

CHAPTER ONE

The Outlaw

When I was a boy, summer nights in the Wilds always smelled like adventure. Fresh pine boughs. The cloying sweetness of honeysuckle. Someone always had a bonfire going, with plenty of sour ale to pass around. The air was full of lively conversation, or bawdy drinking songs, or men swearing as they lost their last coins on a bet.

Now, summer nights carry the underlying scent of rotting corpses. Most of the fires that burn are funeral pyres. Singing is rare.

Drinking is still common. Maybe more so.

Extra Moonflower petals have been promised, but they've been slow in coming. No one here trusts anyone in the palace. Few people trust the consuls. Even the rebels who are supposedly negotiating for better access to medicine have become suspect.

The rumors—and there are *many*—are outrageous.

When I'm here in the Wilds, I keep my head down and do what I can.

The winding paths through the woods are empty at this time of night, but I cling to the darkness like a ghost. I don't want to run afoul of the night patrol. The pouch at my belt is heavy with my own copper coins, but I have a red mask over my eyes, a hat pulled low over my forehead. In this getup, at this hour, I'd be detained. Worse, I'd be locked in the Hold to await an interrogation. That's the last thing I need.

I step off the trail and slip a few coins from my pouch. The first house is smaller than most, likely only one room inside, but there's a chicken coop

and a rabbit hatch out back. I've never seen who lives here, but the animals seem well cared for. I intend to leave a few coppers on the barrel of grain, but then I see a small bundle wrapped up in muslin, next to a misspelled message written in the dust.

Thenk you.

I unwrap the muslin to discover a soft pair of biscuits that smell of cheese and garlic.

It's not the first gift I've found, but each time I do, it makes something in my stomach clench. I want to leave it, because I don't need gifts. I don't do this for payment.

But this gift meant something to the person who left it. I don't want to be rude.

I wrap the biscuits back up in the muslin and tuck the bundle into my pack. After I leave a few coins on the barrel, I move on.

The next house has several children, including a new baby. Sometimes I hear it squalling in the middle of the night, and I step lightly so as not to be noticed. I slip coins into the pockets of clothes left to dry on a line. At the next house, I leave the coins on the doorstep. At the next, the coins go onto the windowsill.

At the fifth house, I'm leaving coins beside an ax blade that's been left embedded in a stump, when a figure leaps out of the shadows.

“Aha!” a whispered voice says. “I caught you.”

I startle so hard that the coins scatter into the grass. I grab the ax handle and whirl.

I don't know what I'll do if it's the night patrol. An ax won't do much against a crossbow. They aren't supposed to shoot on sight, but I've heard stories of their violence from enough rebels and outlaws to know that what they're *supposed* to do is not always the end result.

Regardless, I stand my ground, the ax ready.

The figure springs back, hands raised. “Whoa!”

It's not the night patrol. It's ... it's a girl. She's tall, nearly as tall as I am, which makes me think she's older, but her features still have the

softness of childhood, and her limbs are lean and willowy. She's in a pale sleeping shift that leaves her arms bare, the hem trailing in the grass. Her blond hair is in a messy braid that reaches past her waist.

"I don't want trouble," I say to her.

"You have an ax." Her voice is low, but she doesn't sound afraid. "You won't be getting any from me."

I ease my grip on the handle and let the ax head hang to the ground. "Then return to where you came from, and I'll be on my way."

Now that I don't have a "weapon," she lowers her hands, but she doesn't turn away. Her eyes narrow as she peers at me, then glances into the darkness at my back. "You're alone."

"I am."

"When coins started showing up, my cousin thought Weston and Tessa were making rounds again. You're not Wes, are you?"

"No." I stare into the shadows, wondering if anyone else is hiding among the trees. My heart hasn't stopped pounding since she appeared out of nowhere.

"Well," she continues in her quiet voice, "rumor says Weston Lark was really the king's brother, anyway. Prince Corrick."

"I've heard those stories."

"One of the rebels caught him," she continues. "In Artis, I think. He was dressed as an outlaw. Mask and all. The king's army had to rescue him."

