

Earth and Ember

A Forgotten Lands Novel

By Lindsey Pogue

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Foreword

Dearest readers,

I write this to you as I pause in the early stages of my writing this story to address a few things you should know before you begin reading. First and foremost, I'm loving this book so far. I've never written a story so rich in culture and history. While I will always have a soft spot for *Dust and Shadow*, which was a twisted road of secrets and discovery I hadn't expected (and amazing characters that get to explore a world that fascinates me), *Earth and Ember* feels special.

When I started writing this book, I knew I would have to do a lot of research because my Native American knowledge is limited, mostly to what I learned in elementary school. However, I've always been fascinated and humbled by Native American practices and culture—by their love for the earth and nature, which I can easily connect to. So, I dove in to learn more about the tribes that have farmed the Arizona landscape for thousands of years. I'm continually fascinated by the Ancient Puebloans—by their descendants, the Hopi people—and their practices, which I've blended into this story with a history of my own making. This is a fictional, post-apocalyptic world after all.

While the society, practices, foods, and peaceful nature of these people are all true to history, I've put my own spin on them. Their culture has had to survive a sandstorm-ravaged world with melded belief and people, living in a dormant volcanic mountain that barely sees the light of day. So, while many of the names and most terms are authentic (I've provided a glossary of their meanings), some verbiage and cultural nuances have been altered for the sake of the story and reading ease.

So, now that I've bored you with my disclaimers and anecdotes, by all means, read on my bookworm friends! I hope you enjoy this adventure as much as I'm enjoying writing it.

Sincerely yours,
Lindsey

GLOSSARY

TERMS

Askook – snake

Askwali – “thank you”

Etsi – (pronounced: aa-chee) – clan mother/Mother

Hoonaw/Hon – White Bear; very powerful and able to cure what ails; also called Hon, the actual spirit’s name

Hopituh/Hopi – meaning “The Peaceful People”

Katsina(s) – spirit being(s)

Kiva – sacred ritual and ceremony space

Kokyanwhuti (pronounced: koh-kyang-woo-tee or koh-kyang-so-woo-tee) – Spider Woman/Earth goddess

Kweo – White Wolf katsina spirit; a powerful hunter who brings food to the village.

Mana – butterfly (term of endearment)

Maasaw – the world's guardian spirit

Pahi – waterfall

Sosho – snake/serpent - white man/devil

Siiwi – onion

Tawa – Sun God/Creator

NAMES & MEANINGS

Ahkima – “warrior/protector”

Awan – “somebody”

Elan – “friendly”

Istas – “snow”

Kaia – “little wise one”

Oona – “remember”

Paco – “soaring eagle”

Sakima – “king”

Tarak – “star”

Todi – “wind”

Yoki – “rain”

ARIZONA NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES INCLUDED

Apache – strategists and warriors

Navajo – rug and blanket weavers

Mojave – farmers, fishermen, and hunters

Hopi – deeply spiritual and peaceful

Prologue Kaia

Warm earth clings to my hands, and the thornscrub scratches against my legs as I steady myself, hiding in my father's shadow and waiting for a pronghorn to show itself.

"Be still," he whispers. He closes his eyes and holds his breath. "They are close."

Straining, I listen for what the Great Spirit shows my father—a rustling breeze . . . antlers clacking against one another as two male pronghorns lay claim to the herd that follows them.

I smile. Yes, the pronghorns are close—just out of sight—and my mouth practically waters with anticipation. I brush my sweat-dampened brow with the back of my arm, squinting into the relentless heat as I raise my bow. It's heavy in my small arms but aimed and ready all the same.

"If we are patient, they will come into view," my father explains. "Even one buck could feed our people for a week."

I nod, gripping the bow. It's slick in my hand, and my back dampens under the weight of my arrows. My fingers tighten and I peer out at the valley, focused and determined.

"Your mother will give me an earful for bringing you," my father whispers with a smile in his voice. "But it's good to get into trouble every so often." He winks at me.

"I like being down here, with you," I whisper back. "It is better than Oona and Mother's lessons."

"It is your destiny, Kaia. You have the great Hon and Kweo in you—with the strength of the bear and the prowess of the wolf, you will be a strong leader to our people."

I glare at the lowering sun. Lessons and pilgrimages with my mother and grandmother have kept me away from my friends. "I prefer the hunt," I say, feeling defiant. "Mother will have to find a different etsi for when she is gone."

My father chuckles, and there's a softness in his eyes I've never seen before. "You will change your mind. And who knows, perhaps one day you can be both." He lifts the carved Kweo from around his neck and places it over my head. Surprised, I peer down at the great wolf, rubbing it with my thumb in awe. It is his katsina, my father's guardian and the essence of his spirit—powerful, instinctual, a hunter who always provides food for the village—and he's given Kweo to me.

When I look at him, wide-eyed and mystified, he appears more somber. "He will guide you, when I cannot."

A rustle in the brush ahead startles us, and a buck steps into view, grazing on the wolfberry branches that speckle the valley outstretched before us. A few other pronghorns meander after him.

"Get ready," my father says so low I barely hear him, and my body coils with excitement and expectation. Slowly, I pull my bowstring taut with an inhale, my arrow locked in place. With one eye shut, I wait for the shape in front of me to focus.

"Do not let go until you are ready." My father's voice is sage and knowing, and I hang on his every word. "Never rush."

I take a deep breath, and holding my mouth just right, my fingers begin to loosen.

"Yoki!" Elan shouts my father's name, and the pronghorns startle, galloping away as the big man runs down from his post on the hillside. "Soshos are coming!"

I swallow my fear. The white faces have come.

Gunfire and shouting break out in the canyon behind us, and my father pulls me to my feet. "Take Kaia," he says, shoving me toward Elan. "Go—hide her. I will help the others."

"Father—" I whimper as I realize he's leaving me.

“There are ten, at least,” Elan warns. “We must go, Yoki. You cannot—”

“I will not leave my men.” My father shoves me toward his greatest friend. “Now go!” he shouts, and with his bow and arrow in hand, he runs toward the reverberating sound of battle cries and bullets screeching through the canyon. My father runs like the wolf, chasing after its prey with fierce determination, and I fear what will happen if I take my eyes from him.

“Kaia, come,” Elan bites out, but I scream as I see the soshos riding up over the ridge. Two of my father’s men come out of the brush and fall in step behind him, throwing their spears and shooting their arrows.

As Elan tugs me toward the canyon, I stumble and shriek, craning my neck to watch the horrors unfold behind me. My father shoots arrow after arrow, taking down one sosho and then another. But when more men on horseback gallop around the foothills, I know my father and his men are outnumbered.

“Father—” I scream, but Elan covers my mouth and lifts me against his chest as he runs to where the thicket is dense and caves are etched in mountain stone.

The earth shakes. My vision blurs. And then we’re in the shadows of a sandstone spire. The branches of the wolfberry scratch my face and pull at my hair as Elan shoves me deeper into the bushes, out of sight, crawling in after me.

My heart pounds, and I can barely catch my breath as I watch the world through shimmering tears. The shouts of the soshos mixed with the battle cries of my father and the others are soon overpowered by the thundering of horse hooves and the ear-splitting ring of bullets flying through the air. Dust clouds obscure my view. Limbs are flailing, and horses are falling. Men shout in anger and pain, and then, I watch my father fall.

“No—”

Elan's hand clamps harder over my mouth, his protective arms squeezing me tighter. "Shh," he coos, his voice a deep, demanding hum in my ear, but I can barely hear him as my body is wracked with sobs.

My heart hurts, my throat burns, and I can barely comprehend what I'm seeing as I watch the soshos tie my father's ankles with a tether and drag his lifeless body away.

I spring up in my blankets, clutching my chest. My skin is damp with sweat and I wipe the moisture from my eyes, staring into nothingness. The memory is still so vibrant despite the nine years past, I can barely catch my breath.

