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—SARAH J. MAAS, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author

# THE PRISON HEALER



LYNETTE NONI

THE PRISON  
HEALER



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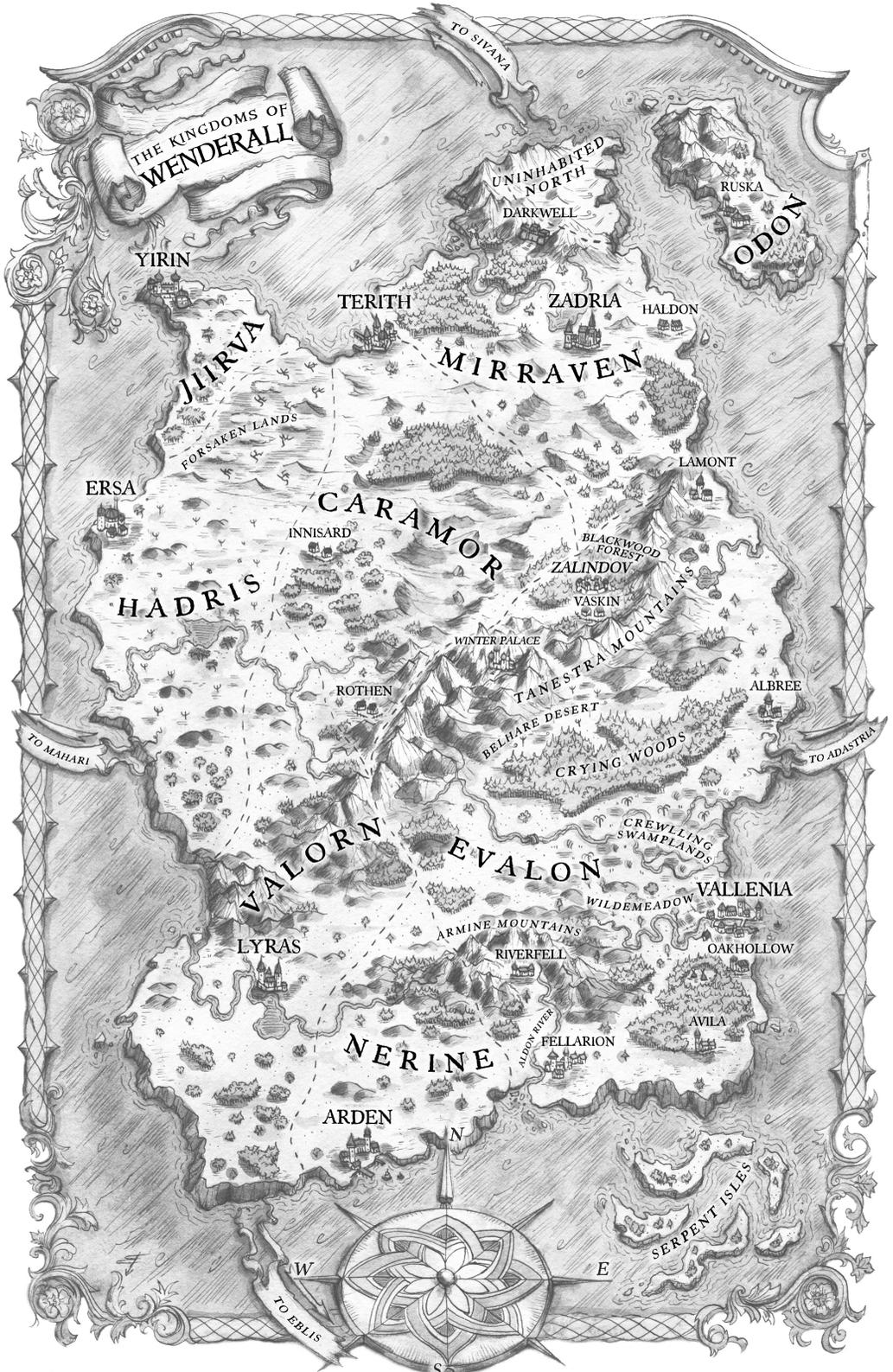
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To Sarah J. Maas —

Thank you for being so generous with your friendship, support,  
and encouragement. But mostly, thank you for believing in me,  
even — and especially — when I didn't.





