

PROLOGUE

THE TRIAL OF MICHAEL KINGMAN

At my trial for treason for killing the king, I played with my father's ring, twisting it around my middle finger. It was one of the few things they hadn't taken away from me when I was arrested. Maybe because they knew it was my father's last gift to me . . . or maybe because no one cared about an old ring. Despite wearing it for the past ten years, first on a chain around my neck and then on my middle finger when I was finally big enough, I never understood why my father gave it to me before his execution for murdering the nine-year-old-prince.

My father gave my sister our mother's red scarf, the one she wore every day before the incident that claimed her memories. My brother received my father's favorite book, something he refuses to read, even to this day. But I was given a ring. An extremely unremarkable,

once black and steel, rusted ring. When I was young, I thought my father bequeathed it to me so I could sell it to support our family. But after an appraiser revealed it was essentially worthless, I convinced myself there must have been another reason. Looking back, I can only think it was something he had cherished, and he thought I might follow in his footsteps.

My father had been right—in the worst way possible. Now I was the one on trial for killing the king. As if regicide could be inherited from father to son. I wondered how many people thought it was true: that I had killed King Isaac. It seemed obvious—after all, I had been there when he died. I had even heard him plead for forgiveness.

Not that it matters what actually happened. No one seemed to believe me anymore.

Not that most of them should have. Depending on who one asked, I was either a puppet master—with my strings tugging around nobility and commoners alike—or a mindless weapon others could direct without care. Yet, no matter what they claimed, I had only ever done what I believed was necessary, which had been easier in some aspects than others. Particularly when the city was so hesitant to change.

The entire city—no, country—had gone to shit after my father was executed. Hollow owed its foundation and preservation to my family. This city had grown up in the shadow of my ancestors—men and women who were more fantastical and awe-inspiring than any tale of make-believe dragons, of children chosen to rule by God, of bandits masquerading as vengeful demonic creatures, or whatever else was passed around as a bedtime story. Anyone who claimed to be a demon hunter, or god slayer, or divine champion, was a pretender

and professional liar. Fools who had flown too high and had not yet been shot down by the moon.

The King wanted Hollow's citizens to forget the truth in favor of a fiction, as if it would make the past easier to swallow. Worse, eager to make my father's betrayal less painful, they blindly accepted the King's medicine.

And forgot everything my family has sacrificed for this country.

We eased the hate against the king. We spoke for the common people. We were the neutral party in all negotiations and never dreamed of taking power for ourselves, content in protecting the citizens from those who had illusions of grandeur. Without us, the separation between the nobility and commoners had grown so much that few could talk with the other without spitting venom, let alone sympathize. It wasn't a surprise refugees had stopped coming here. There was nothing but death, riots, war, and poverty waiting for them. Hollow, the once famous refugee city, was no more. It was just another sign of how our country was preparing to be forgotten by history, only remembered for shattering the moon Celona.

All those problems that would soon be another's to worry about. I was, after all, still on trial for treason. And I knew I would be found guilty, because, for everyone who hadn't been there, the choice was clear. How could they not find the boy who had been found standing over the king's body, blood-splattered with gun in hand, guilty?

Regardless, I am Michael Kingman, and my tarnished legacy will survive, even if my body does not. It will take more than this trial to erase me and my deeds from memory. I understand that now, when before I was always chasing my ancestors' shadows, hoping to be remembered as fondly by history as they were.

Clearly, that wouldn't happen. My story was a tragedy.

Still, here I was, sitting alone underneath a skylight in the middle of the court, with a large half-circle bench in front of me, waiting. Normally, the bench would be filled with the three lucky individuals who would hear the charges and make their decision, but they were still in discussion. Except for the Scales judge, who sat unmoving. I hoped they would hurry up and share their verdict. I was anticipating a bad death.

In all the time I spent waiting, I never turned my head toward the crowd. I could deal with strangers who believed in my treason, but I didn't want to see people I cared about look at me like I was a monster. I was doing this to protect them, even if they didn't know it. That desire kept me focused on the bench and the gold statue of balanced scales behind it.

