

A PRISON HEALER NOVEL

THE GILDED CAGE



LYNETTE NONI

About the Book

“You need to choose, Kiva. It’s him or us. Them or us. You can’t have it both ways.”

Kiva Meridan is a survivor.

Not only did she survive Zalindov Prison, but also the deadly Trial by Ordeal. Now, Kiva’s purpose goes beyond survival to vengeance. For the past ten years, her only goal was to reunite with her family and destroy the people responsible for ruining their lives. But now that she has escaped Zalindov, her mission has become more complicated than ever.

As Kiva settles into her new life in the capital, she discovers she wasn’t the only one who suffered while she was in Zalindov — her siblings and their beliefs have changed, too. Soon it’s not just her enemies she’s keeping secrets from, but her own family as well.

Outside the city walls, tensions are brewing from the rebels, along with whispers of a growing threat from the northern kingdoms. Kiva’s allegiances are more important than ever, but she’s beginning to question where they truly lie. To survive this time, she’ll have to navigate a complicated web of lies before both sides of the battle turn against her and she loses everything.



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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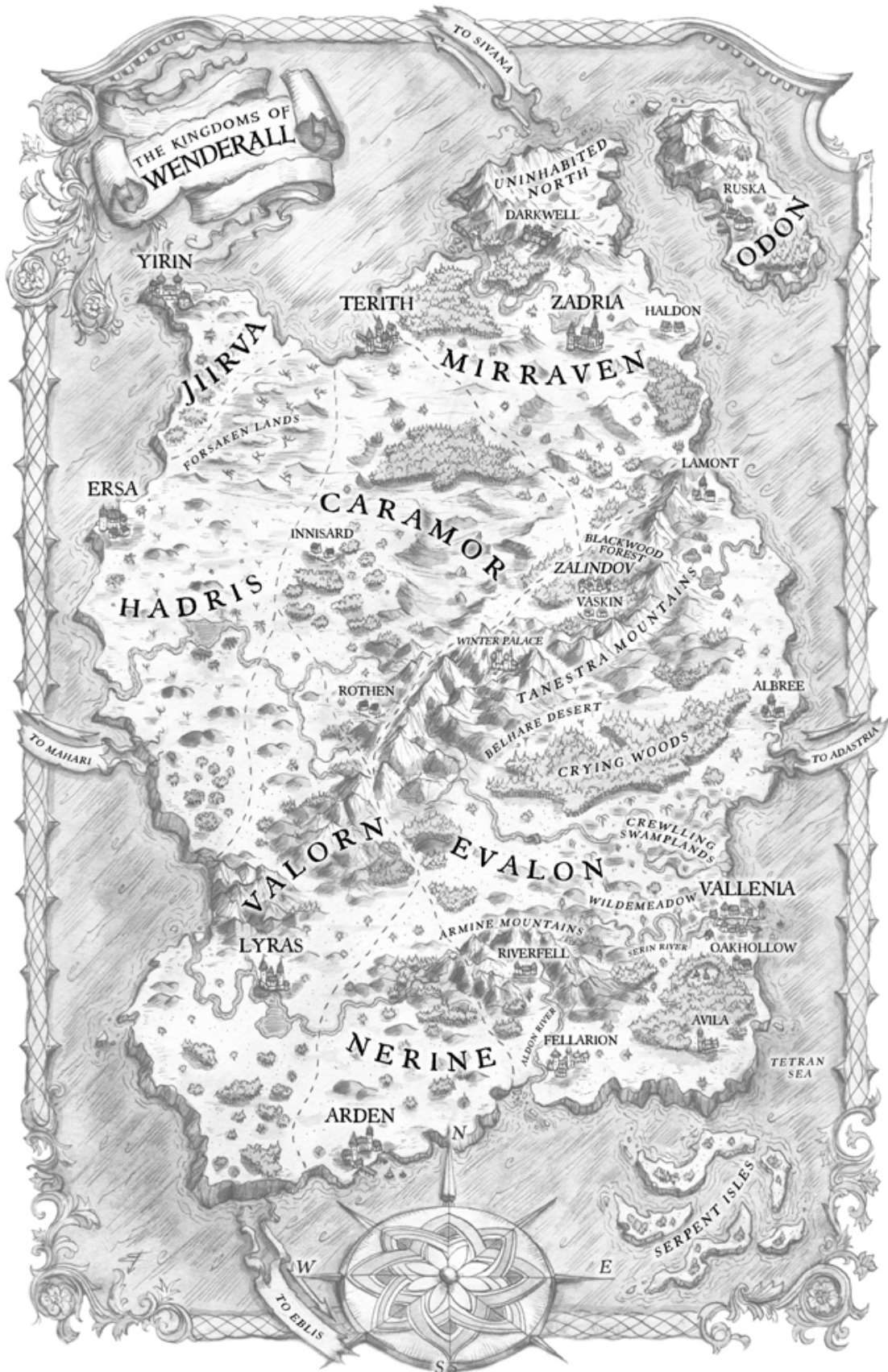
About the Author

Imprint

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To Mum —

For the penguin.



PROLOGUE

Running.

They had to keep running.