Rumors about *that* are everywhere. I glance at the sky, which hasn't begun to lighten, but it won't be long. It'll be dawn soon, and I need to get back. I hesitate, considering, then swing the ax into the stump. The noise echoes in the woods, and I wince. The girl's eyes flare, and she inhales sharply, but I drop a few coins on the stump, then turn away to walk.

My shoulders are tight, and I brace for her to send up an alarm—but I forget that people in the Wilds tend to look out for each other. Instead, she jogs through the grass to walk at my side.

"If you're not Weston Lark," she says, "what's your name?"

"It doesn't matter."

“Your mask is red, anyway,” she chatters on, heedless. I was thinking she might be fourteen or fifteen, but now I’m thinking she’s even younger. “The red makes you look like a fox. I heard Weston’s mask was black.”

“Go home.”

It doesn’t work. “Some people think your coins are a trap,” she says, striding along beside me. “My uncle calls you—”

“A *trap!*!” I swing around to study her. “How could coins left in the middle of the night be a trap?”

“Well, some of the rumors said that Prince Corrick was *pretending* to be Weston Lark so he could trick people into revealing the smugglers.” Her eyes are wide and guileless. “So he could execute them.”

I snort and keep walking. “That feels like a lot of effort for a man who can execute anyone he likes.”

“So you don’t think that’s true?”

“I have a hard time imagining the brother to the king was secretly dressing as an *outlaw* to catch smugglers.”

“Well, he’s called Cruel Corrick for a reason. Or do you think the king is the vicious—*ouch!*” She stumbles, then grabs my arm for balance, hopping on one foot.

She’s making so much noise that I have half a mind to jerk free and leave her here. But I’m not heartless. I swallow a sigh and look down.

She’s barefoot, holding one foot high off the ground. A streak of blood glistens along the pale stretch of her heel, black in the moonlight.

“Is it bad?” she’s saying, and there’s a hint of a tremor in her voice.

“I can’t tell. Sit.”

She sits, folding her leg over her opposite knee. Blood drips into the grass below. Something gleams in the wound, either a sharp rock or a bit of steel.

She grimaces. “Ma will kill me.”

“You made so much noise, the night patrol might beat her to it.” I drop my pack in the grass, then crouch to study her injury. “You should’ve gone home.”

“I wanted to know who you are. My cousin won’t believe I caught you.”

“You didn’t *catch* me. Hold still.” I pull the muslin-wrapped biscuits out of my pack and unwind the fabric. I hold out the food to her. “Here.”

She frowns, but takes it. I move to pull the debris free, but then think better of it. I give her a level look. “This might hurt. You need to stay quiet.”

She clenches her teeth and nods fiercely.

I close my fingers on the offending item and tug it free. She squeals and nearly yanks her ankle out of my grasp, but I keep a tight grip and give her a warning glare. She sucks in a breath and goes still.

Blood is flowing freely down her foot now, but I put a fold of muslin against the wound, then swiftly wrap up her foot, tearing the ends so I can knot it in place.

She blinks tears out of her eyes, but none fall. “What was it? A rock?”

I shake my head. “An arrowhead.”

“From the night patrol?”

I shrug. “From someone wearing shoes, most likely.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“You’ll have to flush that when you get home,” I say. I straighten, then sling the pack over my shoulder. I’ll have to find a new route after this. I don’t need people sitting in the dark, waiting for me—not even a girl who’s barely more than a child. “Be safe,” I say. “I have to go.”

She scrambles to her feet, limping on her injured one. “But I still don’t know your name!”

“Call me whatever you want,” I say. “I won’t come this way again.”

“No!” she calls. “Wait. Please. This is my fault—you don’t—” Her voice breaks like she’s going to cry. “You don’t know how much we all need—”

I turn back and slap a hand over her mouth. “Do you truly *want* to draw the night patrol?”

She shakes her head quickly, mollified. “But your food,” she murmurs behind my hand, holding out the biscuits I’d given her.

You don’t know how much we all need ...

I do know how much they all need. The outlaws Wes and Tessa once provided a lot to these people. I’ve heard so many stories that it makes my

head spin. I can't make up for their disappearance with a few coins left here and there. I'm not entirely sure why I keep trying.

