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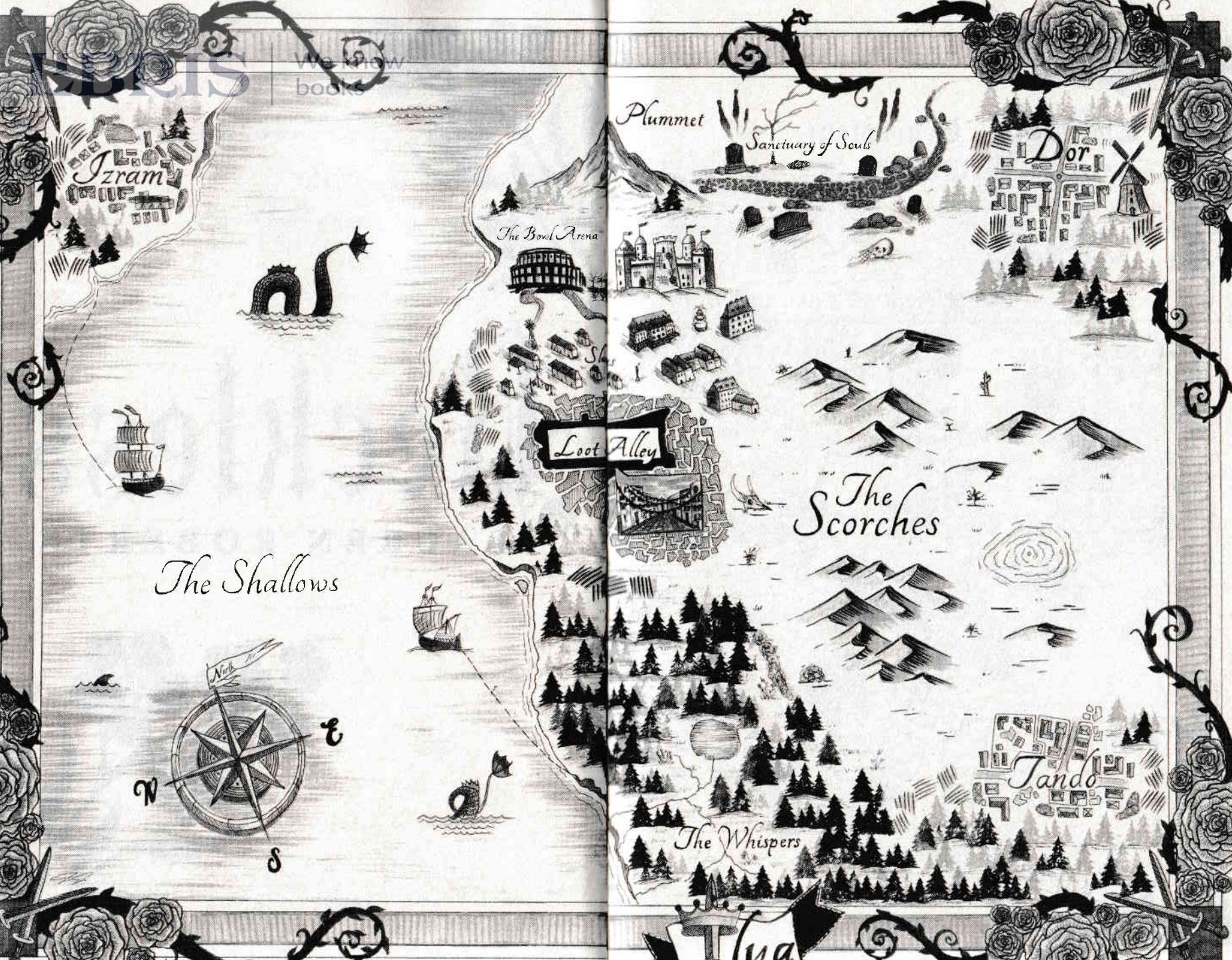


