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# THE GILDED CAGE



*By Lynette Noni*

H  
HODDER

Swallowing back her doubt, the woman and what remained of her family stepped over the threshold. No longer would she be called Tilda Meridan, no longer would she or her children deny their bloodline.

The blood of traitors.

And the blood of queens.

Tilda planned to be both—to betray a lifetime of convictions to claim what was rightfully hers.

Nothing would change what had happened that night. But Tilda Corentine would be damned if she didn't spend the rest of her life making those who were responsible pay.

One way or another, no matter what it cost, she would have her revenge.



TEN YEARS LATER



## CHAPTER ONE

The man was dead.

Kiva Meridan—known to a select few as Kiva Corentine—stared down at the body, noting his sunken cheeks and ashen skin. Given his state of bloating, he'd likely passed into the everworld three or four days ago. Long enough for the scent of death to emanate from him, even if he was yet to show physical signs of decomposition.

"Middle-aged male, average height and build, pulled out of the Serin River early this morning," Healer Maddis said, her crisp voice enunciating every word perfectly. "Who can speculate as to the cause of death?"

Kiva kept her mouth shut, fully aware that she'd been granted entrance into the sterile examination room as an observer only.

"No one?" Healer Maddis prompted her students, all of whom were crowded around the body resting on a metal slab in the center of the small space. "Novice Waldon?"

A young man wearing large spectacles blinked owlishly and answered, "Uh, he drowned?"

"Marvelous deductive reasoning," Maddis said dryly, before turning to the student beside him. "Novice Quinn?"

The young woman hunched in on herself, her voice barely a whisper as she said, "Maybe a heart attack? Or—Or a stroke?"

Healer Maddis tapped a fingernail against her lips. "Perhaps. Anyone else?"

Kiva shifted on her feet, catching the healer's attention.

"What about our visitor?" Maddis asked, drawing all eyes to Kiva. "Miss Meridan, isn't it?"

Seeing the open, inviting challenge in the elderly healer's gaze, Kiva

shook off her trepidation and stepped closer to the corpse, picking up his limp hand to reveal the smudges beneath his nails.

“This discoloration indicates he was suffering from an immune disorder, most likely syphinus or cretamot,” Kiva said, having diagnosed similar cases in the past. “If left untreated, both can lead to the rapid swelling of blood vessels.” She glanced toward the two novices who had been called upon. “Waldon and Quinn are both right—he most likely had a heart attack or a stroke, caused by his underlying medical condition, then fell into the river to drown.” She released the man’s hand. “But only a full examination will be able to say for sure.”

An approving smile stretched across the Matron Healer’s dark, wrinkled face. “Well spotted.” She then launched into a lecture about common immune disorders, but Kiva was only half listening, still marveling over where she stood.

Silverthorn Academy—the most renowned healing academy in all of Evalon. Some would argue in all of Wenderall.

When Kiva was a child, her father had spoken often about Silverthorn. Having grown up in the city of Fellarion, he’d used any excuse to visit Vallenia and sneak into the academy’s classes. His greatest regret was that he’d never relocated to study on campus full-time, instead accepting an apprenticeship from a master healer nearer to his home—an honored position, but one that paled in comparison to being a Silverthorn student.

Faran had made it his life’s purpose to help people, something Kiva had inherited to the point that, even when she’d been locked away in a nightmare, she’d still used everything he’d taught her to make the lives of others better.

A shadowy feeling overtook Kiva as she thought of the long years that were now behind her. A decade of her life spent behind thick limestone walls and impenetrable iron gates.

Zalindov prison.

It was a death sentence for most, but Kiva had survived.

And now she was here, standing at the heart of her father’s dream, when she should have been somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

There was no excuse for her actions today. But when the opportunity to visit Silverthorn had presented itself, she hadn’t been able to say no, even knowing that her own desires should have been at the bottom of her priorities.

It had been six weeks since Kiva had escaped Zalindov. Six weeks since she’d discovered that the crown prince had helped keep her alive through the deadly Trial by Ordeal, a set of four elemental challenges she’d undertaken in order to save the life of the Rebel Queen, Tilda Corentine.

Kiva’s mother.