The morning sunlight peppered through the blanket of snow covering the skylight, warming my aching bones and tight muscles. It was such a simple thing, basking in the sun's glow, that I had taken for granted before I was kept in an endless darkness.

My reverie didn't last long. The door behind the bench opened and out strode the three people who would decide my fate.

First came Gaius Hewitt, Whisperer for the Church of the Eternal Flame, dressed in his church's garb: heavy black robes with a vibrant red lining and flames sewn across the bottom.

Then came Efyra Mason, Captain of the Ravens, serving in place of King Isaac. She wore dented steel plate mail and carried a curved sword. There were seven peacock feathers woven into her black hair, denoting her high rank.

Lastly came Charles Domet, the man who had led me down the

path toward my death. The business magnate wore no smile today, instead picking at his jacket, buttons done up in the wrong holes, black hair disheveled, and wolf's head cane at his side. He was a cowardly contrast to the man I had first met two or three weeks ago—it was hard to tell how long I had been in the dungeons.

Once they had taken their seats to the right of the judge, he began: “Michael Kingman, son of David Kingman, before the jury gives their decision I will ask you one more time: How do you plead?”

The chains rattled as I rose to my feet.

I looked each of them in the eyes. I had not spoken since I surrendered myself, and as much as they'd tried, nothing would get me to utter a single word. This time wasn't any different.

“Do you plead to be a Forgotten?”

I gave no reply. I wasn't a Forgotten. I hadn't overused the nobles' magic of Fabrication until it took all my memories. My suffering and experiences were still mine. They made me who I was: my father's son, inheritor of his legacy. And I remembered everything, now more than ever.

The judge met my unwavering gaze. “Members of the jury, how do you find Michael Kingman?”

Charles Domet rose slowly and read from the piece of paper, his hands shaking, “On the charge of treason of the highest degree, we find Michael Kingman . . .” Domet met my eyes for a last desperate moment, seeking forgiveness. “. . . guilty.”

Shouts rose around me. I heard every voice except for my brother's, Lyon. No doubt he was paralyzed in his seat, the nightmare of my father's fate in mind as he consoled my sister, Gwen.

We, the sole surviving members of the Kingman family, knew what would come next better than any. A charge of high treason only had one fate.

Or so I thought.

Moonstruck heroes always seemed to ruin everyone's plans. As the judge pounded his armored hand against the bench, screaming at the crowds to be silent, a man jumped over the barrier that separated me from everyone. He had a flintlock pistol in his hand and reeked of alcohol, likely for bravery. The gun was aimed at my heart. I had no idea what I had done to him, but knew I deserved his hate.

I would have a clean death after all. A better death than any king killer deserved.

"I won't let there be another," the man screamed. "You will not be remem—"

It would have been a poetic death. Gunpowder made everyone equal, when the strongest Fabricator could be killed with the pull of the trigger . . . as everyone in the city knew far too well.

But, sadly, the poor fool didn't see that the Captain of the Ravens was already in flight. She leaped from her spot on the jury, soaring through the air as lightning crackled around her. She came down right above him, blowing the gun out of his hand with a lightning bolt. As the dust settled and coughing filled the courtroom, a nearby Advocator grabbed the gun before anyone else could.

The assassin didn't even scream when his plan failed, only stared at me. He was on his knees soon after, crying about how much this city had suffered because of me and my father. How he had sought to save it from taking the coward's way out of this mess. The crowd was silent, waiting for what was next.

“Michael Kingman will die when we say he can. As we dictate. After everything he’s done, we will not let him go peacefully. We will have justice,” Efyra growled. “Judge, what is the penalty for having firearms in Hollow?”

“Death,” he said.

Efyra held her hand over the man. “Then let it be done.”

