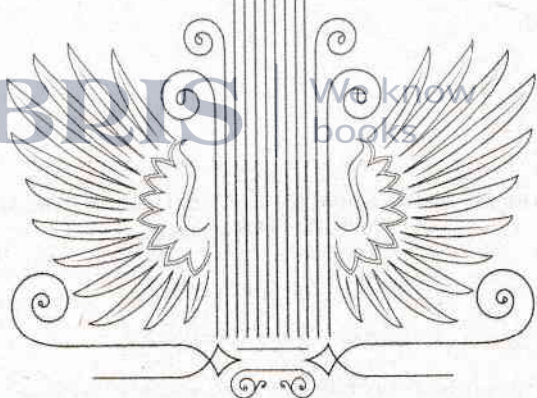


LIBRIS

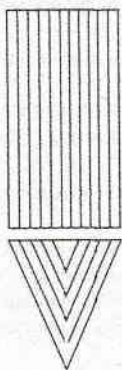
We know
books



DANCE
OF
THIEVES

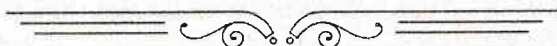
NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE REMNANT CHRONICLES

MARY E. PEARSON



H
HODDER

CHAPTER ONE



KAZIMYRAH OF BRIGHTMIST

THE GHOSTS ARE STILL HERE.

The words lingered in the air, each one a shimmering spirit, cold whispers of caution, but I wasn't afraid.

I already knew.

The ghosts, they never go away. They call to you in unexpected moments, their hands lacing with yours and pulling you down paths that lead nowhere. *This way.* I had learned to mostly shut them out.

We rode through Sentinel Valley, ruins of the Ancients looking down upon us. My horse's ears pricked, watchful, a rumble deep from his throat. He knew too. I rubbed his neck to calm him. It had been six years since the Great Battle, but the scars were still visible—overturned wagons eaten up with grass, scattered bones dug from graves by hungry beasts, the skeletal ribs of giant brezalots reaching skyward, birds perched on their elegant bleached cages.

I felt the ghosts hovering, watching, wondering. One of them slid a cool fingertip along my jaw, pressing a warning to my lips, *Shhh, Kazi, don't say a word.*

Natiya led us deeper into the valley, unafraid. Our gazes scanned the rugged cliffs and the crumbling devastation of a war that was slowly being consumed by earth, time, and memory, like the awkward swallowing of a fat hare by a patient snake. Soon, all the destruction would be in the belly of the earth. Who would remember?

Midway, as the valley narrowed, Natiya stopped and slipped from her saddle, pulling a folded square of white cloth from her saddlebag. Wren dismounted too, her thin limbs gliding to the ground as silently as a bird. Synové hesitated, watching me uncertainly. She was strongest of us all, but her round hips remained firmly planted in her saddle. She did not care for talk of ghosts, even in the brightness of a high sun. They frequented her dreams too often. I nodded to reassure her, and we both slid from our horses and joined them. Natiya paused at a large green mound as if she knew what lay beneath the woven blanket of grass. She absently rubbed the fabric between her delicate brown fingers. It was only for a few seconds, but it seemed to last forever. Natiya was nineteen, only two years older than us, but she suddenly looked much older. She had actually seen the things we had only heard stories about. Her head shook slightly, and she walked toward a scattered pile of rocks. She began picking up the fallen stones and puzzling them back into place on the humble memorial.

“Who was it?” I asked.

Her lips rolled tight against her teeth. “His name was Jeb. His body was burned on a funeral pyre because that’s the Dalbretch way, but I buried his few belongings here.”

Because that’s the vagabond way, I thought, but said nothing. Natiya didn’t talk much about her life before she became Vendan and a Rahtan, but I didn’t talk much about my earlier life either. Some things were better left in the past. Wren and Synové shifted uncomfortably on their feet, their boots pressing the grass into small, flat circles. Natiya wasn’t prone to sentimental displays, even if they were quiet ones like this,

especially if they delayed her well-planned schedule. But now she lingered, just like her words that had ushered us into the valley. *They are still here.*

“He was special?” I asked.