I'm in darkness, not the valley floor. It smells faintly dank from the damp stone walls of the mountain, and of sweet sap from the sagebrush Oona burns in the room below, and I sigh with a guilty sense of relief.

I am home and safe. I force myself to soak up the realization and welcome the brisk cave air nipping my exposed skin as I fall back against my feather-stuffed pillow. Exhaling a deep breath, I try not to think too much about my dream. Or my father. Or the ache in my chest left in my parents' absence.

But it's no use. Rolling my eyes, I toss my fur blankets back. Sleep will be impossible, so in my restlessness, I decide to be useful until it's time to leave with the hunting party.

After pulling on my tunic and tying my fur vest around me, I wrap my legs in deerskin to stave off the cold, determined to prepare the paint and ready the horses for today's trip. I run my fingers through my hair, grimacing as I tug at the knots in the ends. My fingers move quickly as I braid my long hair into rows and out of my face, and I'm just finishing up when I hear the door open and close, and whispers emanate from the room below. Perhaps it is earlier than I thought,

and Oona is reciting her morning prayers. But then I hear a different voice—a familiar, deeper one, and I freeze, straining to listen.

“—and they are gone,” he says almost too faintly to hear.

I creep toward the ladder, leading from my room to the living space below, and peer down. Elan stands beside my grandmother, dressed, but not in his hunting clothes.

My grandmother nods at his muffled words, relief and gratitude softening her wrinkled face.

Gone? My jaw clenches as I hurry down the ladder. “Who is gone?” I bite out.

Both Oona and Elan look at me, eyes wide as if they’ve been caught scheming.

When neither answer, I glare at them. “Cole?” I breathe. “The hunters?” I can feel the blood rushing to my cheeks and through my fingers. I fist my hands at my side. “You let them leave, without me?” I grit the words out, resentment tasting like ash in my mouth. This was their plan all along. Placate me, allowing me to think I could finally go, only to send the others out in the cover of darkness without me.

Oona takes a hesitant step closer. “It is not safe in the valley for you, Kaia.”

Fire ignites in my veins. “It is not safe for *anyone*, not for years. But we *must* hunt,” I say coolly. “I am no different from them—”

“You will be *etsi*,” Oona growls at me. “Whether you want to be or not, that is your destiny. We cannot risk losing you—”

“I am *not* the *etsi*.” I take turns scowling at each of them. “I will never *be* the *etsi*.” But as I say the words, I feel the choice turning to dust, escaping into my looming future. If not me, who? If not soon, when? Brushing past them, I leave Oona and Elan in my furious wake, too angry to look back. And with each step toward the quiet calm of the village, a cool draft envelops

me. *You will change your mind.* My father's words echo in my head, but even as chills trickle over me, I refuse to listen.

Chapter 1 Luke

One Week Later

A hawk cries in the arid afternoon, the earth cracks beneath the horses' hooves, and the two-day journey between the protective foothills of the mountains and the outskirts of town feels longer than usual. It's been over two-hundred years since the Shift decimated the landscape and intensified the sun, and still, some days it feels unbearable.

Just when I don't think I can take another hour under the blistering sun, I see the sandstone spires of Sagebrush Canyon come into view. The canyon that hides us away from a world of savages and sandstorms.

"It's about damn time," Doyle mutters beside me. He spits the tobacco from his cheek, and his bedroll and sand cape flap against the saddle as he quickens his horse's pace. "I want to see what the men brought back from their roundup." Doyle sounds almost giddy as I nudge Tuck into a trot beside him.

Doyle's a lot of things, but his knowledge of the Dead Lands and the savages—or drifters, depending on what story the marshal's men are spinning for the sake of the townsfolk—has gotten a few of the guys out of some bad scrapes, so he's a good deputy to have around in a sticky situation.

Having never been on patrol with Doyle, until now, I've never experienced his renowned dedication to his job for myself. But with nothing other than shelter upkeep with me to worry about this time, he's restless. I see it in his eyes, enlivened again by the promise of tales from returning deputies whose patrols take them further away from home every time. With our resources depleted, excursions extend beyond the foothills to explore the burnt land nearer the

lightning belt to the west, providing new dangers and adventures to recount. Not that I've ever gone.

Even at twenty, the marshal continues to shelter me, as if I don't already know how treacherous life is out here in the desert. It doesn't matter that I've been working with him and his men in some capacity since I was fourteen, the marshal keeps me busy with a route of my own. Maintaining what few dilapidated hideaways the deputies have in the great expanse isn't easy work, especially with the threat of sandstorms increasing, but it is *busy* work. And the more stories I hear about Doyle and the others saving our people from savages, or scouring the lands beyond Sagebrush, the more it feels like the marshal is purposefully preventing me from living the life I've been working toward, and the possibility of avenging my father's death.

"The marshal sending me on these bullshit rounds . . ." Doyle mutters and glances my way. "I don't know how you do it, O'Brien, but this piddly shit is pointless."

I can't help but agree. "It would be nice if Ashford would stop sending me on these water hunts and maintenance runs," I say over the creak of our saddles. "I'm tired of only *hearing* about patrol."

"Ashford likes throwing his weight around, but don't worry, kid," Doyle says with a wink. "Things will be different real soon."

I'm not sure what Doyle means, but when the hot, dry wind picks up and the shadows of sandstone spires stretch across the desert floor, I know we're close to the canyon and secret stream, and I'm too eager to splash water on my face and feel it against my parched tongue to question him.

That's one thing I can look forward to returning home—rest, protection from the sun and wind, a bath, and food that doesn't have sand in it. Even a single day outside the town of

Sagebrush Canyon is enough to ensure us deputies stay focused and determined to keep the town hidden and safe. No one wants to live out here, because no one could.

I rub the back of my neck, my skin gritty beneath my fingertips. “At least this outing was uneventful,” I muse aloud.

That earns me a bored look from Doyle, and his dark brow lifts in the shade of his hat before he shakes his head. He slows his horse. “An uneventful patrol means we’re not doing our job,” he quips. “Every time we come back empty-handed, it gives the savages more time to plot and plan and regroup. We should be flushing them out, not waiting to run into them and hoping we don’t—you don’t want to end up like your father, do you?”

My eyes narrow on him as I pull Tuck to a stop beside him. “Obviously not,” I say, my voice as hard as the steel cages we’re forced to live within to survive the sandstorms. Every time one of the men talks about the day my father died, it hardens another part of me. “Or,” I counter, annoyed, “*uneventful* means all the years and death leading up to now weren’t for nothing.”

Doyle’s gaze lingers on me, as if he’s conceding to give me that, at least. “I remember when you were a snot-nosed kid, hanging around to groom our horses and clean our saddles . . . When did you grow up, Luke?”

My eyes harden on him. “The day you told me the savages killed my father, I reckon. I was lucky not to be like the other orphans left behind in this never-ending battle. And I’ve been wanting to show the bastards what Sagebrush is made of ever since.”

“Like I said,” Doyle drawls with a smirk. “You’ll get your reckoning, kid. In time . . .”

His words are too ominous to ignore this time. “Are you going to fill me in, or leave me guessing?”

Doyle scratches at his bearded jaw a moment, then finally says, “Let’s just say some of the boys and me are ready for a bit of a change. But the timing has to be right.”

A chill runs down my spine in spite of the suffocating heat. I might get impatient with the marshal and Ashford, but I wouldn’t bite the hand that feeds me. The marshal and his right-hand man are the only two people who help me take care of all I have left in this world—June.

I remain quiet and we click our horses onward again, their steps brisk as we draw closer to the sandstone spires marking the entrance to Sagebrush. A couple of miles beyond it lies the Mason farm and the river. At least what’s left of it.

The wind picks up, and I lick my dry lips, suddenly so thirsty my tongue feels swollen.

“How many of them have you killed, anyway?” Doyle calls over his shoulder.