Her efforts had been in vain, with a violent prison riot ending Tilda’s life. But even in death, her purpose remained, inherited by Kiva and her two older siblings. Together, the three of them would seek vengeance for what had been stolen generations ago; together, they would reclaim Evalon’s throne for the Corentine bloodline.

The problem was, Kiva had no idea how to find her brother and sister. The only hint she had was a coded note she’d received before leaving Zalindov, containing a single word: *Oakhollow*.

The village was barely half an hour’s ride away from Vallenia, but Kiva hadn’t had a spare moment to explore since arriving in the city two days ago, having spent the previous weeks holed up in the Tanestra Mountains waiting for the spring thaws. The first chance she’d had to sneak away was today. But instead of using the opportunity to seek out her long-lost siblings, she was indulging in her own dreams.

Tilda Corentine would have been livid.

Faran Meridan would have been delighted.

Kiva chose to side with her father, deciding that her mother’s mission could wait another day.

Guilt had simmered within her when she'd made her choice that morning, but a knot of anxiety had also eased in her stomach. She had no reason to be nervous about a reunion with her siblings, and yet . . . ten years was a long time. Kiva wasn't the same carefree child anymore, and she could only assume the same must be true for them. Too much had happened — to them all.

And then there was what the three of them intended to *do* . . .

The sound of chiming bells interrupted her thoughts, the noise making her jump, a lingering effect of the years she'd spent listening for the smallest of sounds that could herald her death. But she was no longer in Zalindov, the peaceful chimes merely echoing through the walls of the sterile examination room to signal the end of class.

The students, all clad in pristine white robes, scrambled to finish writing their lesson notes as Healer Maddis dismissed them.

"And remember," she called as they started toward the door, "for those heading to the festival this weekend, there will be no mercy come Monday should you partake of excessive libations. Consider yourselves warned."

There was a twinkle in her gray eyes as she uttered her half-hearted threat, with some of the braver students grinning in response as they headed out the door, Kiva following in their footsteps.

"Miss Meridan, a word?"

Kiva halted at the threshold of the small examination room. "Yes, Matron Healer?" she asked, using the honorific owed to the woman, not only because of her age and experience, but because she was the head of Silverthorn Academy.

"Few people would have noted the discolored nailbeds as quickly as you did," Maddis said, covering the deceased man with a sheet. "And even fewer without proper training." She looked up, their eyes meeting. "You impressed me."

Kiva squirmed and mumbled, "Thank you."

"Faran Meridan once impressed me, too."

Kiva stopped squirming in an instant.

Healer Maddis's wrinkles deepened as she smiled. "I knew whose daughter you were the moment you walked through the door."

Unsure whether she should flee or wait to see what the healer said next, the choice was taken from Kiva when Maddis asked, "How is your father? Still saving the world, one patient at a time?"

A million responses came to Kiva's mind, but she settled on simply saying, "He died. Nine years ago."

Maddis's face fell. "Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

Kiva only nodded, seeing no reason to reveal how he had died. Or where.

The Matron Healer cleared her throat. "Your father was my best student — ignoring the fact that he wasn't a Silverthorn student at all. Young Faran Meridan was always sneaking into my classes, acting like an innocent novice." Maddis huffed with amusement. "He showed enough promise that I never reported him to the Matron Healer at the time, knowing he'd be banned from the grounds. Someone with such natural, intuitive talent deserved the chance to hone his skills. I believed that then." She paused. "And I believe it now."

The look Maddis sent Kiva caused her breath to catch.

"Faran's death is devastating, but I'm thrilled to learn his passion was passed on," the healer said. "Should you wish it, you would be welcome to study here at Silverthorn. No sneaking in necessary."

Kiva's mouth opened and closed like a fish. Studying at Silverthorn would be a dream come true. The things she would learn . . . Tears welled in her eyes at the very thought.

And they welled even more because she knew she couldn't accept.

*Mother is dead.*

*I'm on my way to Vallenia.*

*It's time to reclaim our kingdom.*

Kiva had written those words to her brother and sister upon leaving Zalindov, and she had to see them through, denying her own ambitions in order to put her family first.

"Think on it," Healer Maddis said, when Kiva remained quiet. "Take however long you need. The offer will remain open."