"Keep the food." I drop my hand, then fish in my pouch for more coins.
"And keep your silence." I hold them out.

She looks at the coins in my palm, then nods quickly and swipes them.

An alarm bell begins ringing in the Royal Sector, and she jumps. I sigh.
"Go home."

"You'll come back?" she says.

I give her a stern look. "As long as no one is waiting in the shadows next time."

She beams, and it lights up her face. "I promise."

"What's *your* name?" I say.

"Violet."

"Take care of that foot, Violet."

She nods. "Thank you, Fox."

That makes me smile. I touch the brim of my hat to her, then sprint into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

Tessa

There are five men at this table, and most of them want to kill each other. It's making negotiations difficult.

There's another young woman, too, but I don't think either of us are having murderous thoughts. Karri looks overwhelmed by the fact that she's inside the palace. Her brown eyes are wide, and her slender fingers keep fidgeting with the seam of her skirts. A month ago, we would've been whispering about this whole situation, sharing our worries and trying to help each other cope with all that's happened. But now she's in love with one of the leaders of the rebel faction, while I'm involved with the king's brother. That's built a barrier between us that tugs at my heart—but I don't know how to tear it down. Right now, it seems thicker than the wall surrounding the Royal Sector.

Quint probably doesn't want to kill anyone either. The Palace Master is sitting at the opposite end, ostensibly here to keep a record of everything said. His jacket is only half buttoned, a loose lock of red hair drifting across his forehead. He's scratching notes in a leather-bound folio with a fountain pen.

Lochlan, the rebel leader, is seated to my left, and he casts a glare at Quint every few moments. If he had his way, he'd probably kill *everyone*. He already tried once.

"What is he writing?" Lochlan says. "What are you *doing*?"

Quint finishes whatever he was writing, then looks up. “I am here to document your demands,” he says equably. “And the resulting response.”

“I haven’t made any demands yet,” Lochlan growls.

Quint isn’t easily cowed. I’ve seen him maintain composure while pieces of the Royal Sector were literally burning to the ground, so a little aggression barely registers. He’s also one of the most considerate men I’ve ever met, and he has a bizarre talent for making people feel at ease during the prickliest of situations.

Quint sets down his pen and turns the paper around so it’s more easily visible. “Just now, I was recording the names of those in attendance,” he says plainly, without a lick of condescension, “along with the date and location of our meeting. I would gladly have a copy made for you to review, if you would like.”

Lochlan glances at the paper, then back up at Quint. His jaw is tight.

“He’s just taking notes,” Karri says softly, with an apologetic glance at me. She rests a hand on Lochlan’s forearm, but he doesn’t relax.

Across from Karri is Allisander Sallister, the consul of Moonlight Plains. He should be in prison—or more likely, swinging from the end of a rope—yet he maneuvered his way out of a death sentence when he claimed that no one could handle the harvesting and distribution of Moonflower petals with as much efficiency as the truce with the rebels demanded. The worst part is that he’s probably right. It’s the only reason he’s sitting here. Eight weeks isn’t a lot of time to dispense medicine. It’s already taken *two* just to get everyone into the same room.

Allisander’s expression is a combination of boredom and arrogance. He sighs and pulls a gold pocket watch from under the table to glance at it.

“Do you have somewhere to be, Consul?” says Corrick, seated at one end of the table, directly to my right. His voice is cold, his blue eyes like ice. This is the Prince Corrick I once feared. The one many people in Kandala *still* fear.

He’d light Consul Sallister on fire right this very instant if he could.

The consul glances up. “Many places I’d *rather* be. Surely you could have waited to summon me until the ignorants were fully instructed as to the typical arrangement of a meeting.”

Lochlan's chair scrapes back as he begins to rise. "Are you insulting me, you spoiled—"

"You have to ask?" Consul Sallister strokes his goatee. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

"Enough," says King Harristan, and I can't tell if he's talking to Consul Sallister, to Lochlan, or to the guards who've moved away from the door to prevent any trouble. But the king's voice is low, coolly placid. A level command spoken by a man who's used to immediate obedience. His eyes, a darker blue than his brother's, shift to me. "Tessa, you should begin."