I unwrap my water pouch, confiscated from one of the savages at some point over the years, just like my horse. “I’ve injured a few men during a maintenance run a couple of years back, but I’ve never killed one—that I know of, anyway.”

“You’ll get your time, kid. And if we’re lucky, the injured sons of bitches slinked off to die anyway. You’re a good aim. I saw the heart shot on that wolf you brought back last year. Fed the deputies for a couple days, at least.”

I nod, and let what little water I have left trickle over my tongue to tide me over. I’m tired of talking, and knowing the water is close makes me nudge Tuck on a bit faster.

“We’ll cut through the canyon, water our horses, and see if the men are at the mill already, unloading the goods they brought back.”

I’ve barely lowered my water pouch when I see movement from the corner of my eye, and Doyle and I stop our horses short. Two savages wrapped in furs barrel out of the canyon on

horseback, rushing so fast their pelts are flopping against their saddles, and they don't see us coming across the valley.

I drop the water pouch, adrenaline rushing in my ears.

“Son of a bitch—” Doyle pulls his pistol as I do, a dozen thoughts racing through my head as I realize they're rushing away from the Mason farm—away from town. They've stolen something or killed someone. It's all that makes sense. But I hesitate as I realize one of the riders is a woman, and something about this doesn't feel right.

Doyle shoots the woman without hesitation, the sound resounding across the desert floor. The horses spook and she falls to a crumpled heap on the sand.

Doyle aims at the other rider, who is too busy watching the woman fall to her death in horror, to notice Doyle pulling the trigger. But nothing happens. Doyle's gun locks, and he curses at me. “Dammit, O'Brien—shoot 'em!” he commands.

Heart racing, I aim my pistol and lock eyes with the savage as he finally registers us. I see the realization in his eyes—the anger and the fear, right before he turns his horse to flee.

My mind is a tornado, and adrenaline surges through me as I exhale and squeeze the trigger, not wanting to be the reason the savage gets away.

Tuck spooks under me as the bullet cracks through the air. The savage's mustang rears back too, and the man hunches over and slides off his shaggy horse with a thud on the dry earth.

The savage is dead and I should feel victorious—that's one less savage to plot and scheme against us. Instead, even as a small sliver of retribution flares inside of me, something hollow and putrid does too.

1 Month Later

Chapter 2

Luke

The heat is dry and clings to the sweat and sand on my skin as I brush Tuck's back, watching as the dust falls away from his rusty colored coat. His eyes blink so slowly in the shade of the barn and afternoon breeze, I'm sure he'll fall asleep. Between the unrelenting sun, the wind, and the uncertainty during our time spent in the Dead Lands over the past several days, I don't blame the mustang for being exhausted.

"Feels good to be back, don't it, buddy?" I murmur. His ears shift back to me, but he doesn't move. Two sandstorms during our weekly maintenance run turned two days into five, and even if the steel siding of the buildings around me are near blinding in the glare of the afternoon, it's reassuring to know we have shelter, food, water, and a sense of safety now that we're back. Even if everything is different now.

Doyle wasn't lying when he'd said he and some of the men were planning something. Only, in his efforts to take over the town, the marshal wasn't the only one who ended up dead.

I hear the boisterous merriment of the deputies on duty inside the garrison next door and wonder if any of them care that Marshal Cunningham, the man who made them what they are and gave them every luxury this place has to offer, is gone.

I finish grooming Tuck after a few more strokes and reach for the grain bin. His head whips around so fast, I can't help but chuckle. "Oh, now you're awake."

Tuck nods enthusiastically, the fringe of his mane catching in the tepid breeze.

"All right, all right," I mutter as he nudges me greedily. "You earned it—"

"O'Brien," Holyworth drawls.

I pause, Tuck and I both peering at the deputy standing by the water trough. A rolled cigarette hangs from between Holyworth's wrinkled lips, and a plume of smoke surrounds him, as usual.

"You headin' out?" He spits off to the side, his eyes shifting between my mustang and me. Holyworth looks envious he wasn't invited. Our routines have been brought to a standstill, and I get the sense he's been cooped up too long since the old marshal's death, days ago.

"No," I tell him. "I was out there with Carter on a maintenance run. We just got back."

Holyworth leans against the side of the barn and crosses his arms over his chest. His bushy eyebrows and the scar across his cheek make him appear more grizzled than he is. "You see anything out there this time?" It's a question that would've been asked with a trill of anticipation two weeks ago, but now, Holyworth sounds guarded. Maybe even skeptical.

I shake my head. "Nope, nothing. If it's a war Clayton's worried about, the savages haven't made a move yet." In fact, they've been quieter than usual for over a month now, which only leads me to believe they're planning something big.

Holyworth flicks the tip of his cigarette and the ash breaks off in the breeze. He watches the way the smoke curls as he turns the butt between his fingers. Though he's older than me, he's seen little action out there over the years, which is a good thing, one would think, but Holyworth seems unsettled.

I pick a thistle from Tuck's mane but keep my eyes on Holyworth, watching him closely and waiting for his impending questions.

"You've seen them out there," Holyworth muses. "When you shot those two a month back."

My jaw tightens at the memory.

“Is what Doyle was harping on about for all those years true? Are the savages as dangerous as he said, because Clayton and Ashford think—”

“They haven’t seen what we’ve seen,” I reassure Holyworth, bristling a little. I might not have witnessed as many savages as other deputies have, but the few I’ve seen with spears and guns didn’t hesitate to fire upon us, and they clearly hadn’t when they killed my father. “They’re dangerous,” I tell him. “Just like any man, savage or not, who wants what they can’t have. Make no mistake about that.” The words are a necessary reminder to both of us. “Doyle might’ve been crazy and deserved his end, the greedy son of a bitch, but he wasn’t lying about that part. We’ve got enough dead men to prove that.” It’s what I have to believe to keep the gnawing, unsettling feeling trying to rear its ugly head at bay.

“Yeah, Doyle was batshit crazy,” Holyworth mutters. He shakes his head and pushes off the wall. “I can’t say I miss the bastard all that much.”

“Unfortunately, not everyone feels that way,” I grumble, though I’m not entirely sure I’m talking about myself. I owe Doyle my life, after all. Without his encouragement, I might be dead now instead of the savage I shot. But that doesn’t feel quite right either.

“Well, welcome back to hell,” Holyworth says wryly, and squishes his rolled tobacco under his boot, then he continues on his way.

“Hell?” I grin. Though I can’t necessarily argue with him about that, not in a world where sand and thirst are more terrifying than savages or drifters could ever be, I know it’s not all bad.

“Surely Cora or Jasmine can help you forget your misery!” I call after him.

Holyworth’s chuckle carries on the breeze and he disappears into the garrison. Cigarettes, fresh clothes, horses, a decent room in the barracks with the other deputies, unlimited women and drinks at Mistress Hannah May’s—those are the perks of being a deputy, which I’ve never

taken for granted, knowing where I could've ended up had old Marshal Cunningham not brought me into the fold as one of his men. Maybe that's why it's so difficult to come to terms with the changing tides in Sagebrush. With the old marshal dead, the marshal's son, Clayton, and Miss Josephine Mason at his side, are changing everything.

I stare blankly at the horizon for a few beats. Clayton claims his father led the town with fear and secrets, and that we can't live in a world like that anymore. But exaggerations were made to keep people in Sagebrush safe, especially from themselves. Marshal Cunningham had told us that much. If the townspeople learned the location of the only stream running through the Mason property, what little water we had would be at risk—not divvied up and shared, but hoarded and consumed—and possibly gone forever.

No matter what's happened in the Dead Lands over the years, nothing changes the fact that it's always been us versus everyone else; savages, errant drifters, or both. I would continue to patrol and protect the people of this place—to protect June—no matter what Clayton feels is *right* now that the old marshal, keeper of decades' worth of secrets, is dead. I owe it to the men we've lost to do that much. I owe it to my father and to June after all she's done to care for me since his passing.