THE KINGDOMS OF  
WENDERALL

YIRIN

JIIRVA

ERSA

HADRIS

TO MAHARI

VALORN

LYRAS

ARDEN

NERINE

THERITH

UNINHABITED  
NORTH

DARKWELL

ZADRIA

HALDON

MIRRAVEN

RUSKA

ODON

LAMONT

CARAMOR

INNISARD

BLACKWOOD  
FOREST

ZALINDOV

VASKIN

WINTER PALACE

TANESTRA MOUNTAINS

BELHARE DESERT

CRYING WOODS

ALBREE

TO ADASTRA

VALORIN

NERINE

CREWLLING  
SWAMPLANDS

VALLENIA

WILDEMEADOW

ARMINE MOUNTAINS

OAKHOLLOW

RIVERFELL

AVILA

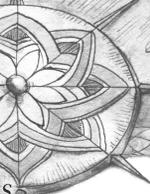
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ALDON RIVER

SERPENT ISLES

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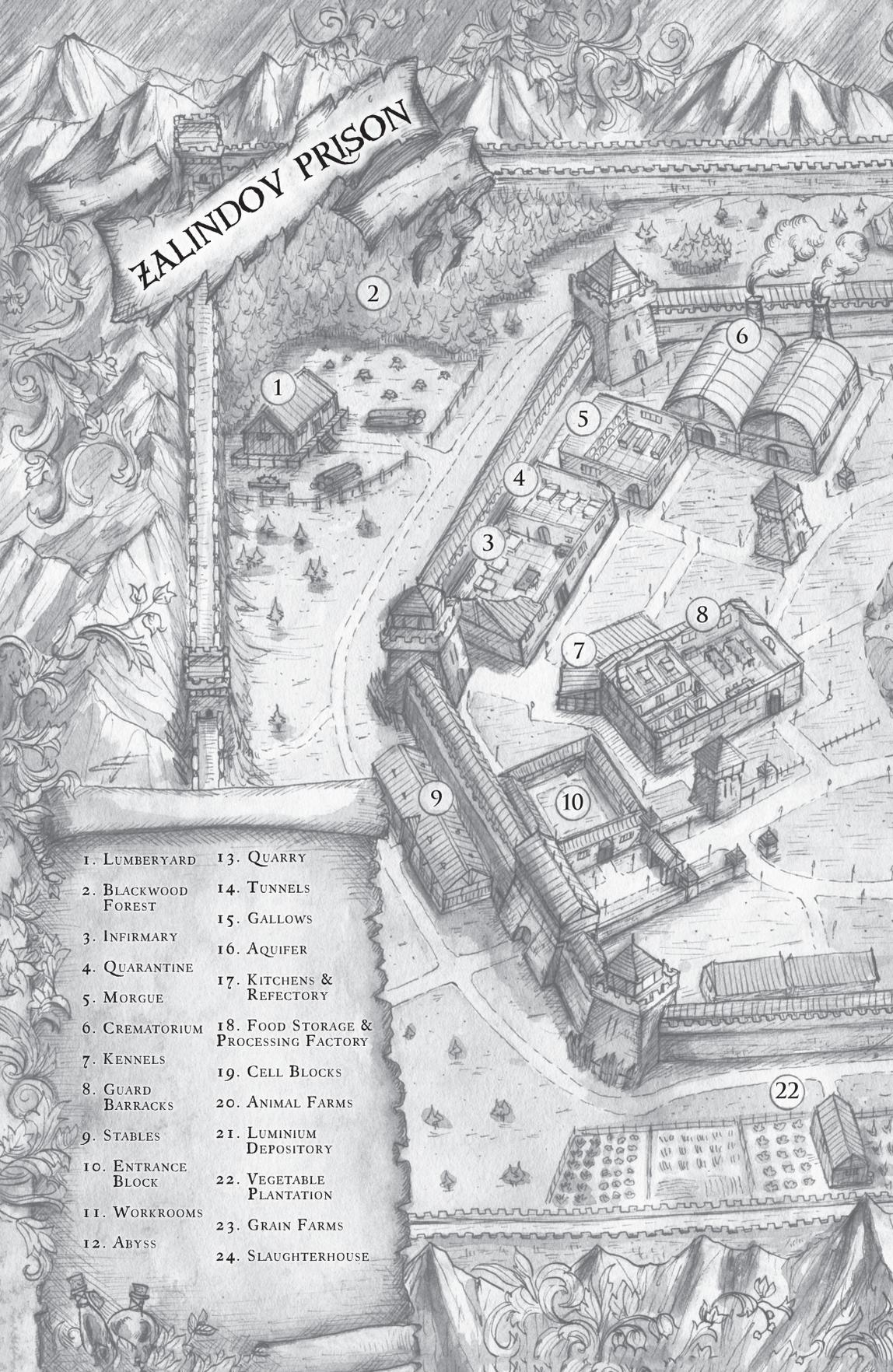
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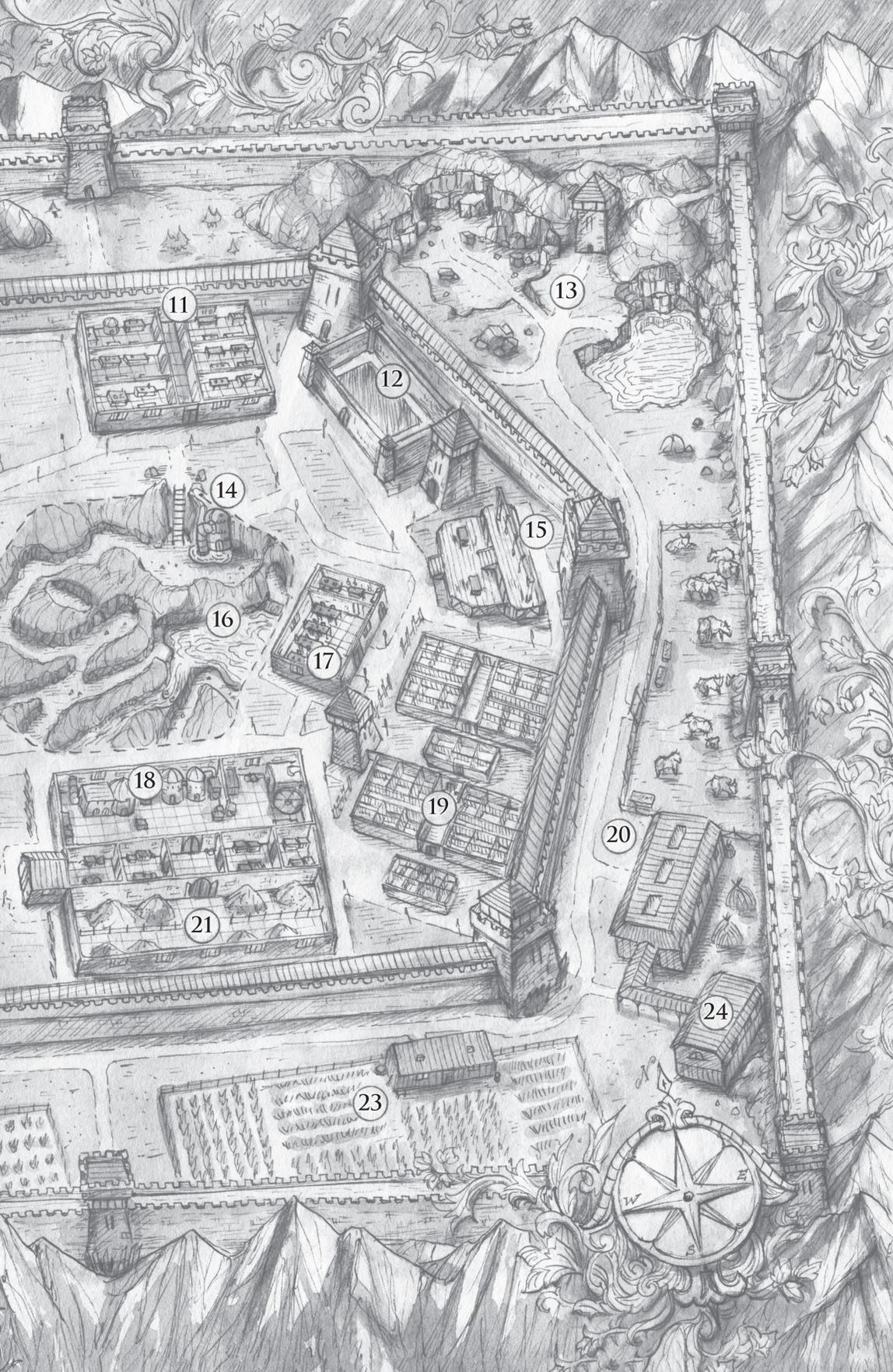
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# ZALINDOV PRISON



