

"Lynette Noni is a masterful storyteller. A must-read for any fantasy lover!"
—SARAH J. MAAS, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author

THE PRISON HEALER



LYNETTE NONI

THE PRISON HEALER



By Lynette Noni

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
BOSTON NEW YORK

Contents

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Contents*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*The Kingdoms of Wenderall Map*](#)

[*Zalindov Prison Map*](#)

[*Prologue*](#)

[*Chapter One*](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Escape to Another World](#)

[Must-Read Sci-Fi and Fantasy Books](#)

[Read the Bloodleaf Series](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with HMH on Social Media](#)

Copyright © 2021 by Lynette Noni

All rights reserved. For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to trade.permissions@hnhco.com or to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 3 Park Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, New York 10016.

hnhbooks.com

Map art © 2021 by Francesca Baerald

Cover illustration, design, and lettering by Jim Tierney

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file.

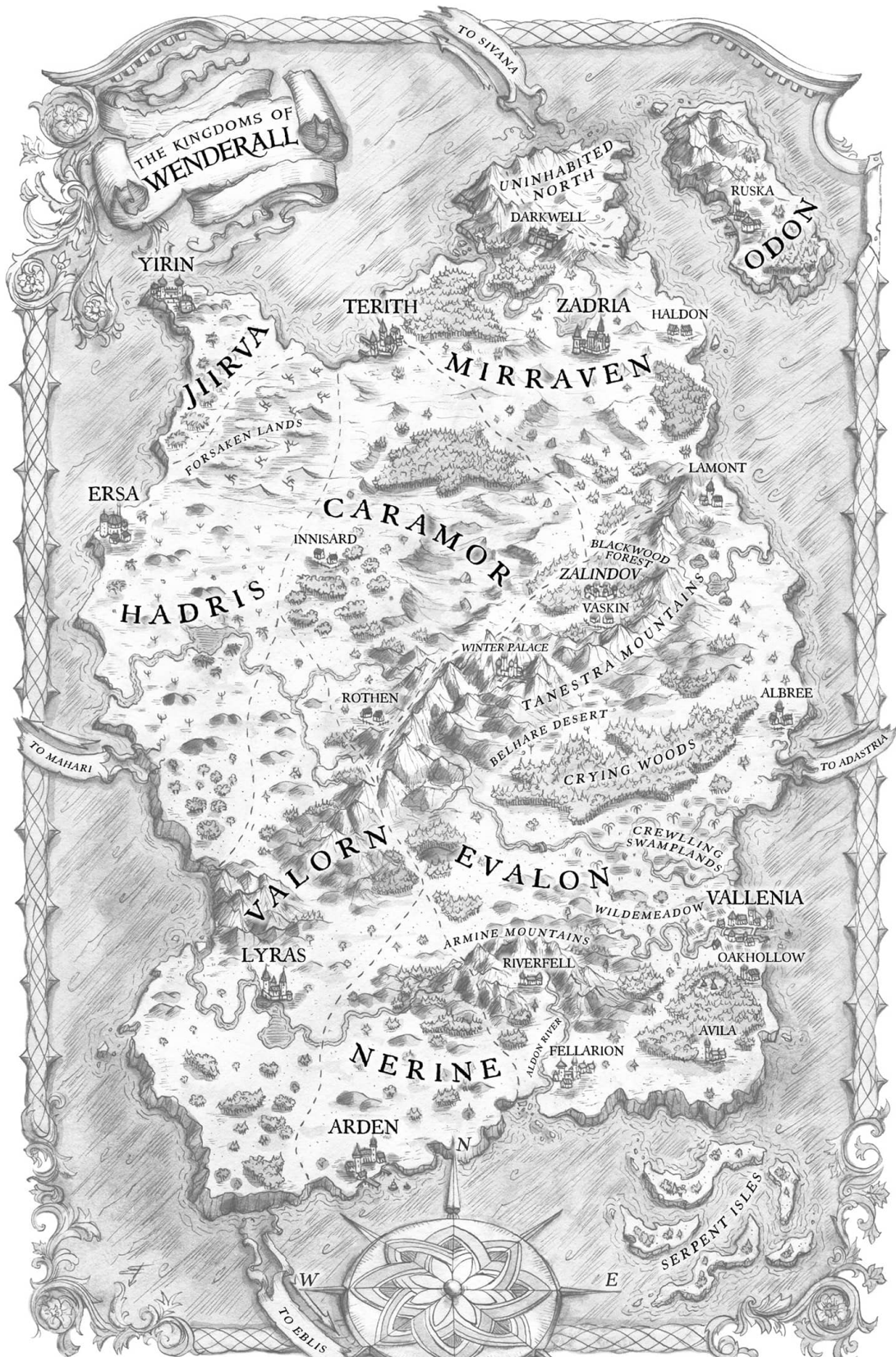
ISBN: 978-0-358-43455-9 hardcover

eISBN 978-0-358-43634-8

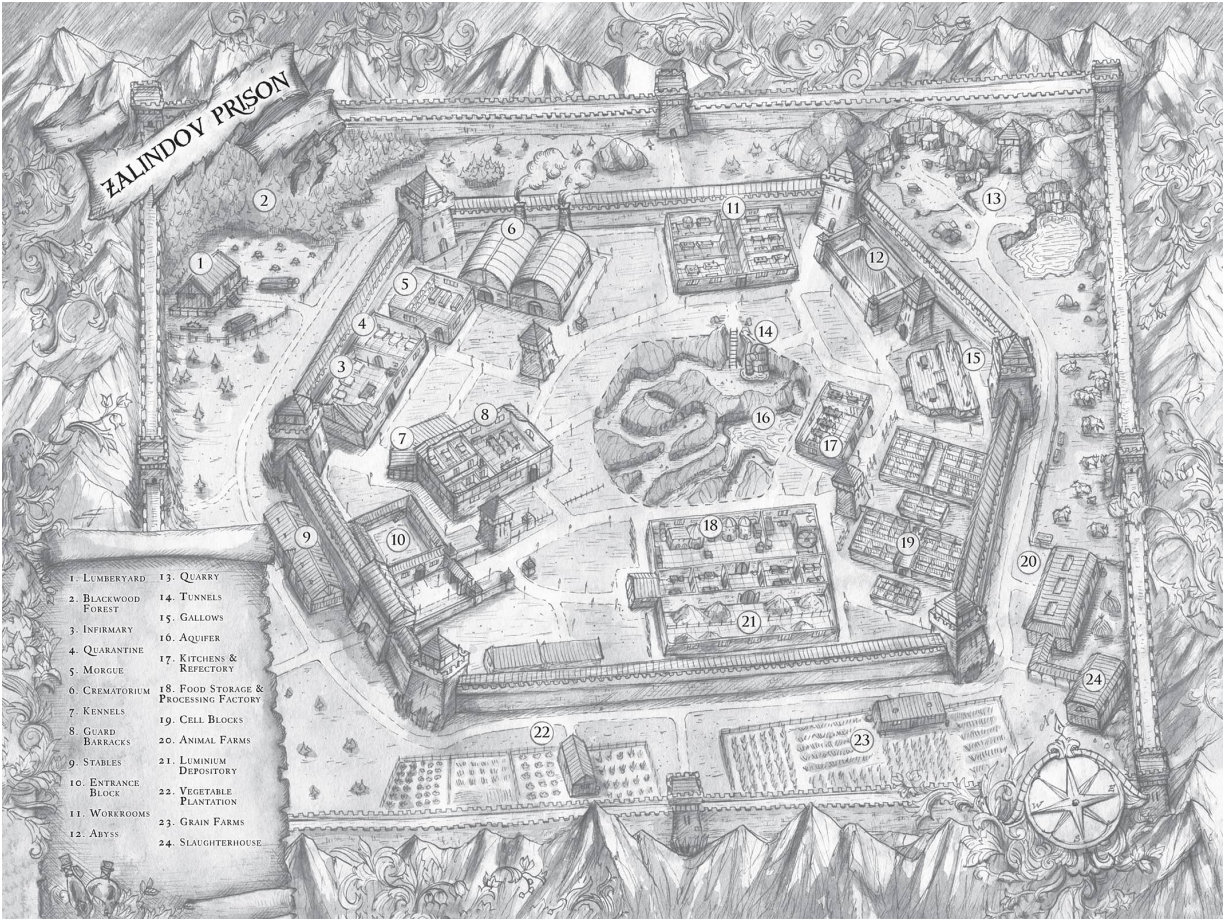
v1.0321

To Sarah J. Maas—

Thank you for being so generous with your friendship, support, and encouragement. But mostly, thank you for believing in me, even—
and especially—when I didn't.







PROLOGUE

Death arrived at twilight.

The little girl was down by the river picking jerriberries with her younger brother, their father crouched at the icy water's edge replenishing his supply of aloeweed. The soothing gel would be needed later, given how many thorns had dug into her flesh. But she could barely feel the pain, thinking instead of the supper that awaited them. Her mother made the best jerribermy jam in all of Wenderall, and since the silver berries were sweetest when picked just as the moon crested the night's sky, she already knew this batch was going to be *delicious*. If only she could stop her brother from stuffing his face with them, then she could finally deliver enough to their mother to reap the benefits of her labor.

The basket was barely half full when the first scream cleaved the quiet night air.