Tuck paws at the ground and cranes his neck to look at me.

“Yeah, yeah. You're hungry. I know . . .”

With a final pat on his back, I walk the tack bucket over to the wall of hooks inside the door and exchange it for one filled with grain. Other horse heads pop up as I hang it in Tuck's stall. They whinny with enthusiasm, but they've all been in the shade, lounging on holiday while Tuck and I have been out making rounds, so this most definitely is not for them.

When I head out to get him, I meet Tuck's big, brown eyes blinking at me. We've come a long way since I found him wandering the Dead Lands with painted white circles on his hindquarters and feathers in his hair. He's not only my riding partner, but he's become my friend, and something tells me he feels the same way.

His tail whips excitedly at the promise of food awaiting him inside.

"Stay out of trouble while I'm gone, all right?" I untie him and lead him into the barn. "If I hear you impregnate one of the mares again—" I shake my head. "Just, don't do it. Okay? Lord knows we've already got too many mouths to feed, thanks to you." He snorts in answer, and I look at him wryly. "For some reason, I don't believe you." Once in his stall, I remove Tuck's halter and I'm almost knocked out of the way as he scarfs down his lunch.

With a chuckle, I close him in. The wooden stall door protests as I latch it, grab my hat, rest it on my head, and step out into the afternoon. The heat of the day smacks me in the face as I step out into the full sun. One would think I'd be used to the heat, growing up in a dusty, sunburnt town like Sagebrush Canyon, but some days it's harder to ignore the heat than others, especially after days on patrol when my skin is too tender and dry from being out in the elements. It's at that thought I decide a little detour is in order.

#

"What do you say, Luke?" Bastian asks from the other end of the bar. "One more round?"

I shake my head and down my last shot, knowing the past two hours are two hours too long, and I need to visit June.

"Ah, come on."

I chuckle as Bastian stumbles over and slaps my shoulder.

“Nah, I gotta go.” I startle as a tinkling laugh caresses the back of my ear. I glance back to find Cora, one of Hannah May’s ladies beside me, smelling of sickly sweet jasmine that I’ve only ever smelled in this place.

“It’s good to have you back, Luke,” she simpers. “It’s been . . .” She glances around at the old, drunk, or beer-bellied men that fill the saloon and almost shudders. “Lonely without you,” she finishes. I can’t help a grin, and I wink at her. “It’s good to be home. Thanks, Cora.”

As she leans in to kiss my cheek, the door to the Brass Rail Saloon flies open.

Jacob Henderson, the doc’s boy who’s my age, steps inside. I eye him up and down, surprised as hell to see him in the saloon. His suit is crisp and clean, and his black hair is combed back, like he just bathed. I look down at my three-day-old, sweat-dampened shirt and dusty pants. Jacob’s innocence being in such an establishment is as obvious as the red staining his cheeks.

“Luke,” he says, clearing his throat as he comes closer. His eyes shift to Cora, and he flashes a timid smile as he dips his chin in greeting. He’s always had a crush on Cora, ever since grade school, and I cover my mouth to hide my amusement at his utter discomfort being in here.

Cora waggles her fingers in a slight wave. “Hi, Jacob. We don’t get to see you in here, well, ever.”

Jacob, my best friend since I was nine, clears his throat. “I—um—I’ve been looking for Luke,” he explains, nodding to me. “I heard you were back—I was hoping, but . . .” His eyes flit around, grazing the drunkards and scantily clad women as if his senses are on overload.

Chuckling to myself, I grab my pack. “I just got back,” I tell him, and nod a goodbye in Bastian’s direction, then I follow Jacob out the door.

“What is it?” I ask as we step out on the main road. I peer south toward the gleaming windows and tattered awnings lining the storefronts.

Whatever Jacob needs must be pretty important if he found the nerve to come into a place of such debauchery looking for me. It’s not that Jacob is a prude or a holy man, just inexperienced in ways I can’t fathom, having grown up in a place like Sagebrush. Debauchery is all we have to keep us sane, and yet Jacob is the epitome of gentlemanly manners and breeding. Even if decorum and respectability rotted away centuries ago with the rest of the world. Now, all that’s left is five hundred souls trying not to die of thirst in the last true civilization we know of.

“I need your help with something,” he says as he follows me toward the grocers. I should pick up a few fresh goods to take home to June. While I know it’s not likely she’s gotten any better in the five days I’ve been away, I try not to think about her health getting worse in my absence either.

I spot a little beggar girl sitting under the shade of a tattered awning in a faded purple dress a couple of sizes too big, and stop to toss her a few coins. That earns me a toothy, dimpled smile, so I toss her another one with a wink, glad someone has something to smile about in this place, and continue down the road.

“Well, spit it out, Jake,” I say, passing the alleyway that leads to the Grunge. The scent of urine and old meat assaults my senses, and I have to hold my breath. I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve asked June to move away from this part of town and into the deputy housing with me, near the outskirts of Sagebrush. It’s a part-time place for me to sleep with how little I’m in town, but it would be more comfortable for June with the luxuries we’re afforded, even if she’s full of reasons why it won’t work: it’s too far from town; we’d get on each other’s nerves; she’s happy

right where she is. And maybe all of it is true, but I also know she doesn't want to be a burden, despite the number of times I tell her she's not.

"I have a meeting with Ashford, Clayton, and Miss Mason."

My brow furrows. "You've been sucked into that then, have you?"

Jacob looks at me askance. "We're discussing the peace treaty mission." He says it as though it's an honor to be part of the inner circle, but I'm not sure I like how upside-down and sideways the three of them have made everything feel. Or that I believe any sort of peace is possible.

"I want you to come with me," Jacob says, thoughtful.

"Yeah? And what would the point of that be?" I eye the townspeople going about their daily business, more skittish than usual after Clayton and Miss Mason unveiled everything they'd learned in the old marshal's passing: the embellishments the deputies have always spouted to keep people within the boundaries of town safe; the truth that the water is drying up and that it's all we have to sustain the Mason farm, which we rely on almost completely to feed us; and that we're in imminent danger of the savages—the *drifters*—because of what we've done to them over the years. I shake my head, unnerved by how much things are changing.

Everything the marshal did was to keep everyone safe, and I'm not convinced the townspeople knowing the truth changes anything. "You know how I feel about all of this, Jacob. I won't be any help to you."

"Actually," he says, holding up the stack of books and journals in his hands. "Maybe you can fill in the holes," he starts. "You're more familiar with the drifters than I am, and Clayton asked me to bring all the research I could—everything the old marshal had me combing through about the Hopi medicines and remedies from before the Shift."

I frown. “He had you researching their medicines?” That’s news to me.

“Yeah,” he says with a glimmer of satisfaction, and our boots crunch against the dusty street. “A few months before he died, he asked me to look into it. He wanted me to find a cure for little Isabel. I have a bunch of other research on the natives, too. Now that we’re no longer in the dark and know who the drifters really are, Miss Mason thinks it could be helpful.”

“Isabel Cunningham is sick?” I ask, struck by how little we’d really known about the marshal’s personal life. First his dealings with the Mason family over the years—what he’d done to their mother and then to Josephine. Now, a sick daughter.

With wide blue eyes, Jacob looks at me and dips his chin. “The Choke,” he says glumly, hesitant.

The Choke? And the marshal had been looking for a cure? That bit of news warrants my attention, and I stop and face him. “And you think I can just drop into this meeting you’re having with them?”

Jacob shrugs. “Ashford asked me if there are any deputies I trust. And unlike the rest of us, you’ve seen the drifters—I mean, the natives . . . or whatever. I only know what I’ve read and heard. And Ashford rarely went out on patrol.” Jacob could’ve asked any deputy to attend the meeting with him, but he asked me, and I can’t pass up the opportunity to learn more about a possible cure for the Choke.