# Reckless

LAUREN ROBERTS



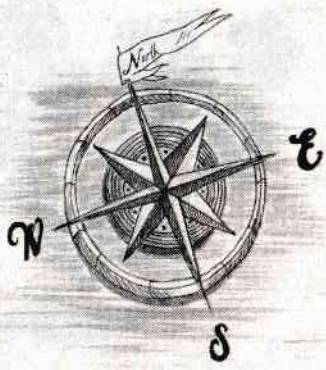
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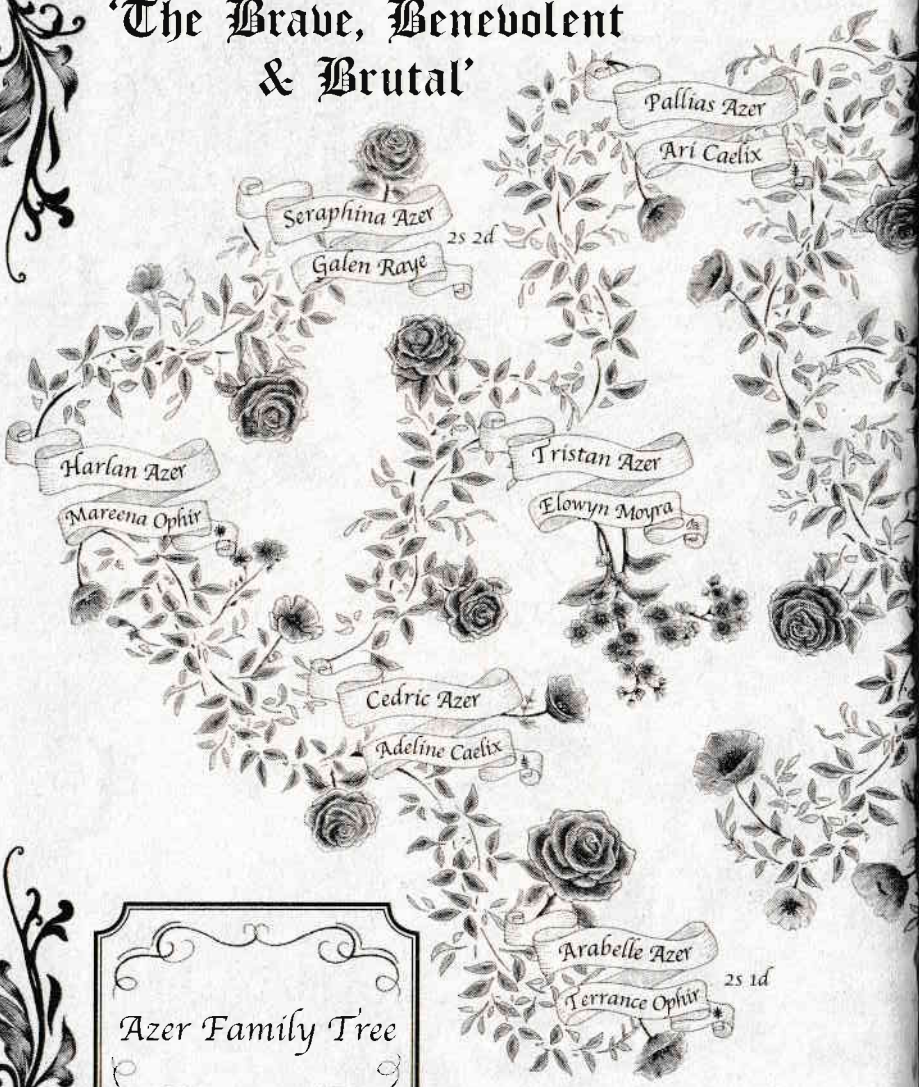
The Scorches

