my deeper, darker taskmaster.

Jase

As far as you can see, this land is ours. Never forget that. It was my father's and his father's before that. This is Ballenger territory and always has been, all the way back to the Ancients. We are the first family, and every bird that flies overhead, every breath that is taken, every drop of water that falls, it all belongs to us. We make the laws here. We own whatever you can see. Never let one handful of soil slip through your fingers, or you will lose it all.

I placed my father's hand at his side. His skin was cold, his fingers stiff. He'd been dead for hours. It seemed impossible. Only four days ago, he'd been healthy and strong, and then he gripped his chest as he got up on his horse and collapsed. The seer said an enemy had cast a spell. The healer said it was his heart and nothing could be done. Whichever it was, in a matter of days, he was gone.

A dozen empty chairs still circled his bed, the vigil ended. The sounds of long good-byes had turned to silent disbelief. I pushed back my chair and stepped out to the balcony, drawing in a deep breath. The hills reached in hazy scallops to the horizon. Not one handful, I had promised him.

The others waited for me to emerge from the room wearing his ring. Now my ring. The weight of his last words flowed through me, as strong and powerful as Ballenger blood. I surveyed the endless landscape that was ours. I knew every hill, every canyon, every bluff and river. As far as you can see. It all looked different now. I backed away from the balcony. The challenges would come soon. They always did when a Ballenger died, as if one less in our numbers would topple us. News would reach the multiple leagues scattered beyond our borders. It was a bad time for him to die. First harvests were rolling in, the Previzi were demanding a greater take of their loads, and Fertig had asked for my sister's hand in marriage. She was still deciding. I didn't like Fertig, but I loved my sister. I shook my head and pushed away from the rail. Patrei. It was up to me now. I'd keep my vow. The family would stand strong, as we always had.

I pulled my knife from its sheath and returned to my father's bed. I cut the ring from his swollen finger, slipped it on to my own, and walked out to a hallway full of waiting faces.

They looked at my hand, traces of my father's blood on the ring. It was done.