Blinking back more tears, Kiva prepared to utter a polite refusal. But when she finally spoke, what she said was, "I'll consider it."

Despite her words, Kiva knew Silverthorn wasn't in her future. As soon as Maddis learned where she'd practiced her skills for the last decade, the invitation would be withdrawn. All Kiva had to do was raise her sleeve and uncover the Z scar on her hand.

But she couldn't do it. Couldn't sabotage herself with such finality. Instead, she uttered a quiet farewell and stepped out of the examination room into the sterile hallway beyond.

Mind reeling, Kiva paid little attention as she walked down the long corridor, passing white-robed healers and students, along with a mixture of plain-clothed visitors and patients. She'd already had a tour of the campus earlier that day, learning that there were three large infirmaries—one for psychological trauma and healing, one for long-term patient care and rehabilitation, and this one, which was for diagnosing and treating physical ailments specific to illnesses and injuries. There were also a handful of smaller buildings dotted across the campus, like the apothecaries' workshop, the quarantine block, the morgue, and the healer residences. Only the main infirmaries were accessible to the public, all connected by outdoor pathways with arched stone sides offering views of the gardens at the center of the grounds. The Silverthorn Sanctuary, as those gardens were known—a place where patients and healers could retreat and relax, enjoying the tranquility of the bubbling brook and aromatic wildflowers all from atop a hill that overlooked the city, straight down to where the meandering Serin River met the Tetran Sea.

It was to the sanctuary that Kiva headed once she left the largest of

the infirmaries, walking along the stone path a short way before stepping off it, her sandals sinking into the lush grass, the late afternoon sunshine warming the chill from her bones. She kept moving aimlessly until she reached a small footbridge affording safe passage over the trickling stream, pausing to lean on the wooden railing in an attempt to gather her thoughts.

"Uh-oh, you're wearing your serious face."

Kiva stilled at the familiar voice, ignoring how it made her feel—all that it made her feel. She braced herself and turned to see the approaching figure just as he came close enough to stop beside her.

Jaren Vallentis—or Prince Deverick, as most of the world knew him. Her fellow escaped inmate, her traveling companion, her once-friend—and once-potentially-more-than-that—and her family's sworn enemy.

*Her sworn enemy.*

"This is my normal face," Kiva said, struggling not to stare. His deep blue shirt with gold embroidery along the collar looked far too good on him, as did his tailored black jacket and pants. It took a supreme effort of will for her to cast her gaze away.

"Yes, and it's much too serious," Jaren stated, reaching out to tuck a strand of dark, windswept hair behind her ear.

Kiva's stomach gave a traitorous leap, and she frowned inwardly at herself. Casual affection from Jaren wasn't uncommon. Even when they'd been in Zalindov together, he'd been overly friendly toward her. Since they'd escaped, Kiva had sought to keep him at arm's length, but her will was beginning to crumble. It was as if he'd been born for the sole purpose of tempting her, of distracting her from her task.

And that was unacceptable.

"Did you have a good day?" he asked, his unique blue-gold eyes capturing hers.

Kiva smoothed her outfit—a simple green dress paired with a thin white cardigan—and weighed her response. Jaren was the reason she

was even at Silverthorn; he'd called in a favor, resulting in her being awakened at dawn and hustled out of the River Palace for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to spend a day at the best healing academy in the kingdom.

There were so many reasons for Kiva to hate the crown prince, but she couldn't summon the burning resentment that should have consumed her. She blamed Jaren for that. From the moment they'd met, he'd been caring and thoughtful and wholly devoted to her. Even when she'd learned that he'd lied about who he really was, she still hadn't been able to turn her back and leave him to die of his injuries down in the tunnels beneath Zalindov. She'd tried — *desperately* — to harden her heart toward him in the weeks they'd spent at his family's palace in the Tanestra Mountains, and then during their long days of travel to Vallenia, but it was useless. He was just too gods-damned *likeable*. It made everything Kiva planned to do to him and his family that much more difficult.

Not that she'd ever admit as much — even to herself.

"It was . . ." she started, unsure how to answer. Her day had been amazing, incredible, everything she'd ever hoped for. But knowing what she did about her future, and how she would have to turn down Maddis's offer, all she said was, "Interesting."