The Whispers

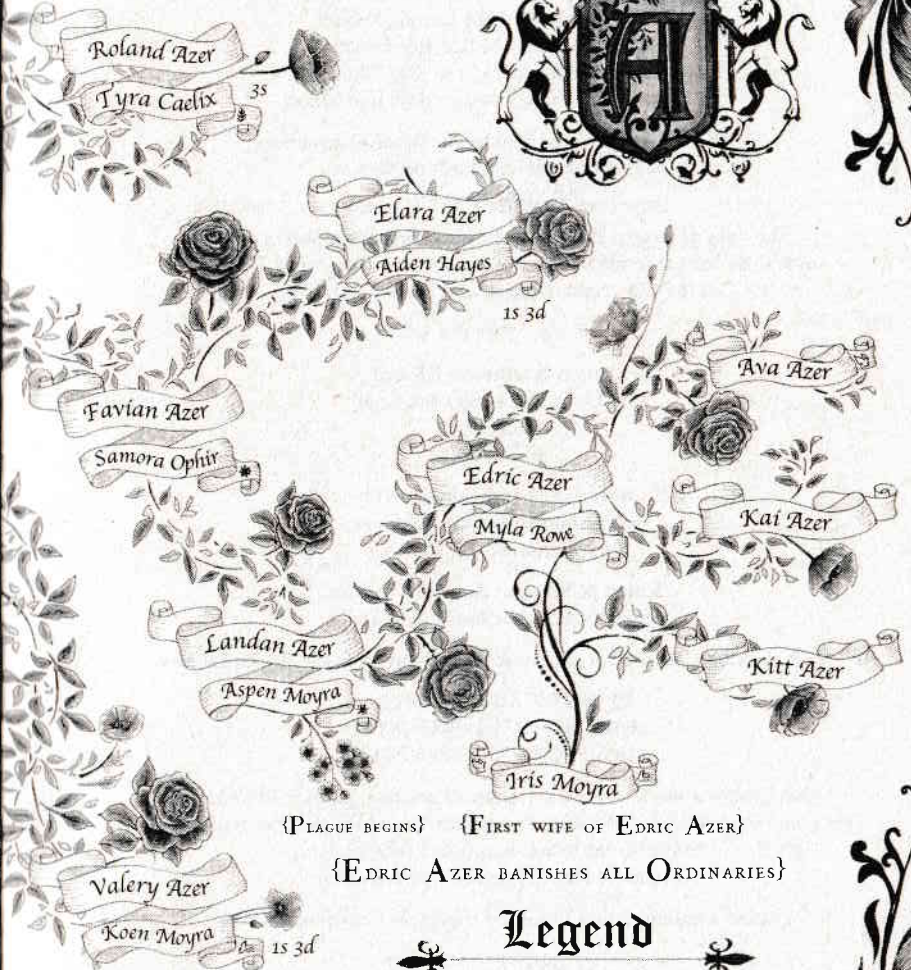
Tando

Tua

## 'The Brave, Benevolent & Brutal'



Azer Family Tree



{PLAGUE BEGINS} {FIRST WIFE OF EDRIC AZER}  
 {EDRIC AZER BANISHES ALL ORDINARIES}

### Legend

- 🌿 Tandan Royalty    s ~ son
- 🌿 Izrami Royalty    d ~ daughter
- ☼ Dorian Royalty    ☼ Deceased



## PROLOGUE

## Kai

The halls are eerily empty at this hour.  
Just as they are every year.

I take my time walking down them, stealing this sliver of peace for myself. Though stolen bliss is little more than smothered chaos.

I choose to ignore that thought as I turn down a dark hall, my footsteps soft atop the emerald carpet. A sleeping castle is comforting, solitude a rarity among royals.

Royal.

I almost allow myself to laugh at the title. I frequently forget what I was before what I became. A prince before the Enforcer. A boy before the monster.

But, today, I am no one. Today, I simply get to be with who I should have been.

A soft light leaks from beneath the doors of the kitchen. I manage a slight smile at the sight.

Every year. She's always here every year.

I gently push open the doors and step into the puddle of light cast



by several flickering candles. The sweet smell of dough and cinnamon hangs in the air, swaddling me in warmth and memories.

‘You’re up earlier every year.’

I meet Gail’s smile with a small one of my own. Her apron is dusted with cinnamon, her face streaked with flour. I lift myself onto the same counter I’ve sat atop since I was big enough to reach it – my palms flattened behind me, scars sticky from the countertop.

There’s comfort in the normalcy of it all.

I smile at the woman who all but raised me, a single shoulder lifted in a lazy shrug. ‘Every year I sleep less.’

When her hands find her hips, I know she’s fighting the urge to scold me. ‘You worry me, Kai.’

‘When have I not?’ I say lightly.

‘I’m serious.’ She wags a finger, gesturing to the whole of me. ‘You’re too young to be dealin’ with all this. It seems like only yesterday you were running around my kitchen, you and Kitt . . .’

She trails off at the mention of him, forcing me to resuscitate the dying conversation. ‘I actually came from Father’s –’ I pause long enough to sigh through my nose – ‘*Kitt’s* study.’

Gail nods slowly. ‘He hasn’t left it since his coronation, has he?’