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|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. LUMBERYARD       | 13. QUARRY                            |
| 2. BLACKWOOD FOREST | 14. TUNNELS                           |
| 3. INFIRMARY        | 15. GALLWS                            |
| 4. QUARANTINE       | 16. AQUIFER                           |
| 5. MORGUE           | 17. KITCHENS & REFECTORY              |
| 6. CREMATORIUM      | 18. FOOD STORAGE & PROCESSING FACTORY |
| 7. KENNELS          | 19. CELL BLOCKS                       |
| 8. GUARD BARRACKS   | 20. ANIMAL FARMS                      |
| 9. STABLES          | 21. LUMINIUM DEPOSITORY               |
| 10. ENTRANCE BLOCK  | 22. VEGETABLE PLANTATION              |
| 11. WORKROOMS       | 23. GRAIN FARMS                       |
| 12. ABYSS           | 24. SLAUGHTERHOUSE                    |



11

13

12

14

15

16

17

18

19

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21

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23





## PROLOGUE

Death arrived at twilight.

The little girl was down by the river picking jerriberries with her younger brother, their father crouched at the icy water's edge replenishing his supply of aloeweed. The soothing gel would be needed later, given how many thorns had dug into her flesh. But she could barely feel the pain, thinking instead of the supper that awaited them. Her mother made the best jerribermy jam in all of Wenderall, and since the silver berries were sweetest when picked just as the moon crested the night's sky, she already knew this batch was going to be *delicious*. If only she could stop her brother from stuffing his face with them, then she could finally deliver enough to their mother to reap the benefits of her labor.

The basket was barely half full when the first scream cleaved the quiet night air.

The girl and her brother froze, silver juice smeared around his half-open mouth, concern creasing her brow. Her emerald eyes looked to their father beside the wintry stream, a large bunch of aloeweed in his hands. His gaze wasn't on the mossy plants, but staring up at their small cottage on the hill, his face draining of color.

"Papa, what—"

"Quiet, Kerrin," the man hushed his son, dropping the aloeweed and hurrying toward them. "It's probably just Zuleeka and Torell playing around, but we should go check that—"

Whatever he'd intended to say about their older sister and brother was stolen by another scream and a crashing sound that echoed all the way down to where they stood.

"Papa—" The little girl spoke this time, jumping when her father

wrenched the basket from her hands, berries flying everywhere, and caught her fingers in his crushing grip. She didn't get the chance to say more before her mother's shrill voice bellowed out a warning.

“RUN, FARAN! *RUN!*”

Her father's grip turned painful, but it was too late for him to follow his wife's order. Soldiers were pouring from the cottage, their armor glinting silver even in the limited light, their swords raised.

There were at least a dozen of them.

So many.

*Too* many.

The little girl reached through the scratchy brambles for her brother's hand, his palm sticky with jerriberry juice, his fingers trembling. There was nowhere to run, trapped as they were with the icy river at their backs, the current too fast and deep for them to risk crossing.

“It's all right,” their father said shakily as the soldiers neared. “Everything will be all right.”

And then they were surrounded.



TEN YEARS LATER





# CHAPTER ONE

Looking down at the boy strapped to the metal table before her, Kiva Meridan leaned in close and whispered, “Take a deep breath.”

Before he could blink, she braced his wrist and stabbed the tip of her white-hot blade into the back of his hand. He screamed and thrashed against her—they always did—but she tightened her grip and continued carving three deep lines into his flesh, forming a Z.

A single character to identify him as a prisoner at Zalindov.

The wound would heal, but the scar would remain forever.

Kiva worked as fast as she could and only eased her grip once the carving was complete. She repressed the urge to tell him that the worst had passed. While barely a teenager, he was still old enough to discern the truth from lies. He belonged to Zalindov now, the metal band around his wrist labeling him as inmate H67L129. There was nothing good in his future—lying would do him no favors.

After smearing ballico sap across his bleeding flesh to stave off infection, then dusting it with pepperoor ash to ease his pain, Kiva wrapped his hand in a scrap of linen. She quietly warned him to keep it dry and clean for the next three days, all too aware that it would be impossible if he was allocated work in the tunnels, on the farms, or in the quarry.

“Hold still, I’m nearly done,” Kiva said, swapping her blade for a pair of shears. They were speckled with rust, but the edges were sharp enough to cut through steel.

The boy was shaking, fear dilating his pupils, his skin pale.