Jaren's golden eyebrows inched upward. "A glowing commendation."

Kiva ignored his sarcasm and asked, "What're you doing here?"

There was no one near where they stood leaning against the footbridge, but she still peered nervously at those spaced further out in the sanctuary, and the spattering of people walking along the arched stone pathways between the infirmaries.

"I came to pick you up," Jaren said with a merry wink. "First day of school, and all that."

Kiva shook her head at him. "You shouldn't be here."

"Ouch," Jaren said, pressing a hand to his heart. "That hurts. Right here."

"If someone recognizes you —"

Jaren had the audacity to chuckle. "People in Vallenia are used to me and my family wandering freely among them. We only wear masks during special events, so we're easily recognizable the rest of the time. Don't worry — we're not as much of a novelty as you'd think."

"I doubt Naari would agree with you," Kiva argued, looking past him. "Where is she?"

Since leaving Zalindov — and in the time they'd been there together — it was rare to see Jaren without his most loyal Royal Guard, his Golden Shield. That Naari Arell was absent now meant one of two things: either she was giving them space and watching from a distance, or —

"Would you be impressed if I said I managed to give her the slip?"

The self-satisfied grin Jaren wore had Kiva tilting her head to the side, a smirk playing at her lips as she replied, "I'd be impressed if you managed to survive her wrath afterward."

Jaren's grin fled, a wince taking its place. "Yes. Well." He straightened his shoulders and rallied. "That's a problem for later."

"I'll say something nice at your funeral," Kiva promised.

Jaren huffed out a laugh. "You're too kind." He then grabbed her hand and started leading her back toward the arched pathway. "Come on, we have to get moving if we don't want to miss it."

Kiva tried to free herself from his grip, but his fingers only tightened around hers, so she gave in, resolutely ignoring how nice it felt, and sought to keep up with his long strides. "Miss what?"

"Sunset," Jaren answered.

When he said no more, Kiva dryly observed, "This may come as a shock, but there'll be another one tomorrow."

Jaren gave her a gentle tug. "Smart ass." The amused look he shot her warmed her insides — and *that* she ignored, too.

She was ignoring a lot these days, when it came to Jaren.

"The annual River Festival kicks off at sunset *today*," he said. "It lasts

all weekend, but the first night is always the best, so we want to make sure we have a good view.”

“Of what?”

“You’ll see,” Jaren said mysteriously.

Kiva made a quick decision. She would allow herself one more night—a night to experience the River Festival and enjoy being in Jaren’s company, knowing that their days together were numbered.

One night, and then she would set out for Oakhollow, where she would finally follow through with what she’d determined upon leaving Zalindov.

No matter how she might feel, no matter how the crown prince had wormed his way into her heart, it was time for the Vallentis family to fall.

## CHAPTER TWO

Vallenia was known as the River City, Kiva had learned upon her arrival two days earlier. With numerous meandering waterways, none was more impressive than the mighty Serin River, which twisted and turned like a serpent throughout the capital.

It was to the river that Jaren was leading Kiva, an easy downhill walk from Silverthorn until they reached the main thoroughfare, where people were already beginning to crowd the sidewalks bordering the water, the thrill of anticipation heavy in the air.

As they wove their way through the masses, Kiva assumed Jaren was taking her back to the River Palace—a feat of architecture split in half by the Serin, the two sides connected by a gilded bridge. Not even Kiva could deny the magnificence of the royal residence, the luminium threaded into its outer walls creating a glittering effect that was dazzling.

So far, Kiva had only set foot in the eastern palace, where Jaren had a whole wing to himself—including guest quarters, inside which Kiva had been allocated a lavish suite. His siblings, Mirryn and Oriel, also resided in the eastern palace, but their parents lived on the western side of the river. Kiva had yet to lay eyes on the king or queen, but given how she felt about the monarchs, she wasn’t in a rush to meet them.

The crowds became uncomfortably thick as they approached the River Palace, offering a valid excuse for Kiva to free her hand from Jaren’s. She refused to acknowledge the loss she felt once their connection was severed, focusing instead on the back of his tousled gold-brown head as he led her off the main street and into a grimy alleyway well before they reached the guarded palace gates. The dilapidated buildings