‘No, he hasn’t. And I wasn’t in there long, either.’ I run a hand through my disheveled hair. ‘He was just informing me of my first mission.’

She’s quiet for a long moment. ‘It’s her, isn’t it?’

I nod. ‘It’s her.’

‘And are you—?’

‘Going to complete the mission? Do as I’m told?’ I finish for her. ‘Of course. It’s my duty.’

Another long pause. ‘And did he remember what today is?’

I look up slowly, smiling sadly as I meet her gaze. ‘It’s not his job to remember.’

‘Right,’ she sighs. ‘Well, I only made one this year anyway. Figured he wouldn’t be able to join ya.’

She steps aside, revealing a glistening sticky bun beside the oven. I slide off the counter, smiling as I walk over to her. Only after I’ve kissed her on the cheek does she hand the plate to me.

‘Now, go on,’ she shoos. ‘Go spend some time with her.’

‘Thank you, Gail,’ I say softly. ‘For every year.’

‘And the rest to follow.’ She winks before shoving me towards the door.

I glance back at her, at this woman who was a mother to me when the queen could not be. She was warm hugs and affection, well-deserved scoldings and much-desired approval.

I fear where the Azer brothers would be without her.

‘Kai?’

I’m halfway through the door when I stop to look back at her.

‘We all loved her,’ she says quietly.

‘I know.’ I nod. ‘She knew.’

And then my feet are carrying me out into the shadowed hallway beyond.

The sticky bun sitting atop the plate in my hand is tempting, smelling of cinnamon and sugar and simpler times. But instead I force myself to focus on walking the familiar path to the gardens, the same one I take this time each year from the kitchens.

It’s not long before I’m heading for the broad doors that separate me from the gardens beyond. I barely glance at the Imperials standing guard or the ones sleeping uselessly beside them. The few who are awake pretend not to notice the sticky bun I’m carrying into the darkness with me.

I follow the stone path between the rows of colorful flowers I can’t make out in the shadows. Statues covered in ivy litter the garden,

several missing chunks of stone after taking one too many topples that certainly had nothing to do with me. The fountain ripples at the center of it all, reminding me of stifling days and understandable stupidity that had Kitt and me jumping into it.

But it's what sits beyond the garden that I'm here for.

I step out into the soft stretch of grass that was once layered with colorful rugs for the second Trial's ball. Not allowing myself to reminisce any further on that night, I follow the moonlight that strokes its pale fingers over the outline of her.

The willow tree looks hauntingly alluring, her leaves rustling in the soft breeze. I run my eyes over each drooping branch. Over each root breaking through the dirt. Every inch is beautiful and strong.

I push through the curtain of leaves to step beneath the tree I visit as often as life will allow it – but always on this day with a sticky bun in hand. I run my fingers along the rough bark of the trunk, following its familiar grooves.

It's not long before I take my familiar seat beneath the towering tree, draping an arm over my propped knee. Balancing the plate atop a particularly large root, I pull a small matchbox from my pocket.

'I couldn't find a candle this year, sorry.' I strike the match, staring at the small flame now sputtering on the stick. 'So this will have to do.'

I push the match into the center of the sticky bun, smiling slightly at the pathetic sight. I take a moment to watch it burn, watch it paint the massive tree in a flickering glow.

Then I look down beside me, running a hand over the soft grass there.

'Happy birthday, A.'

I blow out the makeshift candle, letting darkness swallow us whole.



## CHAPTER 1

# Paedyn

**M**y blood is only useful if it can manage to stay inside my body.  
My mind is only useful if it can manage not to get lost.

My heart is only useful if it can manage not to get broken.

*Well, it seems I've become utterly useless, then.*

My eyes flick over the floorboards beneath my feet, wandering over the worn wood. The mere sight of the familiar floor floods me with memories, and I fight to blink away the fleeting images of small feet atop big booted ones as they stepped in time to a familiar melody. I shake my head, trying to shake the memory from it despite desperately wishing I could dwell in the past, seeing that my present isn't the most pleasant at the moment.

*. . . sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—*

I smile, ignoring the pain that pinches my skin.

*Found you.*

My stride is unsteady and stiff, sore muscles straining with each step towards the seemingly normal floorboard. I drop to my knees, biting my tongue against the pain, and claw at the wood with



crimson-stained fingers I struggle to ignore.