Kiva didn’t offer him any reassurances, not while the armed woman standing at the door to the infirmary watched her every move. Usually she was given a degree of privacy, working without the added pressure

of the guards' cold, keen eyes. But after the riot last week, they were on edge, monitoring everyone closely— even those like Kiva who were considered loyal to the Warden of Zalindov, a traitor to her fellow prisoners. An informant. A spy.

No one loathed Kiva more than she did herself, but she couldn't regret her choices, regardless of the cost.

Ignoring the whimpers now coming from the boy as she moved toward his head, Kiva began to hack at his hair in short, sharp motions. She remembered her own arrival at the prison a decade earlier, the humiliating process of being stripped down, scrubbed, and shorn. She'd left the infirmary with raw skin and no hair, an itchy gray tunic and matching pants her only possessions. Despite all she'd been through at Zalindov, those early hours of degradation were some of the worst she could recall. Thinking about them now had her own scar giving a pang of recollected pain, drawing her eyes to the band she wore beneath it. N18K442—her identification number—was etched into the metal, a constant reminder that she was nothing and no one, that saying or doing the wrong thing, even looking at the wrong person at the wrong time, could mean her death.

Zalindov showed no mercy, not even to the innocent.

*Especially* not to the innocent.

Kiva had been barely seven years old when she'd first arrived, but her age hadn't protected her from the brutality of prison life. She more than anyone knew that her breaths were numbered. No one survived Zalindov. It was only a matter of time before she joined the multitudes who had gone before her.

She was lucky, she knew, compared to many. Those assigned to the hard labor rarely lasted six months. A year, at most. But she'd never had to suffer through such debilitating work. In the early weeks after her arrival, Kiva had been allocated a job in the entrance block, where she'd sorted through the clothes and possessions taken from new inmates.

Later, when a different position had needed filling—due to a lethal outbreak that took hundreds of lives—she was sent to the workrooms and tasked with cleaning and repairing the guards' uniforms. Her fingers had bled and blistered from the unending laundry and needlecraft, but even then, she'd had little reason to complain, comparatively.

Kiva had been dreading the order for her to join the laborers, but the summons never came. Instead, after saving the life of a guard with a blood infection by advising him to use a poultice she'd seen her father make countless times, she had earned herself a place in the infirmary as a healer. Nearly two years later, the only other inmate working in the infirmary was executed for smuggling angeldust to desperate prisoners, leaving the then twelve-year-old Kiva to step into his role. With it came the responsibility of carving Zalindov's symbol into the new arrivals, something that, to this day, Kiva despised. However, she knew that if she refused to mark them, both she *and* the new prisoners would suffer the wrath of the guards. She'd learned that early on—and bore the scars on her back as a reminder. She would have been flogged to death had there been anyone skilled enough to replace her at the time. Now, however, there were others who could take up her mantle.

She was expendable, just like everyone else at Zalindov.

The boy's hair was a choppy mess when Kiva finally set the shears aside and reached for the razor. Sometimes it was enough to just cut away the tangles; other times, new arrivals came with matted, lice-infested locks, and it was best to shave it all off, rather than risk a plague of the small beasts spreading around the compound.

"Don't worry, it'll grow back," Kiva said gently, thinking of her own hair, black as night, that had been shorn upon her arrival yet now fell well down her back.

Despite her attempted comfort, the boy continued trembling, making it harder for her to avoid grazing him as she swiped the razor over his scalp.

Kiva wanted to tell him what he would face once he left the infirmary, but even if the guard hadn't been watching closely from the doorway, she knew that wasn't her place. New prisoners were partnered with another inmate for their first few days, and it was that person's responsibility to offer an introduction to Zalindov, to share warnings and reveal ways to stay alive. If, of course, that was desired. Some people arrived wanting to die, their hope already crumbled before they stepped through the iron gates and into the soulless limestone walls.

Kiva hoped this boy still had some fight left in him. He would need it to get through all that was coming.

"Done," she said, lowering the razor and stepping around to face him. He looked younger without his hair, all wide eyes, hollowed cheeks, and protruding ears. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

The boy stared at her as if she were one move away from slitting his throat. It was a look she was used to, especially from new arrivals. They didn't know she was one of them, a slave to Zalindov's whim. If he lived long enough, he would find his way to her again and discover the truth: that she was on his side and would help him in any way she could. Just like she helped all the others, inasmuch as she could.