Deciding fresh produce can wait another hour or two, I nod. “Lead the way.”

Chapter 3 Luke

“Welcome,” the butler says as we step into the Cunningham estate.

Jacob smiles warmly at the man, but my attention fixes on the giant entryway cast mostly in shadows. Strips of sunlight filter in through the curtain seams, but even in the dim light, I see the house is decadent. I’ve been here twice before over the years, ogling the rich colors and shining woods that are unlike anything else in Sagebrush. The Cunninghams are town royalty, the marshals dating back to the very start of it, and everything about their estate boasts as much.

I hear a giggle above, and a girl of about twelve or so peers down at me from over the banister, her curls falling into her cherub-round face. The marshal’s youngest daughter, Isabel. She giggles again, as if she’s about to get into some mischief, then I hear a woman call her name from one of the rooms.

“—now back to your studies!”

With another giggle, Isabel scampers away, but not before I hear a familiar sounding cough.

“Come,” Jacob says, nudging me toward the study just off the entry.

“—fine, then we send a party out, not a patrol,” Clayton says as we step inside. “Sooner rather than later. Peace is far too important now, and it’s long overdue.”

Those words would’ve never been uttered by the late marshal, but then, Clayton Cunningham is nothing like his father—not in stature or imposition. Even as he stares down at the map flattened across his desk, I can see the gears of his mind churning. There’s nothing hiding behind shadowed eyes, and no double meaning behind veiled words, because Clayton has no reservations, though perhaps he should.

I've never had much of an opinion about Clayton, heir to the family's name and future marshal, because he never had much of a presence. Until his father's murder, he'd spent his days drinking and gambling his luxuries and freedoms away like the rich boy he's always been. But the marshal allowed it, and I felt honored to be among the men he relied upon to keep both Sagebrush and his family safe, whatever the cost. Even if it's easy to see why Doyle begrudged Clayton so much, and it remains to be seen if Clayton is the answer this town needs.

When he finally notices us, his attention steals from Ashford standing beside him, to Jacob, then lands on me.

"Ah, Mr. Henderson," Clayton says, hands resting on his hips as he glances between us. "I see you brought a friend." The new marshal eyes me carefully, as he does with all the deputies remaining since Doyle's failed rebellion and shootout at the old mill a couple of weeks ago.

"Yes, Marshal," Jacob says, reaching for Clayton's hand. "I thought he could be helpful."

"Please, call me Clayton. I prefer it." He shakes Jake's hand. "It's strange enough taking my father's place as it is." Jacob nods though he seems hesitant.

Clayton offers me his hand as well, and I dip my head. "Luke," I tell him, introducing myself.

"Uh—Luke's just come back from patrol. And he knows more than I do about the Dead Lands."

Clayton's stare is pointed, taking me in as if he's not sure what to think or if he can trust me. "Welcome," he finally says. I feel as out of place in this room with Clayton as he feels being called the marshal.

Ashford watches us for a moment, then peers down at the map on the desk again. "What damage has been done is only festering," he muses. "I'm not sure there's much chance of peace

at this point, but we must try.” When he looks at me, I know he expects me to add something to the importance of his advice, but I can’t.

“Patrol was quiet,” I say with a shrug. “Other than Carter, I saw no one for five days. There’s nothing much to report.”

“The drifters’ sudden disappearance could be for a number of reasons,” Clayton ponders after a breath. He leans down and studies the outdated aerial map, its sketches from decades ago partially faded. With a quick glance at it, I’m not even certain it’s accurate anymore. “They live up on the mountain,” Clayton says, peering up at Ashford. “You’re certain of that?”

“Yes.” Ashford and I say it at the same time, and Clayton looks between us.

“Well then . . .” The new marshal straightens. “Regardless of where they are or what they’re doing or not doing, we know the situation isn’t getting any better and we can’t risk them getting to us first and being caught unaware. That stunt Doyle pulled has left us with less than half of our deputies. We’re more vulnerable now than ever.”

“I don’t think they know where we are, exactly,” I offer. “We’ve always cut them off in the Dead Lands, at least as far as I know.” I recall the two riders a month ago, leaving the stream on horseback. They were the closest we’d ever seen them, hence Doyle’s parading their bodies through town as if they’d been trophies.

“That’s reassuring,” Ashford mutters, but I’m not certain if he’s being sarcastic. I always knew of Jonathan Ashford, but never worked directly with him. As the old marshal’s confidant, he rarely went out on patrol, which is where I’ve always wanted to be. Seeing him so close with Clayton now is strange. Then again, as I recall both of their approaching nuptials to the Mason sisters, being close-knit isn’t so surprising; soon he and Clayton will be brothers.

“Still.” Clayton clears his throat and shakes his head. “We need to get to that mountain—we need water, and they stand between us and it. The decades of looting and terrorizing them is going to make our lives a lot harder—”

“They’re not innocent in all of this,” I interrupt. My cheeks flush, and I regret talking out of turn the instant I do. But then I remember, this isn’t the marshal I’m speaking to, it’s Clayton, mayor-elect per his request. I don’t fear him. I’m not entirely sure I even respect him.

He straightens, his blue eyes locking on me. “Perhaps that’s true,” Clayton says tersely. “But our past actions toward the drifters ensure they view us as enemies and won’t help us willingly. Does it not?” He takes a few steps toward me, his eyes never leaving mine, and I can feel Ashford’s and Jacob’s gazes on me as well.

My body tenses, and I lift my chin. That Clayton calls the savages *drifters* like the rest of the oblivious townsfolk sets him even more apart from those of us who’ve lived the truth along with his father, while he’s been drinking his life away all these years.

“Ashford told me about you, Luke,” Clayton continues, studying me far too closely. “The youngest deputy we have, working for my father since you were fourteen and got your first pistol. You’ve got a vendetta against the drifters for killing your father when you were ten. A neighbor woman took you in after, and now she’s ailing.”

My chest burns with the knowledge he shares so openly, as if he knows me in the slightest. And his words make my jaw clench as I fist my hands at my sides so as not to do something I know I’ll come to regret.

“Ailing with the Choke, just like my sister, Isabel,” Clayton adds quietly.

My brow twitches as I picture the giggling, cherub-faced little girl from the stairs.

“I imagine you’d do anything to help June after her kindness to you, just as I would do anything to help my sister—to give them both a better life.”

His words hang in the air, heavy and weighted as if he’s waiting for me to disagree, but I can’t.

“I know the idea of peace doesn’t come easily for you, Mr. O’Brien, and given the past, I understand that, but if you knew what I do—if you’d read the letters passed down from generation to generation since the Shift by men like my father, twisting this world in a way that benefits them most and at any cost to others—you might see how much of the blame rests on our shoulders.”

Clayton exhales heavily, as if he’s forcing himself to take a breath. “Regardless of who has done what, the fact of the matter is that the water is drying up, and whatever the reason is in those mountains. We need to find a solution if we’re to survive. We have livestock and crops to sustain. Besides, we need more safety if we’re to send men further out in search for metal and materials to retrofit our buildings that are crumbling into sand. Just like June’s place is.” He says the last part slowly so that his words sink in, and I try not to gape at him in surprise. Clayton knows far more about me than I ever would’ve expected or thought he cared to, and it’s unnerving.

He tilts his head, focus razor-sharp as he speaks his next words carefully. “We need to get to that water, no matter how guilty or innocent any of us are in all of this. Therefore, we have to find a way to make peace with them. Don’t you think?”

Two minutes ago, Clayton was just a pretty boy next to the rugged memory of his father; he was a wilting shadow with a mountain of a man’s memory to live up to. But he’s shrewd. He knows more than I gave him credit for and is clearly invested in the wellbeing of the people of

Sagebrush—if for no other reason than to take care of his family, his sister. He’s formidable in his own right, and I give him a quick nod.