The floor seems to be just as stubborn as I am, refusing to budge. I would have admired its resilience if it weren't a damn piece of *wood*.

*I don't have time for this. I need to get out of here.*

A frustrated sound tears from my throat before I blink at the board, blurting, 'I could have sworn you were the secret compartment. Are you not the nineteenth floorboard from the door?'

I'm staring daggers at the wood before a hysterical laugh slips past my lips, and I tip my head back to shake it at the ceiling. 'Plagues, now I'm talking to the *floor*,' I mutter, further proof that I'm losing my mind.

Although, it's not as if I have anyone else to talk to.

It's been four days since I stumbled back to my childhood home, haunted and half dead. And yet, both my mind and body are far from healed.

I may have dodged death with each swipe of the king's sword, but he still managed to kill a part of me that day after the final Trial. His words cut deeper than his blade ever could, slicing me with slivers of truths as he toyed with me, taunted me, told me of my father's death with a smile tugging at his lips.

*'Wouldn't you like to know who it was that killed your father?'*

A shiver snakes down my spine while the king's cold voice echoes through my skull.

*'Let's just say that your first encounter with a prince wasn't when you saved Kai in the alley.'*

If betrayal was a weapon, he bestowed it upon me that day, driving the blunt blade through my broken heart. I blow out a shaky breath, pushing away thoughts of the boy with gray eyes as piercing as the sword I watched him drive through my father's chest so many years ago.

Staggering to my feet, I shift my weight over the surrounding

floorboards, listening for an indicating creak while mindlessly spinning the silver ring on my thumb. My body aches all over, my very bones feeling far too fragile. The wounds I earned from both the final Trial and my fight with the king were hastily tended to, the result of shaky fingers and silent sobs that left my vision blurry and stitches sloppy.

After limping from the Bowl Arena towards Loot Alley, I stumbled into the white shack I called home and the Resistance called headquarters. But I was greeted with emptiness. There were no familiar faces filling the secret room beneath my feet, leaving me with nothing but my pain and confusion.

I was alone – have been alone – left to clean up the mess that is my body, my brain, my bleeding heart.

The wood beneath me groans. I grin.

Once again I'm on the floor, prying up a beam to reveal a shadowy compartment beneath. I shake my head at myself, mumbling, 'It's the nineteenth floorboard from the *window*, not the door, Pae . . .'

I reach into the darkness, fingers curling round the unfamiliar hilt of a dagger. My heart aches more than my body, wishing to feel the swirling steel handle of my father's weapon against my palm.

But I chose the shedding of blood over sentiment when I threw my beloved blade into the king's throat. And my only regret is that *he* found it, promising to return it only when he'd stabbed it into my back.

Empty blue eyes blink at me in the reflection of the shiny blade I lift into the light, startling me enough to halt my hateful thoughts. My skin is splattered with slices, covered in cuts. I swallow at the sight of the gash traveling down the side of my neck, skim fingers over the jagged skin. Shaking my head, I slip the dagger into my boot, stowing away my scared reflection with it.

I spot a bow and its quiver of sharp arrows concealed in the

compartment, and the shadow of a sad smile crosses my face at the memory of Father teaching me how to shoot, the gnarled tree behind our house my only target.

Slinging the bow and quiver across my back, I sift through the other weapons hidden beneath the floor. After tossing a few sharp throwing knives into my pack, where they joined the rations, blanket, water canteens, and crumpled shirt I'd hastily tucked inside, I struggle to my feet.

I've never felt so delicate, so damaged. The thought has me swelling with anger, has me snatching a knife from my waist and itching to plunge it into the worn, wooden wall before me. Searing pain shoots down my raised arm when the brand above my heart pulls taut with the movement.

A reminder. A representation of what I am. Or rather, what I'm not.  
O for Ordinary.

I send the knife flying, plunging it into the wood with gritted teeth. The scar stings, gloating of its endless existence on my body.

*' . . . I will leave my mark on your heart, lest you forget who's broken it.'*

I stalk over to the blade, ready to yank it from the wall when the board beneath my foot creaks, drawing my attention. Despite knowing that flimsy floorboards are anything but foreign to houses in the slums, my curiosity has me bending to investigate.

