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MARY E. PEARSON

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*au dedication copy TK*



**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



K A Z I

*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 headdress 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 importantly, 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 *Patri*, 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 *Patrei*, 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 importantly, 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, *Patrei*."

"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



J A S E

“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 mad men 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 lands of Infernaterr shimmered like a silver sea lapping at the shores of the plain.

"Whoa, Mije." Kazi stopped and stared at the vast emptiness. It was our third time having to cross an empty plain 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



K A Z I

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. Death 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.

*L*est 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

J A S E

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 knee-cap 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

K A Z I

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 again. 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, *Patri*, 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, it was his gift 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 each other. *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.