“If we’re not careful,” Clayton continues, glancing from me to Jacob. “The natives will eventually find us or make their move, and we’ll have to be ready for that too. Unless,” he continues, “we work to do something about it now.” He walks back to his desk. “Do either of you disagree?”

Jacob shakes his head earnestly. “No. Not at all, Mr. Cunningham.”

Clayton takes a sip of amber liquid from his crystal glass, then looks to me, waiting.

I want to tell him he’s been living in a cloud the past two decades while I’ve watched men die in front of me—that Ashford can feed him all the information he wants, truth or not, but it means little when you don’t know how life in this place really works without the money and protection he’s always had because of his father.

But when I see movement from the corner of my eye and notice Miss Josephine Mason leaning toward the unlit fireplace, every terse word and combative thought vanishes. Miss Mason’s dark red hair is messily pinned atop her head, a tendril of it loose and curling down the middle of her back as she absently rubs a fur pelt between her fingers.

I can’t help but stare blankly at the back of her bodice, as if I can see the scars I’ve heard mar her flesh beneath it. The rumors were rampant for days before and after the old marshal’s death, rumors of the pain he’d inflicted on her as a child after killing her mother in a jealous rage. If all of that is true, I wonder how she could sit in the old man’s study with his son, as if she’s a fixture here herself.

“Well,” Clayton hedges. “Are you with us, Mr. O’Brien, or not?”

It's then I realize I can't claim that Clayton is ignorant of the way this place works, because the truth is, there is much that I don't fully understand yet myself. And while I might be bitter and distrusting, my gut has never steered me wrong, and it tells me I am as oblivious as the rest of them in so many ways.

"Fine," I agree, mindful of June, myself, and the rest of the sick and weary living in Sagebrush.

"Good." Clayton turns back to the map. "So, how is it we don't know where they live in the mountains?" he asks. "After all these years, no one has tried to find them?"

"The sandstones along the foothills of the mountain range are slick and dangerous to travel," I tell him. "And without knowing the correct path, we could get lost and die simply trying to find them."

"It's a risk," Ashford adds. "There are caves everywhere they could be stationed at. It would be like walking into an ambush."

Clayton rubs his jaw, eyeing the map. "Jacob, show us where the old settlements used to be before the Shift, based on your research. It's what they've always known and they might still frequent them or the surrounding areas. We can start there."

Jacob happily walks to the desk, leaning over it and staring at the tattered parchment before he cracks open one of his journals. He flips through pages of dates and circled words, like *Industrial Revolution*, *environmental forces*, and *black lung*. Toward the end, he scans sketches and trails his fingers down one page and then another, skimming his chicken scratch. "They were land people—farmers." Jacob shakes his head. "Whatever information we have about their lives before is too much changed to know anything for certain. They would've grown crops here," he

says, pointing to the map. “But if that’s true, wouldn’t our men have found them long before now?”

When I see a list of herbs I can barely decipher, let alone pronounce, and a few locations sketched out with question marks beside them, I realize they’re grasping at straws.

“There are no farms or settlements,” I tell them. “But they’ve been known to set up makeshift outposts in the foothills.” I point to the unmarked terrain along the mountain range on the map. “We’ve found a few of them over the years. We think they prefer it, to re-group and hide from the storms, tucked away in rocks and caves like Ashford says, but close enough to the valley floor they can hunt, scavenge—whatever they want.”

“Draw it,” Clayton says, handing me a quill. “Everything you know—draw it so we can see. And I want to know what sort of weapons they have, what sort of skills, and what we’re to expect.”

“They have rifles—our rifles,” I say, sketching a sad excuse for a foothill settlement. “Guns they’ve taken from our dead and learned to wield against us to save their own skins . . . I’m not sure how many or how much ammunition they’ve hoarded. And they have their own weapons as well—knives and spears—”

“And arrows,” Miss Mason says, her voice quiet, but I’m not sure if it’s from sadness or because she is deep in thought. She turns to us, her slight frame regal in a way I’ve never noticed before as she straightens her shoulders and smooths out her blue skirt. “They have bows and arrows. I’ve seen them.”

Clayton watches her, a thousand questions in his gaze, but he only asks one. “Have we ever been attacked by them first?” His eyes shift to me and then to Ashford.

I open my mouth to say yes, of course we have, but I stop myself. After everything that's been divulged in the past couple of weeks, I'm not entirely certain anymore. I've never had them come out of the darkness and try to slit my throat in the night like I've heard so often. I've seen bloodstained dirt and their bodies, and I've seen them from yards away, but I've never seen them ambush riders firsthand. I've never watched the bloodshed with my own eyes, save for what happened with the two riders Doyle and I shot in the canyon.

"According to stories," I say instead.

"We've always lived in fear of them—always acted without thought," Ashford adds, and walks over to the French doors. "And based on your father's journal, Clayton, we have no idea how many of them there actually are. There were hundreds generations ago, tribes of people, some just like us, who took to the mountains for safety. How many are left is anyone's guess, and we have no idea what we're walking into." He peers out at the few shrubs and mesquite trees that break up the barren land surrounding the estate.

"Christ," Clayton curses under his breath, and rubs his temple. "I never wanted to inherit this godforsaken town, but this . . ." He looks at Miss Mason, perhaps for guidance.

"Whatever your plans," she says, taking a step closer to our broken circle. There's worry in her gaze as she stares into Clayton's eyes. "You must remember that, unlike us, they are clearly patient." She glances between the three of us. "You must go with men who will not act on instinct or in fear. We must be smart about this if we have any hope of peace—any hope of surviving a conversation with them." She lets her words sink in. "We must do whatever we can to show them we mean no harm, not anymore."

"I wouldn't trust them coming to us to speak of peace," I tell her. "And I'm certain they won't trust us either, no matter what we say."

Ashford sighs, crossing his arms over his chest. “Perhaps we can trade with them,” he offers.

“These people have farmed this land and lived here far longer than we have,” Jacob starts, glancing at the map. “They’ve learned how to adapt, that much is clear. The mountains offer them protection and water—for all we know, they’re the ones who are blocking the river from us. And if what we’ve known all this time is a lie,” he continues, staring pointedly at me, “and we’ve been seeking them out to harm them, not the other way around, we may not have anything they want or need that’s worth a possible peace.”

“They’re not likely to turn down food, weapons, or women,” I say, and while that earns me a few unappreciative glances, everyone knows it’s true.

Miss Mason holds out the fur pelt in her hand. The apprehension that darkens her hazel eyes is unmistakable as she steps closer. “They were peaceful when I met them, and I believe there is hope. Though you must find a way to speak to the right people, otherwise whoever goes may not come back,” she adds, and swallows thickly. Her eyes are fixed on Clayton, and I wonder if she’s silently pleading for him to stay behind.

It’s then I realize the hardest part comes next. Deciding who would give up their life for an impossible peace. With the old marshal newly dead, what would happen to Sagebrush if Clayton was killed too? Chaos would descend—deputies would fight for power. Fear would run rampant with no established leader.

“I think Luke should go,” Jacob says.

“What?” I nearly choke. Eyes wide, I stare at him. I can feel everyone’s gazes shift from him to me.

Jacob shrugs. “Why not? It makes sense. You know where the outposts and safe places to hide are—how to maneuver sandstorms. You know how to use a gun—” He lifts his palm defensively and peers around. “You’ve been out there half your life, Luke, and you want peace with them just as much as anyone.”

I’m about to correct him when he points to the herbal remedies in his journal. “We don’t have these plants anymore, Luke. They likely do, or know where we can get them.”

My mouth clamps shut as the deep-rooted resentment and distrust I have for the savages almost gets the better of me. But as much as I hate that Jacob’s right, I know he is. It pains me to admit June’s near her end, and I know that when she’s gone, I’ll have nothing left. A possible remedy for the Choke—even the slightest hope—would be worth whatever hatred I’d have to swallow to give June a semblance of ease in the last days that remain of her harsh, exhausting life.