"Finished?" called the guard at the door.

Kiva's hand tightened around the razor before she forced her fingers to relax. The last thing she needed was for the guard to sense any spark of rebellion in her.

Impassive and submissive — that was how she survived.

Many of the prisoners mocked her for it, especially those who had never needed her care. Zalindov's Bitch, some of them called her. The Heartless Carver, others hissed when she walked by. But the worst, perhaps, was the Princess of Death. She couldn't blame them for seeing her that way, and that was why she hated it the most. The truth was, many prisoners who entered the infirmary never came out again, and that was on her.

“Healer?” the guard called again, this time more forcefully. “Are you finished?”

Kiva gave a short nod, and the armed woman left her spot at the door and ventured into the room.

Female guards were a rarity at Zalindov. For every twenty men, there was perhaps one woman, and they seldom remained at the prison long before seeking posts elsewhere. This guard was new, someone Kiva had noticed for the first time a few days ago, her watchful amber eyes cool and detached in her youthful face. Her skin was two shades lighter than the blackest black, indicating that she hailed from Jiirva or perhaps Hadris, both kingdoms renowned for their skilled warriors. Her hair was cropped close to her scalp, and from one ear dangled a jade tooth earring. That wasn’t smart; someone could easily rip it out. Then again, she carried herself with a quiet confidence, her dark guard uniform—a long-sleeved leather tunic, pants, gloves, and boots—barely concealing the wiry muscles beneath. It would be a rare prisoner who was willing to mess with this young woman, and any who did would likely find themselves on a one-way trip to the morgue.

Swallowing at the thought, Kiva stepped backwards as the guard approached, giving the boy an encouraging squeeze of his shoulder as she moved past. He flinched so violently that she immediately regretted it.

“I’ll just”—Kiva indicated the pile of discarded clothes that the boy had worn before changing into his gray prison garb—“take these to the entrance block for sorting.”

This time it was the guard who nodded, before setting her amber eyes on the boy and ordering, “Come.”

The scent of his fear permeated the air as he rose on wobbling legs, cradling his wounded hand with the other, and followed the guard from the room.

He didn’t look back.

They never did.

Kiva waited until she was certain she was alone before she moved. Her motions were quick and practiced, but with a frantic urgency, her eyes flicking to and from the door with awareness that if she was caught, then she was dead. The Warden had other informants within the prison; he might favor Kiva, but that wouldn't keep her from punishment—or execution.

As she rifled through the pile of clothes, her nose wrinkled at the unpleasant smells of long travel and poor hygiene. She ignored the touch of something wet on her hand, the mold and mud and other things she'd rather not identify. She was searching for something. Searching, searching, searching.

She ran her fingers down the boy's pants but found nothing, so she moved to his linen shirt. It was threadbare, some places ripped and others patched up. Kiva inspected all the stitching, but still there was nothing, and she began to lose heart. But then she reached for his weathered boots, and there it was. Slipped down the damaged, gaping seam of the left boot was a small piece of folded parchment.

With shaking fingers, Kiva unfolded it and read the coded words contained within.

⊕ ≡ ~ < > ≡ > ~ \* ≡ .

> 6 ~ ☒ ~ >> # X ≡ .

⊕ ≡ ⊕ # >>> & || ⊕ ≡ .

Kiva released a *whoosh* of air, her shoulders drooping with relief as she mentally translated the code: *We are safe. Stay alive. We will come.*

It had been three months since Kiva had last heard from her family. Three months of checking the clothing of new, oblivious prisoners,

hoping for any scrap of information from the outside world. If not for the charity of the stablemaster, Raz, she would have had no means of communicating with those she loved most. He risked his life to sneak the notes through Zalindov's walls to her, and despite their rarity—and brevity—they meant the world to Kiva.

*We are safe. Stay alive. We will come.*

The same eight words and other similar offerings had arrived sporadically over the last decade, always when Kiva needed to hear them the most.

*We are safe. Stay alive. We will come.*

The middle part was easier said than done, but Kiva would do as she was told, certain her family would one day fulfill their promise to come for her. No matter how many times they wrote the words, no matter how long she'd already waited, she held on to their declaration, repeating it over and over in her mind: *We will come. We will come. We will come.*

One day, she would be with her family again. One day, she would be free of Zalindov, a prisoner no longer.

For ten years, she had been waiting for that day.

But every week that passed, her hope dwindled more and more.