*If every creaky board were a compartment, our floor would be littered with them . . .*

The wood lifts and my eyebrows do the same, shooting up my forehead in shock. I huff out a humorless laugh as I reach into the shadows of the compartment I didn't know existed.

*Silly of me to think that the Resistance was the only secret Father kept from me.*

My fingers brush worn leather before I pull out a large book, stuffed

with papers that threaten to spill out. I flip through it, recognizing the messy handwriting of a physician.

*Father's journal.*

I shove it into my pack, knowing I don't have the time or safety needed to study his work now. I've been here too long, spent too many days wounded and weak and worrying that I'll be found.

The Sight that witnessed me murder the king has likely displayed that image all over the kingdom. I need to get out of Ilya, and I've already wasted the head start *he* so graciously gave me.

I make my way to the door, ready to slip out and onto the streets where I can disappear into the chaos that is Loot. From there, I'll attempt to head across the Scorches to the city of Dor, where Elites don't exist and Ordinary is all they know.

Reaching for the door and the quiet street beyond—

I halt, hand outstretched.

*Quiet.*

It's nearly midday, meaning Loot and its surrounding streets should be a swarm of swearing merchants and squealing children as the slums buzz with color and commotion.

*Something's not right . . .*

The door shudders, something — *someone* — ramming into it from the outside. I jump back, eyes darting around the room. I contemplate ducking down the secret stairwell to the room beneath that held the Resistance meetings, but the thought of being cornered down there makes me queasy. That's when my gaze snaps to the fireplace, sighing in annoyance despite my current situation.

*How do I always find myself in a chimney?*

The door breaks open with a bang before I've barely shimmied halfway up the grimy wall, my feet planted either side of me while bricks dig into my back.

Only an Elite with extraordinary strength would be able to smash through my barricaded and bolted door so quickly. The sound of heavy boots has me figuring that five Imperials have just filed into my home.

‘Don’t just stand there. Search the place and convince me that you’re useful.’

A shiver runs down my spine at the sound of that cool voice, the one I’ve heard sound like both a caress and a command. I stiffen, slipping slightly down the sooty wall.

*He’s here.*

The voice that follows is gravelly, belonging to an Imperial. ‘You heard the Enforcer. Get a move on.’

*The Enforcer.*

I bite my tongue, whether to keep myself from letting out a bitter laugh or a scream, I’m not sure. My blood boils at the title, reminding me of everything he’s done, every bit of evil he’s committed in the shadow of the king. First for his father, and now for his brother – thanks to me ridding him of the former.

Except he’s not thanking me. No, he’s come to kill me instead.

*‘Maybe when I rid myself of you, I’ll find my courage. So I’m giving you a head start.’*

A lot of good his head start has done me.

I can’t risk being heard scrambling up the chimney, so I wait, listening to heavy footsteps stomping through the house in search of me. My legs are beginning to shake, straining to hold me up while my every wound has me wincing in pain.

‘Check the bookcases in the study. There should be a secret passage behind one,’ the Enforcer commands dryly, sounding *bored*.

Once again, I find myself stiffening. A Resistance member must

have confessed that little secret after he tortured it out of them. My pulse quickens at the thought of the fight after the final Trial in the Bowl when Ordinaries, Fatales, and Imperials clashed in a bloody battle.

A bloody battle that I still don’t know the outcome of.

The steps of the Imperials grow distant, the sounds of their search softening as they head down the stairs and into the room beneath.

Quiet.

And yet, I know he’s still in this room. Only a feeble amount of feet separate us. I can practically feel his presence, just as I’ve felt the heat of his body against mine, the heat of his gray gaze as it swept over me.

A floorboard creaks. He’s close. I’m shaking with anger, revenge coursing through my blood and desperately wishing to spill his. It’s a good thing I can’t see his face because if I were to catch sight of one of his stupid dimples right now, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from trying to claw it from his face.

But I steady my breathing instead, knowing that if I fight him now, my fury won’t be enough to beat him. And I intend to win when I finally face the Enforcer.

‘I imagine you pictured my face when you threw that knife.’ His voice is quiet, considering, sounding far more like the boy I knew. Memories of him flood my mind, managing to make my heart race. ‘Isn’t that right, Paedyn?’ And there it is. The edge is back in the Enforcer’s voice, erasing Kai and leaving a commander.