It only took a single bolt of lightning out of her palm, aimed at the heart, for the man to die. He blew back into the crowd, smashing into people and their seats. His body smoldered, smoke wafting off it, and the entire courtroom was filled with a foreign, unnatural smell. Something that haunted my dreams ever since this all began.

While others dealt with what she had done, Efyra returned to her seat on the jury with her blade drawn. She laid it across her lap as if daring my siblings to try and save me.

When the chaos settled and the body had been removed by the Wardens, the judge continued my sentencing, “Michael Kingman, we hoped for more from you, of all people. You should know better than this. Despite your father’s actions, you are still a Kingman, and our troubled times called for a man who could lead us, aid us. Yet here we are with a king killer instead.”

The judge paused for a moment, eyeing the brand for treason on my neck. A gift the king had given me ten years ago after my father’s execution. I wasn’t ashamed of it anymore. As the judge shook his head, he continued, “I hereby sentence you to death. You will be executed on the steps of the Church of the Wanderer, as your father was before you, in a week’s time. May God have mercy upon you.”

I wanted to laugh. If only that would-be assassin had waited a little bit longer, he would have got exactly what he wanted.

There was no controlling the noise after that. Behind me, I could hear the Advocators of Scales holding back the crowds. Cheers and clapping and threats became white noise as a Warden came for me. The metal monster wrapped my chains around one gauntlet and dragged me away from the witnesses and into one of the back rooms with tempered ferocity. As I was shoved through the open door, I took my first look back at the courtroom crowd. My sister was at the front, smashing herself against the Advocators, reaching for me.

Dark, the Mercenary, was leaning against a doorframe at the back of the courtroom with his arms crossed. He was shaking his head at me. His dull, smoky eyes silently said I should've known better. He wasn't wrong—I should have . . . yet here I was. What a sad sight I must have been, to elicit pity from a Mercenary.

The door closed and I was separated from the court. I shut my eyes and waited to feel the sun's warmth again, knowing full well it would mean my death.



AN AUDIENCE

You will hear this story as I lived it.

Count yourself lucky to hear a Kingman tell their story. There has been no other account like this. And all I ask from you, in return for the greatest story ever told, is a small favor and to let me live long enough to tell it.

To learn how I earned the title of king killer, we must begin on the night before the Endless Waltz began, the last remnant of my youth.

Not that I ever really had one.

After my father's execution, I spent years struggling to survive in a city that wanted to see shackles on my wrists and my head roll. It might not surprise you to hear that I spent much of my time conning

the nobility, which was always easier than it should have been. Even without hiding the brand on my neck or how suspicious my intentions ever were.

And my actions were as suspicious as usual that night I oversaw a duel between my friend Sirash, a former Skeleton, and his target: a rather drunk and rather obnoxious country-born Low Noble who had never been to Hollow before. The mark was so fresh to the city, he hadn't even had time to change into something more befitting of a Hollow noble, and was still wearing layers of clothes that lacked a uniform style or color. It showed everyone how low he was, as if that wasn't evident enough when he called Sirash a copper-skinned savage. The so-called civilized people only did that in the comfort of their own homes.

The Low Noble pointed the flintlock pistol at Sirash, then showed it to his painfully sober brother before peering down the barrel himself. His finger was on the trigger the entire time. Thankfully for him, it wasn't loaded. Not that he was privileged to that information. "Sure you want to do this, Skeleton?"

Sirash didn't reply. We were already past the point of no return, and the nobles were ensnared in our trap. There was no chance they were escaping unscathed.

But that didn't stop the brother from trying. "Adrianus, we shouldn't do this. Guns are still illegal here and the last thing you want is to be seen with one. They'll execute you."

"Adrianus," I said quietly. "I am compelled to inform you that unless you apologize, this duel will proceed. Should you decline, with the Endless Waltz beginning so soon, your reputation will be ruined."

"He's a Skeleton!" Adrianus said. "What could *he* do to me?"