The girl and her brother froze, silver juice smeared around his half-open mouth, concern creasing her brow. Her emerald eyes looked to their father beside the wintry stream, a large bunch of aloeweed in his hands. His gaze wasn't on the mossy plants, but staring up at their small cottage on the hill, his face draining of color.

"Papa, what—"

"Quiet, Kerrin," the man hushed his son, dropping the aloeweed and hurrying toward them. "It's probably just Zuleeka and Torell playing around, but we should go check that—"

Whatever he'd intended to say about their older sister and brother was stolen by another scream and a crashing sound that echoed all the way down to where they stood.

“Papa—” The little girl spoke this time, jumping when her father wrenched the basket from her hands, berries flying everywhere, and caught her fingers in his crushing grip. She didn’t get the chance to say more before her mother’s shrill voice bellowed out a warning.

“RUN, FARAN! *RUN!*”

Her father’s grip turned painful, but it was too late for him to follow his wife’s order. Soldiers were pouring from the cottage, their armor glinting silver even in the limited light, their swords raised.

There were at least a dozen of them.

So many.

Too many.

The little girl reached through the scratchy brambles for her brother’s hand, his palm sticky with jerriberry juice, his fingers trembling. There was nowhere to run, trapped as they were with the icy river at their backs, the current too fast and deep for them to risk crossing.

“It’s all right,” their father said shakily as the soldiers neared. “Everything will be all right.”

And then they were surrounded.



TEN YEARS LATER



CHAPTER ONE

Looking down at the boy strapped to the metal table before her, Kiva Meridan leaned in close and whispered, “Take a deep breath.”

Before he could blink, she braced his wrist and stabbed the tip of her white-hot blade into the back of his hand. He screamed and thrashed against her—they always did—but she tightened her grip and continued carving three deep lines into his flesh, forming a Z.

A single character to identify him as a prisoner at Zalindov.

The wound would heal, but the scar would remain forever.

Kiva worked as fast as she could and only eased her grip once the carving was complete. She repressed the urge to tell him that the worst had passed. While barely a teenager, he was still old enough to discern the truth from lies. He belonged to Zalindov now, the metal band around his wrist labeling him as inmate H67L129. There was nothing good in his future—lying would do him no favors.

After smearing ballico sap across his bleeding flesh to stave off infection, then dusting it with pepperroot ash to ease his pain, Kiva wrapped his hand in a scrap of linen. She quietly warned him to keep it dry and clean for the next three days, all too aware that it would be impossible if he was allocated work in the tunnels, on the farms, or in the quarry.

“Hold still, I’m nearly done,” Kiva said, swapping her blade for a pair of shears. They were speckled with rust, but the edges were sharp enough to cut through steel.

The boy was shaking, fear dilating his pupils, his skin pale.

Kiva didn’t offer him any reassurances, not while the armed woman standing at the door to the infirmary watched her every move. Usually she was given a degree of privacy, working without the added pressure of the

guards' cold, keen eyes. But after the riot last week, they were on edge, monitoring everyone closely—even those like Kiva who were considered loyal to the Warden of Zalindov, a traitor to her fellow prisoners. An informant. A spy.

No one loathed Kiva more than she did herself, but she couldn't regret her choices, regardless of the cost.

Ignoring the whimpers now coming from the boy as she moved toward his head, Kiva began to hack at his hair in short, sharp motions. She remembered her own arrival at the prison a decade earlier, the humiliating process of being stripped down, scrubbed, and shorn. She'd left the infirmary with raw skin and no hair, an itchy gray tunic and matching pants her only possessions. Despite all she'd been through at Zalindov, those early hours of degradation were some of the worst she could recall. Thinking about them now had her own scar giving a pang of recollected pain, drawing her eyes to the band she wore beneath it. N18K442—her identification number—was etched into the metal, a constant reminder that she was nothing and no one, that saying or doing the wrong thing, even looking at the wrong person at the wrong time, could mean her death.

Zalindov showed no mercy, not even to the innocent.

Especially not to the innocent.

Kiva had been barely seven years old when she'd first arrived, but her age hadn't protected her from the brutality of prison life. She more than anyone knew that her breaths were numbered. No one survived Zalindov. It was only a matter of time before she joined the multitudes who had gone before her.

She was lucky, she knew, compared to many. Those assigned to the hard labor rarely lasted six months. A year, at most. But she'd never had to suffer through such debilitating work. In the early weeks after her arrival, Kiva had been allocated a job in the entrance block, where she'd sorted through the clothes and possessions taken from new inmates. Later, when a different position had needed filling—due to a lethal outbreak that took hundreds of lives—she was sent to the workrooms and tasked with cleaning and repairing the guards' uniforms. Her fingers had bled and blistered from the unending