A lump forms in my throat and my eyes shift around the group, landing on stern, uncertain faces.

Miss Mason, specifically, looks at me warily, judging me and perhaps not fully trusting me, and I don’t blame her.

“I would trust Luke over the other deputies,” Ashford finally says. “He has more to lose.” Though I detest the fact that he’s talking about me as if I’m not in the room, Ashford is right about trusting me over the others. Holyworth, Marsh, Carter—they’ve lived and breathed the old marshal and Doyle far longer than I have. They have loose tongues that would squash any hopes of peace, no matter how temporary, and their cushy lives with all the whores and booze they could ever want would make them all too quick to pull the trigger. I, on the other hand, can’t act as easily; Doyle showed me that.

“I will go,” I finally say. “The other men would likely wind up dead. But—” I meet Clayton’s gaze, pinning him in place. “If I go with you, I’m doing this for June and a possible remedy for the Choke, just as Jacob and your father discussed. I want whatever you get from this as payment—as much of it as I want, for June.”

Clayton’s eyes hold mine for a few heartbeats before he looks at Ashford, who dips his chin in answer.

“And,” I add.

Clayton’s gaze cuts back to mine with a flare of irritation.

“You give me your word you’ll take care of June as best you can if something happens to me—like you would your sick sister.” I look at Miss Mason. “Give her the same care and comforts.” I don’t like the strain in my voice, and while I’m not sure I should trust that Clayton will keep his word, I feel certain Miss Mason would.

Clayton inclines his head. “You have our word.”

Miss Mason appraises me a second longer than I expect, and I almost think I’ve got her compassionate nature all wrong, when finally she concedes. “Of course we will.”

Running one hand through his sandy blonde hair, Clayton peers down at the map again. “Now, to decide who else must go with us.”

There’s barely a second’s pause before Jacob says, “I will,” shocking the shit out of me. Although he’s a good guy, he’s not a fighter in any sense of the word, nor does he like to get dirty. “I know some of the language,” he offers, holding up the book. “At least the basics. Luke told me once he heard them speaking in their native tongue, which means some of them might not speak any English at all. We don’t know who we’ll come across.”

He's right. I can still hear the man's foreign curses the day I watched the woman fall to the ground. I push the memory aside. "Not to mention," I add, "we'll likely need your medical skills if we're going to come back in one piece."

"It's settled then," Ashford says. "The three of us, and I'll bring Andy along. He's the best tracker we have."

"Jonathan," Clayton says, shaking his head. "What about Scarlet and Tobias?" He pauses, his voice earnest, and I recall the orphan boy who lost his caregiver as a result of one of Doyle's treacherous deeds in his quest for power. "You have them to think about—"

"And you have this town and Miss Mason," Ashford counters. "Since we've taken the boy in, Scarlet and Tobias have gotten on well together. They will be fine while I'm away. But if you go on this mission and don't come back, this town will be ruined. You cannot leave, not with everything so unsettled. I can go with Luke. They won't recognize me, and as long as we're careful, they may be more curious than anything. Besides, we don't want a larger group, it would only draw more attention. The last thing we want is to look threatening."

Clayton curses and sits down in his father's high-back chair, running his hands over his face as the weight of uncertainty settles in around all of us. This is really happening. We are riding into an unknown filled with danger so outside of our control, it will be a miracle if any of us are standing here days from now.

"You must also bring them a peace offering," Miss Mason adds, looking at Ashford. "We must acknowledge what we've done—give them some sort of recompense, some closure."

We all look at her as she stares at the canyon on the map, where the river runs through the edge of the town. She taps it absently. "Where are their things?" she asks, her voice distant. "Their furs, their bows and arrows—everything they had on them before they were killed must

go back.” There’s a bite to her voice that wasn’t there before. A commanding tone I would never dare cross.

Their furs and bows and arrows . . . I can imagine the savages perfectly on top of their horses, but it was so much a blur, I don’t know what happened to their belongings after I’d pulled the trigger.

“I’m sure their belongings were logged in the ledgers,” Ashford says.

“You’re sure about that?” Clayton lifts an eyebrow. “Those ledgers were a wild goose chase last time I looked at them.”

Ashford looks from Clayton to Miss Mason again. “I’ll find them,” he assures her. His tone is almost sympathetic. He doesn’t just respect Miss Mason, I realize, but he cares about her, perhaps like a father would his daughter.

She eyes him carefully. “Scarlet will not be pleased to hear you’re leaving. You could be gone for weeks.” *Or not return home at all*, goes unsaid.

Ashford straightens and glances around as if he’s reading the room, weighing what each of us is leaving behind. “I’ll speak with her—to her and Tobias both. They must understand.”

“Well, then.” Clayton leans back in his chair, exhaustion darkening his features. “They were a peaceful people once, according to my father’s journals. Some of them were at least, and used to trade with us before the Shift, despite our troubled path. We must have faith that this will work because we need that water.” Clayton flips over three more glasses and fills them with whiskey. “We have a lot of work to do,” he says, and looks at me. “Mr. O’Brien, tell us everything else you know.”

Chapter 4

Kaia

They are three days late.

That's three days of idly waiting, the distance between sunrise and sunset stretching further and more desolate than the desert floor without rain.

Three days of worrying what's keeping the hunters, and three days shrouded in constant cloud cover, making it impossible to see any life beyond the cliffs. Snow settles in the mountain peaks surrounding us, *katsinas*' protective veil against the *soshos*—the white devils, greedy like vultures that scavenge the sands below.

But, this place that keeps us safe—this dwelling that was our ancestors' blessing generations before now—might be our unmaking.

I peer up at the thickening storm clouds that rarely disperse, and a frigid gust whips across the mountain, catching the falling water from the cliff overhead. Mist kisses my skin, cool against my face. A warning from the *katsinas* to tame my wandering thoughts, perhaps, and quiet my budding fury.

Leaning against the carved stone, I watch Ahkima gathering his men together on the lookout below. All of them are dressed in brown and gray fox furs, but Ahkima stands out—confident, strong, and always so serious. He is a good warrior, one of the last true leaders we have to fight against the *soshos*.

Anger warms me from the inside out. That Ahkima's leading another mission down the mountain to look for our people should make me feel better, but if he returns with no sign of Cole, I'll once again have to hide my fury and disappointment, as well as my fear.

The *katsinas* chide me again, but with a bone-chilling gust this time, and I pull my furs closer to my ears. Though it clears my mind to be away from the others, I've lingered outside too long.

As I turn to head back into the mountain, Ahkima's dark eyes meet mine. I wish I could go with him, that I could be at his side, looking for my people, but Oona and Elan would tie me down before they let me step foot off this mountain, especially now.

Ahkima lifts his chin, his jaw clenching with determination and a promise to do all that he can to bring my cousin back to me. After our silent farewell, I leave the wind and darkening skies behind and step into the stone tunnel. Oona will skin me alive if I'm late to my birth day marking ritual.

Wind howls through the tunnel as I make my way toward the village. The layers of quartz and sandstone have kept us safe since the Great Storm, hiding us from the dangers of the desert lands to the south, and protecting us from the constant blizzards that have flurried to the north for generations. But the mountain has left us with only stone and earth, too wet to yield much, so we wilt along with our depleted resources.

Intermittent torchlight shadows the path as I weave my way deeper into the mountain. The stories of life before the violent winds and torrential rains are so different than the world we live in now—the stories of my ancestors' farming the earth so dry it crumbled between their fingers. A life of sunshine, hot and inescapable. Rows of corn as far as the eye could see; rolling hills of sagebrush, the stone mountains only mirages in the distance instead of what feels like our inescapable tomb.

Those are the stories Oona still tells, always with a lilt of hope in her voice, or perhaps it's certainty that our people will find balance once again. She tells her stories to the children and

shows them the drawings of our ancestors who came to the mountains long before they settled on the valley floor, but I pay no mind to her tales. I know life as it was before the Great Storm is impossible, no matter what Oona's spirits tell her.