I looked at Sirash. He was sitting calmly on a stone wall, fiddling with the other flintlock pistol I had brought. Since he was masquerading as a Low Noble, he was clean-shaven, wearing long, dark-colored trousers and an almost see-through, partly unbuttoned white shirt. The only odd detail about his appearance was the bone tattoo on the back of his left hand. A remembrance of his past. Much as the rusted ring on my middle finger was for me.

“Look at him. He’s clearly risen in society,” I said.

“Could he be a Low Noble?” Adrianus asked.

“Maybe. High Noble Morales has added many new families in recent years.”

“Even a former Skeleton?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

Adrianus considered my words, nodding as he studied the flintlock pistol in his hand.

“Enough of this,” Adrianus’s brother said. “Forget the Skeleton. We should go and receive the Eternal Flame’s blessing for the Endless Waltz tomorrow. High Noble Maflem Braven can protect us from gossip and rumors.”

“But what if he names me a coward and the women want nothing to do with me?” Adrianus said, worrying as only an underconfident boy could about those of the opposite sex. “I don’t want to please Father and marry Jessi. I want a more adventurous future than breeding horses!”

“What if someone hears this duel and arrests you?” his brother said.

I put my hand on Adrianus’s shoulder. “We’re in the middle of the Fisheries. There are no members of Scales or the King’s Ravens

down here unless there's a riot about taxes. Most of the locals are asleep."

"Is . . . is the gun ready?" Adrianus asked.

"Yes," I said. "I've prepared it for you. All you have to do is point and shoot."

"Let us do it," he said. "I'm ready."

Before his brother could protest, I made a sweeping gesture and guided Adrianus into place with my hand on the small of his back. "Listen closely, Adrianus. Instead of the typical ten steps, turn, then shoot, you're simply going to stand a distance apart and shoot. That way no one cheats and turns early. Sound good?"

Another nod as I signaled for Sirash to take his place opposite from him. "You will shoot on three. Aim true." With a final pat on the back, I took my place.

"On my mark!" I shouted. "One! Two! Three!"

They shot. White smoke billowed across them both and they were lost in it for an instant. As it cleared, there was a crash, and Sirash fell to the floor. Blood poured out of his knee and upper thigh, soaking the ground around him. Despite being unharmed, Adrianus screamed and dropped the gun, letting it clatter to the stone.

"Shit!" I was at Sirash's side in an instant, my hand over his knee, staunching the blood. It ran cold over my hands regardless, flowing over the stone around me. "He's bleeding out."

Adrianus stood there moonstruck. "What have I done? I didn't want this. Wanderer, forgive me!"

I checked for his pulse. "Your shot severed an artery and he bled out in a few heartbeats. He's dead."

The noble retched and then puked all over the stone, his shocked

brother patting him on the back. Adrianus mumbled to himself as he recovered, and it wasn't long before his mumbles turned to sobs as he repeated to himself, "I killed him. Oh, Wanderer, I killed him."

"I didn't think you'd actually hit him. Why couldn't you apologize!"

Adrianus's brother stepped forward and pointed at me. "No, this is not happening. I knew who you were the moment I saw that brand. You are Michael Kingman, traitor son of David Kingman, and you are going to fix this."

I felt the crown brand on my neck throb, whether from being reminded it was there, or from my racing heartbeat, I couldn't tell. "Fix this? How do you expect me to bring him back from the dead?"

"I don't." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a bulging purse, and shook it at me. I suspected it was a sizable part of his allowance for the Endless Waltz. "You will take this, get rid of that body, and we are never going to hear from you again. Understand?" He sneered at Sirash's body. "I doubt anyone will miss him. If someone does, they can always import a new slave from the Skeleton Coast."

"You want me to cover up a murder for you and your brother?"

He pushed the bag of coins against my chest. "I don't want you to. I'm telling you to."

"If I don't?"

Lightning began to form and crackle around his right arm, saying more than any idle threat could. I hadn't realized he was a Fabricator, though it explained why the moonstruck fools had been sent to Hollow for the Endless Waltz.