The night was dark, the cold so bitter that it pierced straight through to their bones, but still, they couldn't stop. Not when death itself chased their heels.

"Mama, where are we —"

"Quiet, sweetheart," the woman hushed her daughter, looking over her shoulder for any sign of pursuit.

"But what about Papa?" the little boy whispered. "What about —"

"Shhh," the woman cut him off, gripping his hand tighter and hastening his steps.

Neither the little boy nor his older sister uttered another word, both sensing their mother's urgency, both seeing the silent tears that slid down her face, shining in the moonlight.

On they ran, none speaking of who they had left behind and everything they had lost that night.

The woman couldn't bear to close her eyes lest she recall the image of her family's cottage in flames, her husband and youngest daughter being dragged away by the Royal Guard, her youngest son —

A sob left her mouth before she could stifle it.

Her son was dead.

He was *dead*.

The woman clamped down on her tongue to halt another sob, grateful that her two eldest children had heeded her command to stay hidden when she'd crept back to investigate, sparing them from the sight that would forever haunt her nightmares.

A sword piercing his small chest.

Her husband begging for help.

Her daughter screaming, trying to reach him, desperate to save him.

But it was too late.

“Mama, you’re hurting me.”

Her son’s quiet whimper had her easing her grip and whispering an apology. It was all she could manage, too choked by what she was feeling to offer anything more.

Hours passed as they followed the twisting Aldon River, never slowing, always looking back to see if they were being followed. There was no sign of the guards, but the woman didn’t risk stopping until they were deep in the foothills of the Armine Mountains, far from any civilization. A safe house, she had been told. A place where she might find sanctuary, should the worst ever fall upon her and her loved ones.

When the invitation had come from a cloaked stranger in the marketplace, she’d laughed as if it were a joke, claiming to have no idea why her family would ever be in such danger. They were but humble servants of the people, she’d said, her husband the village healer, she herself a devoted wife and mother.

How they had tracked her down, she had no idea. For years she had remained in hiding, after a lifetime of denying whose blood ran in her veins.

Some called it the blood of traitors.

Others, the blood of kings.

Or — in her case — queens.

The woman had done everything she could to ignore the rumors of the growing rebel group searching for descendants of their long-lost monarch. She’d taken a new name and become a new person, wanting nothing more than a quiet life with her beloved family.

Tonight, half of that family had been ripped from her.

Something vital within her had shattered as she’d watched, helpless to do anything.

She never wanted to feel that helpless again.

She would never *allow* herself to feel that helpless again.

And so, as she and her two remaining children approached the safe house — a thatched cottage hidden deep in the snow-dusted woods — the woman made a decision.

Three short raps of her numb fist against the wooden door was all it took before it opened, the cloaked figure from the marketplace illuminated by the luminous beacons shining from within, along with a small group of others reclining by the fireplace and peering curiously in her direction.

“This is a surprise,” the cloaked man said, his hood pulled back enough to reveal his weathered features as he took in the woman and her two shivering children.

The woman raised her emerald eyes to his, gripping her son and daughter tighter as she said, “We’re here to join you.”

Those in the room beyond froze like statues, but the man merely angled his head and repeated, “Join us?”

“I know who you are and what you’re after,” she stated baldly. “You won’t succeed without me.”

The man arched an eyebrow as everyone behind him seemed to hold their collective breaths. “And what would you want in return?”

The woman recalled everything she had suffered through that night, still hearing the screams, still seeing the *blood*, and whispered one word: “Vengeance.”

A slow smile stretched across the man’s face before he sank into a deep bow. “Then please come in, Tilda Corentine,” he said, as those in the room stood and bowed in turn. “Your rebels have long been waiting for you.”

Swallowing back her doubt, the woman and what remained of her family stepped over the threshold. No longer would she be called Tilda Meridan, no longer would she or her children deny their bloodline.

The blood of traitors.

And the blood of queens.

Tilda planned to be both — to betray a lifetime of convictions to claim what was rightfully hers.

Nothing would change what had happened that night. But Tilda Corentine would be damned if she didn't spend the rest of her life making those who were responsible pay.

One way or another, no matter what it cost, she would have her revenge.

TEN YEARS LATER

CHAPTER ONE

The man was dead.

Kiva Meridan — known to a select few as Kiva Corentine — stared down at the body, noting his sunken cheeks and ashen skin. Given his state of bloating, he'd likely passed into the everworld three or four days ago. Long enough for the scent of death to emanate from him, even if he was yet to show physical signs of decomposition.

"Middle-aged male, average height and build, pulled out of the Serin River early this morning," Healer Maddis said, her crisp voice enunciating every word perfectly. "Who can speculate as to the cause of death?"

Kiva kept her mouth shut, fully aware that she'd been granted entrance into the sterile examination room as an observer only.

"No one?" Healer Maddis prompted her students, all of whom were crowded around the body resting on a metal slab in the center of the small space. "Novice Waldon?"

A young man wearing large spectacles blinked owlishly and answered, "Uh, he drowned?"

"Marvelous deductive reasoning," Maddis said dryly, before turning to the student beside him. "Novice Quinn?"