"Right," I say. "Of course." I smooth my hands over my skirts to calm my nerves, but the slippery silk does nothing to quell my anxiety. I'm probably leaving handprints on the material.

I wish I were back in the infirmary, calculating dosages with the palace physicians. Weights and measures and vials don't care about diplomacy.

Really, though, if I could wish for anything, I'd wish to be back in the Wilds, sneaking through the darkness with Wes. Picking locks and stealing medicine might have been dangerous—and illegal—but I always felt like I was making a difference.

Here in the palace, trying to convince everyone to work together, I feel like I'm just making a mess. King Harristan and Prince Corrick have been seen as callous and cruel for so long that it's going to be tough to get anyone at this table to agree.

Allisander sighs and peers at his pocket watch again. Harristan clears his throat.

Corrick doesn't glance at me, but he picks up his pen and scratches a few words at the base of his own folio, then casually sets the pen down. The motion draws my eye to the words.

Mind your mettle.

I almost flush. He used to say that to me when we were outlaws: times when we were in danger, or when the sickness was too much to bear. It always helped.

It helps now.

I nod slightly, then look around the table. “Consul Sallister has promised medicine for eight weeks, but beyond that—”

“It should have been two,” the consul says.

“It was eight,” says Harristan.

“It should have been *two*. I told Corrick that eight was impossible when he made this ridiculous guarantee. Before any of this happened, I said that the spring rains had caused a supply issue—”

“You said there *could be* a supply issue,” Corrick says.

“And there is,” Allisander says. “If you aren’t making payment for eight weeks of medicine, I don’t have the guaranteed revenue to pay my workers, so you can’t blame them for walking off the fields.”

“So there … won’t be eight weeks of medicine?” Karri says.

“There will be,” says the king, and his voice has a note of finality. “Consul Sallister made the promise as witnessed and recorded. If you’ve stopped paying your laborers, Consul, you can work the fields yourself. Tessa, continue.”

I take a deep breath. “I have been sharing my findings with the palace physicians, and we feel that combining Moonflower with roseseed oil to create a longer-lasting elixir may allow the medicine to have a greater effect in a smaller quantity.”

“Or more people could die,” Consul Sallister says. He sounds like he wouldn’t mind.

“Perhaps you could wait in the Hold,” Corrick says icily. “I’m certain Quint would be happy to provide a copy of the meeting notes to you as well.”

“Tessa,” Harristan says evenly, as if neither of them have said a word. “Continue.”

“If we were to adjust the dosage this way, the eight weeks of medicine could stretch to *twelve* weeks—”

“Is he right?” says Lochlan. “Would more people die?”

“I don’t think so,” I say honestly. “When I was delivering medicine in the Wilds, we provided a similar dosage, and we saw it work.”

Lochlan is looking at me intently. “So you say.”

I don't flinch from his gaze. "You saw it yourself! You know the people trusted us."

"The people trusted *you*." He turns his glare on Corrick. "No one trusts the King's Justice when he's not wearing a mask."

I expect Corrick to snap back, the way he did to Allisander, but he holds Lochlan's gaze. "My goal is to change that." He pauses. "In this, you don't need to trust me. I don't claim to be an apothecary. Tessa is right. I saw her medicine work."

Lochlan doesn't move. It's clear that he doesn't trust anyone.

Quint's pen keeps scratching across the paper, loud in the silence of the room. I wonder if he's only writing down what's said, or if it's more. Quint notices everything. I imagine he's recording every glance, every shift in weight.

"I trust Tessa," Karri says softly.

Lochlan glances at her. In that moment, something in his gaze gentles. After he incited a mob that nearly killed Corrick, and later, led a murderous rebellion into the Royal Sector, I have a hard time finding anything about him likable. But every time he looks at Karri like that, it tugs at my heart and reminds me that he *does* care. Not just about her. About everyone.

So do I.

"So this buys you more time," Lochlan finally says. "Then what? What happens at twelve weeks?"

"If we can prove to others that a lower dose works in the Wilds," I say, "then we can encourage more people among the sectors to use a lower dose. It allows for more medicine to be spread among more people."

"So you're testing your medicine on people too poor to know better," says Lochlan.