She nodded. “They all were. But Jeb taught me things. Things that have helped me to survive.” She turned, giving us a sharp glance. “Things I have taught all of you. *Hopefully.*” Her scrutiny softened, and her thick black lashes cast a shadow beneath her dark eyes. She studied the three of us as if she were a seasoned general and we were her ragtag soldiers. In some ways, I supposed we were. We were the youngest of the Rahtan, but *we were Rahtan*. That meant something. It meant a lot. We were the queen’s premier guard. We didn’t rise to these positions because we were bumbling fools. Not most of the time, anyway. We had training and talents. Natiya’s gaze rested on me the longest. I was lead on this mission, responsible for making not just the right decisions, but perfect ones. That meant not only achieving success, but keeping everyone safe too.

“We’ll be fine,” I promised.

“Fine,” Wren agreed, impatiently blowing a dark curl from her forehead. She wanted to be on her way. The anticipation was wearing on all of us.

Synové anxiously twisted one of her long persimmon braids between her fingers. “Perfectly fine. We’re—”

“I know,” Natiya said, putting her hand up to stop Synové from embarking on a long explanation. “Fine. Just remember, spend some time at the settlement first. Hell’s Mouth comes after. Only ask questions. Gather information. Get what supplies you need. Keep a low profile until we get there.”

Wren snorted. A low profile was certainly one of my specialties, but not this time. Getting into trouble was my goal for a change.

Galloping broke the tense exchange. “Natiya!”

We turned toward Eben, his horse kicking up soft clods of grass. Synové's eyes brightened like the sun had just winked at her from behind a cloud. He circled around, his eyes fixed only on Natiya. "Griz is grumbling. He wants to leave."

"Coming," she answered, then shook out the square of fabric she was holding. It was a shirt. A very handsome shirt. She touched the soft fabric to her cheek, then laid it over the rock memorial. "Cruvas linen, Jeb," she whispered. "The finest."

We reached the mouth of the valley, and Natiya stopped and looked back one last time. "Remember this," she said. "Twenty thousand. That's how many died here in a single day. Vendans, Morrighese, and Dalbretch. I didn't know them all, but someone did. Someone who would bring a meadow flower to them if they could."

Or a Cruvas linen shirt.

Now I knew why Natiya had brought us here. This was by the queen's order. *Look. Take a good long look and remember the lives lost. Real people that someone loved. Before you go about the task I have given you, see the devastation and remember what they did. What could happen again. Know what is at stake. Dragons eventually wake and crawl from their dark dens.*

I had seen the urgency in the queen's eyes. I had heard it in her voice. This wasn't only about the past. She feared for the future. Something was brewing, and she was desperate to stop it.

I surveyed the valley. From a distance, the bones and wagons blended back into a calm sea of green, hiding the truth.

Nothing was ever quite what it seemed.

Griz's grumbling to break camp was nothing new. He liked to make camp early and leave early, sometimes even when it was still dark, as if it were some sort of victory over the sun. His horse was already packed when we returned, and the campfire doused. He watched impatiently as the rest of us buckled up bedrolls and bags.

An hour's ride from here, we would go our separate ways. Griz was headed to Civica in Morrighan. The queen had news she wanted to share with her brother, the king, and she trusted no one else to deliver it, not even the Valsprey she used for other messages. Valsprey could be attacked by other birds or shot down and messages intercepted, whereas nothing could stop Griz. Except, perhaps, a quick side trip to Terravin, which was probably why he was in such a hurry. Synové liked to tease that he had a sweetheart there. It always made him explode in denial. Griz was old-school Rahtan, but the Rahtan was not the elite, rule-bound ten it once was. There were twenty of us now. A lot of things had changed since the queen came to power, including me.

When I began folding my tent, Griz came and stood over my shoulder and watched. I was the only one who used a tent. It was small. It didn't take up much room. He had balked the first time he had seen me use one on a mission to a southern province. *We don't use tents*, he'd said with utter distaste. I remembered the shame I felt. In the weeks that followed, I turned that humiliation to determination. Weakness made you a target, and I had promised myself, long ago, I would never be a target again. I buried my shame deep beneath carefully crafted armor. Insults couldn't penetrate it.