The young woman hunched in on herself, her voice barely a whisper as she said, "Maybe a heart attack? Or — Or a stroke?"

Healer Maddis tapped a fingernail against her lips. "Perhaps. Anyone else?"

Kiva shifted on her feet, catching the healer's attention.

"What about our visitor?" Maddis asked, drawing all eyes to Kiva. "Miss Meridan, isn't it?"

Seeing the open, inviting challenge in the elderly healer's gaze, Kiva shook off her trepidation and stepped closer to the corpse, picking up his limp hand to reveal the smudges beneath his nails.

"This discoloration indicates he was suffering from an immune disorder, most likely syphinus or cretamot," Kiva said, having diagnosed similar cases in the past. "If left untreated, both can lead to the rapid swelling of blood vessels." She glanced toward the two novices who had been called upon. "Waldon and Quinn are both right — he most likely had a heart attack or a stroke, caused by his underlying medical condition, then fell into the river to drown." She released the man's hand. "But only a full examination will be able to say for sure."

An approving smile stretched across the Matron Healer's dark, wrinkled face. "Well spotted." She then launched into a lecture about common immune disorders, but Kiva was only half listening, still marveling over where she stood.

Silverthorn Academy — the most renowned healing academy in all of Evalon. Some would argue in all of Wenderall.

When Kiva was a child, her father had spoken often about Silverthorn. Having grown up in the city of Fellarion, he'd used any excuse to visit Vallenia and sneak into the academy's classes. His greatest regret was that he'd never relocated to study on campus full-time, instead accepting an apprenticeship from a master healer nearer to his home — an honored position, but one that paled in comparison to being a Silverthorn student.

Faran had made it his life's purpose to help people, something Kiva had inherited to the point that, even when she'd been locked away in a nightmare, she'd still used everything he'd taught her to make the lives of others better.

A shadowy feeling overtook Kiva as she thought of the long years that were now behind her. A decade of her life spent behind thick limestone walls and impenetrable iron gates.

Zalindov prison.

It was a death sentence for most, but Kiva had survived.

And now she was here, standing at the heart of her father's dream, when she should have been somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

There was no excuse for her actions today. But when the opportunity to visit Silverthorn had presented itself, she hadn't been able to say no, even knowing that her own desires should have been at the bottom of her priorities.

It had been six weeks since Kiva had escaped Zalindov. Six weeks since she'd discovered that the crown prince had helped keep her alive through the deadly Trial by Ordeal, a set of four elemental challenges she'd undertaken in order to save the life of the Rebel Queen, Tilda Corentine.

Kiva's mother.

Her efforts had been in vain, with a violent prison riot ending Tilda's life. But even in death, her purpose remained, inherited by Kiva and her two older siblings. Together, the three of them would seek vengeance for what had been stolen generations ago; together, they would reclaim Evalon's throne for the Corentine bloodline.

The problem was, Kiva had no idea how to find her brother and sister. The only hint she had was a coded note she'd received before leaving Zalindov, containing a single word: *Oakhollow*.

The village was barely half an hour's ride away from Vallenia, but Kiva hadn't had a spare moment to explore since arriving in the city two days ago, having spent the previous weeks holed up in the Tanestra Mountains waiting for the spring thaws. The first chance she'd had to sneak away was today. But instead of using the opportunity to seek out her long-lost siblings, she was indulging in her own dreams.

Tilda Corentine would have been livid.

Faran Meridan would have been delighted.

Kiva chose to side with her father, deciding that her mother's mission could wait another day.

Guilt had simmered within her when she'd made her choice that morning, but a knot of anxiety had also eased in her stomach. She had no reason to be nervous about a reunion with her siblings, and yet . . . ten years

was a long time. Kiva wasn't the same carefree child anymore, and she could only assume the same must be true for them. Too much had happened — to them all.

And then there was what the three of them intended to *do* . . .

The sound of chiming bells interrupted her thoughts, the noise making her jump, a lingering effect of the years she'd spent listening for the smallest of sounds that could herald her death. But she was no longer in Zalindov, the peaceful chimes merely echoing through the walls of the sterile examination room to signal the end of class.

The students, all clad in pristine white robes, scrambled to finish writing their lesson notes as Healer Maddis dismissed them.

"And remember," she called as they started toward the door, "for those heading to the festival this weekend, there will be no mercy come Monday should you partake of excessive libations. Consider yourselves warned."

There was a twinkle in her gray eyes as she uttered her half-hearted threat, with some of the braver students grinning in response as they headed out the door, Kiva following in their footsteps.

"Miss Meridan, a word?"

Kiva halted at the threshold of the small examination room. "Yes, Matron Healer?" she asked, using the honorific owed to the woman, not only because of her age and experience, but because she was the head of Silverthorn Academy.

"Few people would have noted the discolored nailbeds as quickly as you did," Maddis said, covering the deceased man with a sheet. "And even fewer without proper training." She looked up, their eyes meeting. "You impressed me."

Kiva squirmed and mumbled, "Thank you."

"Faran Meridan once impressed me, too."

Kiva stopped squirming in an instant.

Healer Maddis's wrinkles deepened as she smiled. "I knew whose daughter you were the moment you walked through the door."