"No! I wouldn't classify it that way—"

"Yes," says Allisander.

"We're testing it on him, too," says Corrick. "He just doesn't know it yet."

The consul inhales sharply, his eyes like thunder.

"What?" says Corrick. "Did you think we were tricking the populace while taking a full dose here in the palace?"

“This is absurd!” Consul Sallister cries. “You—you are purchasing full dose allotments and then—”

“Making it last longer,” says King Harristan.

Karri smiles. She looks at Lochlan. “See?” she says brightly. “I trust Tessa.”

I give her a grateful smile back.

Lochlan doesn’t smile. “I don’t trust any of them.” He pauses. “I can’t take this back to the others. They won’t trust this either. Give *us* the full dosage. Test your medicine here.”

“Trust must go both ways,” says Harristan.

“You still haven’t said what will happen at the end of the twelve weeks,” says Lochlan.

“We are hopeful that the people will see that a lower dosage will allow us to keep more people healthy, and they will be willing to—”

Lochlan snorts. “Don’t you see?” He’s glaring at me. “Half the people in this sector are sitting on Moonflower petals that they’ve been hoarding for months. And you’re *hopeful* they’ll use less in a matter of weeks? Because you say it works on people in the Wilds?” He turns that glare on Allisander. “*You* don’t seem very hopeful.”

“I don’t really care what happens to people in the Wilds,” says Allisander. “If you want more medicine than what I’m being forced to provide, buy it.” He glances at the rebel’s left arm, still splinted and bandaged from the day Corrick broke it in the prison. “Ah. I suppose you can’t work in the forges now, can you? So you need to beg? Under this pretense of *helping*—”

Lochlan lunges across the table.

Or he tries to. Two of the guards grab him before he can get a hand on the consul, but not before he knocks over two glasses that send water streaming along the polished wood of the table. Allisander lifts an aggrieved eyebrow and shoves his chair back a few inches, but otherwise makes no effort to stop the mess. An attendant moves away from the wall with a cloth ready.

The guards are wrestling Lochlan back, and he swears. They must twist his injured arm because his voice cuts off with a gasp, and a bloom of sweat

breaks out on his forehead.

“Do something,” I whisper to Corrick.

His blue eyes meet mine. “Hang them both?”

“*Corrick*,” I breathe. I’m not entirely sure he’s teasing.

“They’re both at fault here,” he says pointedly, for all at the table to hear. “We’ll never make any headway if the two of you are content to attack each other.”

“Fine,” Lochlan grinds out. “Let me go.”

Karri has risen from her seat, and she glances between Lochlan and me. The guards look to the king.

“Release him,” says Harristan. He looks at Allisander. “You will keep your silence, Consul. If you cannot speak in good faith, then you will not speak at all.”

“I am speaking in good faith, Your Majesty.” Allisander’s words are full of contempt. “You can ban me from your meetings and lower my dosages and make all the arrangements you like, but on *this* point, the brute and I agree. The sectors will not accept a hypothesis you’ve tested on those who have nothing to lose. Those who would be motivated to *lie* if it’s a means to more handouts. It is not only the rebels whose trust you need to earn.”

Corrick and Harristan exchange a glance. Quint never stops writing.

“The people won’t *lie*,” says Karri, and there’s heat in her voice.

Allisander turns his disdainful glare her way. “You people were willing to burn down the entire sector. I doubt *lying* is beyond anyone’s capabilities.”

As much as I hate Consul Sallister, he’s not entirely wrong. This isn’t just about getting the rebels to trust Harristan and Corrick and … well, me. *Everyone* needs to.

Lochlan jerks his clothes straight and drops into a chair. “No one is lying. We *also* came here in good faith, remember?”

“Because you narrowly escaped an execution?” Allisander sniffs.

“So did you,” Lochlan snaps.

“Enough,” says Harristan, and there’s a pulse of anger in his voice. He takes a thin breath, then clears his throat. Twice.

I watch Corrick's attention zero in on his brother. The king has been hiding a cough for months. At first, I thought it was because he truly needed more medicine than everyone else due to a lingering illness from his childhood. Allisander admitted to cheating the palace of pure Moonflower petals, but that problem was solved weeks ago. His cough should be gone.