I held my tongue as he bundled Adrianus away from the scene, first pushing and then dragging him away by the shirt. Once they

were out of sight, I wiped my stained hands off on my shirt and then kicked Sirash in the ribs to signal we were in the clear.

“Seriously? How am I supposed to convince someone you died from being shot in the knee?”

Sirash sat up and grimaced at his dirty clothes. He’d broken a sheep’s stomach full of blood for effect during the duel. “Oh, I’m sorry. Next time I’ll grab my chest after he points the gun at my leg. We’re lucky he aimed anywhere near me. Unlike the last one.”

“All I’m asking is for an easy one, so I don’t have to come up with some artery in some random place to explain why you dropped dead. You should be grateful I can talk us out of these problems.”

“Literally every time you open your mouth, all you do is get us into more trouble.”

“Then why am I always the one doing the talking not the shooting?”

“Because no one would hesitate to shoot you.” Sirash grinned at me wickedly. “So, how much did we get?”

I returned his smile and crouched down, emptying the bag of coins in front of us. We began to spread out the gold, silver, copper, and iron, making sure to count as we did. “Almost eleven suns,” Sirash said.

“I would have expected more from a noble coming to Hollow Court.”

“Must’ve been poorer than we thought. You should have tried to get Adrianus’s allowance, too.”

“Maybe if he had less to drink I would have.”

We split the take. Sirash took seven suns to cover his expenses and to help his lover, Jean, pay for her tuition at the College of Music. I took the rest—enough to cover my expenses and potentially

buy another cure if I haggled the oddity merchants down a bit. With it safely in my pocket, I asked, “How much more do you need for the month?”

“Another three suns. I’m not sure how many more Low Nobles will come to Hollow for this ridiculous courting ritual—”

“Call it the Endless Waltz. We’ve been doing this for two years now; it has to be second nature if we’re masquerading as Low Nobles.”

“How much do you need?”

“I don’t know. This should cover my mother’s medical expenses. I’ll talk to Trey and figure out how much more I need tomorrow. I might have to start covering part of his bills while he’s indentured to a High Noble family—”

A bell rang out in the city, and we turned our heads toward the sky, looking for the piece of the moon falling from it.

“I can’t see it with all this light,” he murmured.

Before I had a chance to respond, the city began to darken. Seizing the guns, Sirash and I emerged from the alleyway and looked down the street. The gas lamps that ran down the length of one of the main roads in Hollow held a strong flame within them, burning brightly. One by one they were being snuffed out by the lamplighters, and it was Lights Out in the city. The spreading darkness was accompanied by a symphony of slamming shutters and windows.

“Do you see it?” he asked.

I didn’t. Tenere, our smaller moon, was full, its orange-bluish mass clear in the dark, even at a distance. In front of it, much larger, was the ever-broken Celona, its seven major pieces bright and white. They were surrounded by dust and smaller rocks, most of which

would eventually hit the world below. The stars around them looked dull and flickering . . . and then I saw the falling piece of Celona. I strained to make out what color the tail was, hoping for red. If it was blue or white, it would mean the end of Hollow, no matter how the King and Scales attempted to stop it.

Their infamous Celona defense system, built to reassure the general public, was little more than a trebuchet. I'd love to see the imbeciles tasked with aiming that thing at a fast-falling piece of the moon try to save Hollow. It would be a show worth watching before the city's inevitable destruction.

"We need to find cover in case a second or third bell starts ringing," Sirash said.

"I can't," I said. "I should have been at the asylum already. Celona be damned." I slapped Sirash on the shoulder and took off, running through the streets, knowing Sirash would find shelter in the sewers as he always did when the bells rang.

Amidst his laughter, Sirash shouted, "Michael! If you don't take moon-fall seriously, one of these days it will be the death of you! You'd be the bastard that gets hit!"

Doubtful. The Kingman family did not die with whimpers. History was shaped by our births and deaths, and whether I liked it or not, I would be no exception.