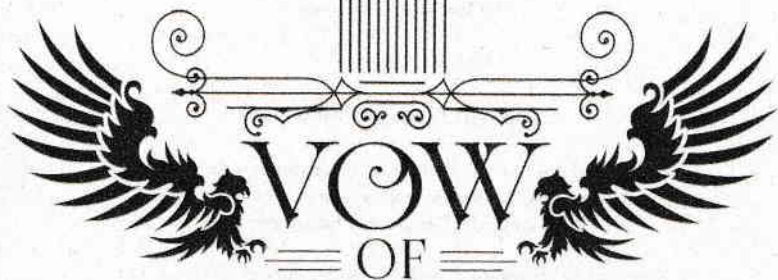


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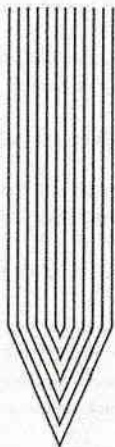
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books



VOW OF THIEVES

NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE REMNANT CHRONICLES

MARY E. PEARSON



H

HODDER

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.

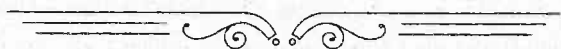
I lay down on the floor, the chains jangling against the cobbles, and I curled tight, trying to ease the ache in my gut.

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, *Patri*. 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 important, 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 *Patrei*, 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 *Patri*, 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 important, 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, *Patri*."

"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."