It's not.

Quint's pen stops. He looks up, assesses the situation quicker than a heartbeat, and says, "Finn, I believe everyone could do with some refreshments."

A footman moves away from the wall, and the king's cough is covered by the sudden rattle of china and silver.

Corrick is still staring at his brother. A flicker of worry crosses his expression, almost too quick to notice.

I pick up my own pen, then reach over and circle the words he wrote earlier.

Mind your mettle.

It draws his gaze to mine, and he offers a small nod, but the worry in his eyes doesn't vanish. I wish I could rest a hand over his or whisper a reassurance, but neither would be welcome. Everything is so uncertain. I don't want to weaken him.

Finn is setting a cup of tea before each person at the table, along with a small plate featuring a delicate pastry that's been drizzled with chocolate, a wedge of apple beside a tiny pot of honey, and a thinly sliced strawberry that's been dusted with pink sugar.

Karri is staring at the plate, her eyes wide. I remember doing the same thing.

Lochlan is glaring at the food.

Allisander looks bored.

The king has taken a sip of his tea, and it seems to have staved off his cough. I wish he wouldn't hide it. He doesn't want to be seen as weak, I'm sure, but I believe the opposite would be true: it would endear him to the people to see that he's just as vulnerable as they are.

Then again, I understand why he doesn't want that. Harristan and Corrick's parents were assassinated right in front of them, so I can appreciate their worries.

Mine were too.

Karri looks like she's afraid to touch the food, so I give her a smile, then pick up my apple wedge and dip it in the honey. "The apples are the best," I say to her.

She smiles back, then picks up her own piece of fruit.

Lochlan hesitates, but maybe the lure of the decadent food is too much, because he does the same. It's not a concession, but it feels like one.

Out in the hallway, voices echo, but the doors are closed, and we can't make out the words. Even still, it's unusual for anyone's voice to be raised when they near a room where the king is residing. Aside from the guards in here, half a dozen more are on the other side of that door. Maybe more.

Harristan glances down the table at Corrick, who looks to one of the guards, and then to Quint: a bizarre silent communication that always seems to speak volumes in the space of time between heartbeats.

Quint sets his pen to the side and rises from the table. "I will return in a moment." One of the guards joins him by the door.

Karri looks at me. "What's happening?" she whispers.

I don't want to be alarmed, but my heart is kicking in my chest. I was here when the rebels bombed the palace the first time. "I ... I don't ..."

Corrick rests a hand over mine. "A palace matter," he says smoothly. "Nothing concerning."

Despite his words, I can feel the tension in his hand.

No one is eating now. Even Consul Sallister looks apprehensive.

Luckily, Quint returns in less than a minute. He leans down to say something softly to the king. Harristan is too well schooled in court politics, so his expression reveals nothing. But his eyes find Corrick's again.

"It seems we may need to postpone our meeting," Quint says evenly. "A matter has arisen requiring the king's attention."

"What matter?" demands Lochlan.

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to say—"

“It took two weeks to arrange this meeting. I won’t be tricked into waiting longer.” He glances around the table. “Especially since I’m pretty sure everyone else in this room will hear what’s so important.”

Quint inhales sharply, but Harristan lifts a hand. “You’re right. Not just everyone in this room. If the ship docked hours ago, rumors have likely already reached the Royal Sector.”

“Ship?” says Corrick. “What ship?”

“An emissary,” says Harristan, “has just arrived from Ostriary.”

I jerk my head around to look at Corrick. Ostriary is the country directly to Kandala’s west, sitting on the other side of a wide, dangerous river. Due to the difficulty of travel and the severity of the fevers, there’s never been any kind of trade agreement between countries. Weeks ago, I asked Corrick if there were a chance that Ostriary could provide medicine, and he said it would be nearly impossible to find out. At the very least, it would be expensive to even *try*.

He glances at me briefly, and I know he’s remembering our conversation. “Ostriary sent an emissary?”

“Not quite,” says Quint.

“*They* didn’t send an emissary.” Harristan runs a hand across the back of his neck, the first sign of strain from him. “Apparently, six years ago, we did.”