Griz's brooding stature cast a mountainous shadow over me. "Doesn't my folding technique meet with your approval?" I asked.

He said nothing.

I turned and looked up at him. "What is it, Griz?" I snapped.

He rubbed his bristled chin. "There's a lot of open territory between here and Hell's Mouth. Empty, *flat* territory."

"Your point?"

"You'll be . . . *all right?*"

I stood, shoving my folded tent into his belly. He took it from me.

"I've got this, Griz. Relax."

His head bobbed in a hesitant nod.

"The real question is," I added, long and drawn out for effect, "do you?"

He eyed me, his brow furrowed in a question, and then he scowled, reaching for his side.

I smiled and held his short dagger out to him.

His scowl turned to a reluctant grin, and he replaced the dagger in its empty sheath. His bushy brows lifted, and he shook his head in approval. "Stay downwind, Ten."

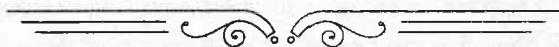
Ten, my hard-won nickname. It was his acknowledgment of confidence, I wiggled my fingertips in appreciation.

No one, especially not Griz, would ever forget how I had earned it.

"You mean upwind, don't you?" Eben called.

I glared at Eben. And no one, especially not Eben, would ever forget that my life as Rahtan began the day I spit in the queen's face.

CHAPTER TWO



KAZI

THE QUEEN HAD BEEN WALKING THE NARROW, DIRTY STREETS of the Brightmist quarter when I spotted her. I hadn't planned it, but even events unplanned can whisk us down paths that we never expected to travel, changing our destinies and what defines us. Kazimyrrah: orphan, invisible street rat, girl who defied the queen, Rahtan.

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

When she learned I had no family to summon, she told the guards

who had grabbed me to bring me along to Sanctum Hall. I thought I was so very clever back then. Too clever for this young queen. I was eleven years of grit and gravel by then, and impervious to an interloper. I would outwit her just as I did everyone else. It was *my* realm after all. I had all my fingertips—and a reputation to go with them. In the streets of Venda, they called me “Ten” with whispered respect.

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

But because of the queen, almost overnight I witnessed my world dissolving. I had starved and clawed my way to this position. No one was going to take it from me. The cramped, winding streets of Venda were all I had ever known, and its underworld was all I understood. Its members were a desperate coalition who appreciated the warmth of horse dung in winter, a knife in a burlap sack and the trail of spilled grain it left

behind, the scowl of a duped merchant realizing he was short an egg in his basket—or, if I was feeling punitive, the whole chicken who had laid it. I had walked away with bigger and noisier things.

I liked to say I stole only because of hunger, but it wasn't true. Sometimes I stole from the quarterlords just to make their miserable lives more miserable. It made me wonder, if I ever became a quarterlord, would I cut off fingers to secure my place of power? Because power, I had learned, could be just as seductive as a warm loaf of bread, and the small bit I wielded over them was sometimes all the food I needed.

With new treaties signed among the kingdoms allowing settlement of the Cam Lanteux, one by one those whom I thieved for and with left to go live in wide-open spaces to begin new lives. I became a plucked bird flapping featherless wings, suddenly useless, but moving to a farming settlement in the middle of nowhere was something I would not do. It was something I *could* not do. I learned this when I was nine and had traveled just a short distance beyond the Sanctum walls in search of answers that had eluded me. When I looked back at the disappearing city and saw that I was a mere speck in an empty landscape, I couldn't breathe and the sky swirled in dizzy currents. It hit me like a smothering wave. There was nowhere to hide. No shadows to melt into, no tent flaps to duck behind or stairs to disappear under—there were no beds to hide beneath in case someone came for me. There was no place to escape to at all. The structure of my world was gone—the floor, the ceilings, the walls—and I floated loose, untethered. I barely made it back to the city and never left again.

I knew I would not survive in a world of open sky. Spitting in the queen's face had been my futile stab at saving the existence I had carved out. My life had already been stolen once. I refused to let it happen again, but it happened just the same. Some rising tides cannot be held back, and