My heart hammers against my rib cage.

*He can’t know I’m here. How could he possibly—?*

The sound of a blade ripping from splintered wood tells me he yanked my knife out of the wall. I hear a familiar flicking noise and can practically picture him mindlessly flipping the weapon in his hand.

'Tell me, darling, do you think of me often?' His voice is a murmur as if his lips were pressed against my ear. I shiver, knowing exactly what that feels like.

*If he knows I'm here then why hasn't he—?*

'Do I haunt your dreams, plague your thoughts, like you do mine?' My breath hitches.

*So he doesn't know I'm here, not for certain.*

His admission told me as much.

As an Ordinary who was trained and tailored into a *Psychic*, my father taught me to read people, to gather information and observations in a matter of seconds.

And I've had far more than a matter of seconds to read Kai Azer.

I've seen through his many masks and facades, glimpsing the boy beneath and growing to know him, care for him. And with all the betrayal now between us, I know he wouldn't declare dreaming of me if he knew I was drinking in every word.

I hear the humor in his voice as he sighs. 'Where are you, Little Psychic?'

His nickname is laughable, seeing that he and the rest of the kingdom now know I'm anything but. Anything but Elite.

*Nothing but Ordinary.*

Soot stings my nose and I have to clamp my hand over it to hold in a sneeze, reminding me of my many nights thieving from the stores lining Loot before escaping through cramped chimneys.

*Cramped. Trapped. Suffocating.*

My eyes dart across the bricks surrounding me in the darkness. The space is so small, so stuffy, so very easily making me panic.

*Calm down.*

Claustrophobia chooses the worst times to claw to the surface and remind me of my helplessness.

*Breathe.*

I do. Deeply. The hand still clamped over my nose smells faintly of metal – sharp and strong and stinging my nose.

*Blood.*

I pull the shaky hand away from my face, and though I can't see the crimson staining my fingers, I can practically feel it clinging to me. There's still blood crusted under my cracked nails, and I don't know whether it's mine, the king's, or . . .

I suck in a breath, trying to pull myself together. The Enforcer looms far too close to me, pacing the floor, wood groaning beneath him with each step.

*Getting caught because I started sobbing would be equally as embarrassing as getting caught for sneezing.*

And I refuse to do either.

At some point, the Imperials stomp back into the room beneath me. 'No sign of her, Your Highness.'

There's a long pause before *his highness* sighs. 'Just as I thought. You're all useless.' His next words are sharper than the blade he flips casually in his hand. 'Get out.'

The Imperials don't waste a single second before scrambling towards the door and away from him. I don't blame them.

But he's still here, leaving nothing but silence to stretch between us. I have a hand clamped over my nose again, and the smell of blood combined with the cramped chimney has my head spinning.

Memories flood my mind – my body caked in blood, my screams as I tried to scrub it away, only managing to stain my skin a sickening red. The sight and smell of so much blood made me sick, made me think of my father bleeding out in my arms, of Adena doing the same.

*Adena.*

Tears prick my eyes again, forcing me to blink away the image of

her lifeless body in the sandy Pit. The metallic stench of blood fills my nose, and I can't stand to smell it, to look at it, to feel it—

*Breathe.*

A heavy sigh cuts through my thoughts. He sounds as tired as I feel. 'It's a good thing you're not here,' he says softly, a tone I never thought I'd hear from him again. 'Because I still haven't found my courage.'

And then my home bursts into flames.



## CHAPTER 2

# Rai

**F**lames lick at my heels as I leisurely make my way to the door. Waves of heat crash into my back; wisps of smoke cling to my clothing. I step outside into the cloudy afternoon, now further polluted by the billowing clouds of smoke wafting into the sky.

My lips twitch at the look of shock on my Imperials' faces, accompanied by the unhinged jaws they fight to clamp shut as flames consume the house behind me. Their gazes slowly flick to me, managing to reach as high as my collar before they're shifting uncomfortably on their feet.

They still when I stride towards them with ease.

*They think I've gone mad.*

Glass shatters when a window bursts behind me, sending shards of sharp edges scattering the street. The Imperials flinch, covering their faces. The sight makes me smile.

Maybe they're right. Maybe I have gone mad.

Mad with worry, with rage, with betrayal.

The tension continuously coiling through my body seems to be the