"Kaia." Muna says my name with a barely perceptible hiss as we meet in the mouth of the cavern. Being one of our council elders, she often views me with silent judgement, which isn't surprising. "Ahkima says he leaves again before dark."

I keep my gaze fixed on the lines etched in her face, the hard purse of her mouth as she speaks, and I refuse to look away despite my discomfort in her presence. "Yes, he's readying the others below. I suspect he'll be gone for a couple days, at least."

"And you think it wise for them to venture out, knowing what's befallen the hunting party—"

"We know nothing for certain," I tell her, resenting the harsh finality in her tone. "And Ahkima will do as he wills."

Muna's eyebrows lift, but the hard set of her features is unwavering. Much like her son, Muna is serious, but unlike the concern and affection I see in Ahkima's eyes, Muna's gaze holds scrutiny and censure. She hated my mother, and she will always hate me because I am my mother's daughter. Part of me has come to accept it, even if I don't understand why. Another part of me resents such a cold-hearted shrew for breathing when my mother no longer does.

"Be steady, be patient, in all that you do. Never feed the beast." Hearing my mother's voice in the back of my mind, I bite back the remarks forming on my tongue, and without another word, we exchange a sharp but courteous nod, then carry on our separate ways. I glance back in time to see Muna disappear through the tunnel behind me. Probably to say farewell to her only son.

I bristle when she's out of sight, straighten my shoulders, and pray she is wrong, even if I've tried and failed not to assume Cole, Tiva, Tate, and the others have met their end at the hands of the *soshos*. Muna's snide comments don't help ease my mind either.

Although our people have been peaceful since the Great Storm, there is an undeniable tension between some of the council elders and myself that grows heavier as my ceremony draws closer. Muna doesn't think I've earned my status. If only she knew how much I agree, nor do I want it.

With a deep breath, I continue into the plaza, the center of our hidden village, and into a sea of tan and dark-skinned faces. No matter the uncertainty that awaits my people outside the mountain, inside feels like an entirely different world. For all the rituals and beliefs that I question daily, the pride I've always felt in the Hopi people—in all the clans from all corners of the desert that make up our tribe—never wavers. Everyone has a purpose and fulfills it without hesitation, a legacy my mother and her ancestors have left behind, for me.

Remembering the looming birth day markings awaiting me, I shut my eyes and let the scents and bustling life of midday calm me. The basket weavers chat quietly among themselves with dried, yellow rabbitbrush spread out on hide blankets, awaiting use. The dull scent of smoke, boiling pine, and roasting yucca root fills my nostrils and lingers in the cool air that catches the breeze through the cavernous space.

Children sit around the fire, listening to elder Sakima's stories of old as they mold their clay *katsina* dolls that will watch over them as they sleep.

"You must use caution," Sakima says in a brittle voice as he deftly smooths the palmed-sized figure in his hand. The little girls and boys use pointed bone to shape their dolls. "Your parents will never forgive me if you lose a finger."

Some of the children giggle, then their mouths contort just right as they concentrate again, their eyes fixed on their task.

“Like the sun god did for us,” Sakima continues in his warbly voice, “we mold the *katsina* with grace and respect. They will protect us, if we do. We were born from the earth just as they will be, though we were breathed to life by the goddess below.”

“Kaia!” I meet Lena’s gaze outside her family’s adobe, one of many surrounding the plaza, where she and her mother burn sage and dissect dried cactus fruit. “Any news?” she asks as I draw closer. Since Lena is our resident dye maker, and her mother our most gifted herbalist, they can always be relied upon to be brewing tinctures and stews, so I’m not surprised to find herbs and dried flowers laid out on the stone in front of them.

I inhale the steady plume of incense constantly surrounding their home. Though her mother continues to hum, Lena looks at me with brown eyes that appear almost black against her pale skin. “Ahkima has gone in search for the hunters,” I tell her.

She busies herself thoughtfully, but I know she is deciding whether or not to tease me. “And you are not going with him?” The amusement in her voice is obvious as she looks up at me from her lashes. Growing up together, Lena knows as well as everyone else that Ahkima and I have been inseparable most of our lives, though now, things feel different, even if I’m not certain why.

“No, of course not. You know Oona would never forgive me.” *If I even came back.*

With a shrug, Lena sets aside a bundle of sage wrapped in yucca root. “And you always do as your grandmother says?”

I can’t help but crack a small smile, which feels foreign in the somberness that’s settled upon the village the past few days. “Not always,” I admit.

She shakes her head, her amusement fading. “It’s for the best, you know? Cole’s leaving without you was maddening, yes—but imagine your possible fate had you gone with them. We would be wondering what happened to you these weeks past, just as you worry for him.”

I look anywhere but at her, not wanting to hear the same lecture I’ve already heard from Oona a dozen times over. “Perhaps they went further west this time, toward the burnt lands.”

Lena’s forehead crumples with sympathy but I raise my eyebrow in defiance, daring her to disagree that it’s possible.

Finally, she concedes. “Whatever their reasons for being late to return, that you didn’t go is for the best,” she repeats. Only this time, she grins. “You would no doubt find yourself in more trouble than they have. You have a weakness for it. Like when we decided to sneak away and visit your parents grave without Elan . . . That was a disaster.”

I roll my eyes. “We were twelve, and it’s not our fault there was a blizzard.”

“Perhaps not, but what about the snowbank and the rockslide?” There’s humor in her voice, though when we were younger it wasn’t the slightest bit entertaining. “We could’ve died out there, frozen to death at the top of the mountain.”

“But we didn’t,” I say. Elan found us, Ahkima by his side. He’d tattled, I was sure of it, but I was too happy they’d found us and brought us home to be angry with him.

“Speaking of troublesome youth, where is Nico?” I glance around for her little brother. Though Lena is light skinned like her father, a descendant of a *sosho* from generations back, Nico is a brown-faced cheeky thing who takes after his mother, quiet but mischievous.

“Practicing his English with Gerta and the others. They wish to perform at your ceremony.” Lena smiles widely, knowing it would be unheard of to veer away from tradition, even if I wish we could.

“A private performance, perhaps.” I smile at her and steal some dried blood-red Saguaro fruit from her basket and pop it into my mouth. “Besides, who said there was going to be a ceremony?”

Lena practically snorts, as if I’m joking, and hands me another piece of dried fruit. “For the road.” The Saguaro is mildly sweet and reminds me of my mother, so I savor the flavor on my tongue. Lena’s mother continues to hum, still lost in her own world as she tends to her herbs.

“I should go,” I say, and as I’m about to leave, Kimi turns to me.

“Take care, my child,” she says kindly. She bows her head and hands me a dried sage leaf. “There is much change ahead.”

I blink at her. “Thank you,” I say, gracious but a bit tentative. Lena’s mother turns back to her humming and herbs, and I peer at the adobes lining the cliff above.

“What’s her meaning?” Lena asks, brow furrowed again. “Where do you go now?” Unlike her mother who is faceted to the beliefs of our ancestors, Lena is a free spirit who dares to question the old ways, like me, and often forgets them entirely.

So not to insult Kimi, I force my snide comments from my tongue. “To see the scribe,” I mutter, looking at Lena with a tight-lipped smile.

Her eyes widen and shift from my face to my neck. “Oh.”

“Yes, *oh*,” I mutter. The markings are my birthright and symbolize adulthood, a display all men and women receive on their eighteenth year. I glance at the markings on Lena’s wrists and arms, far different from the ones I will receive. While hers boast the transformation of girl to woman, my markings will signify my lineage and a future that is uncertain, the weight of it too great and looming.

But with a deep sigh, I accept my current fate. “Thank you.” I hold up the last Saguaro fruit before plopping it into my mouth. Lena offers me a small wave and I head through the plaza for the cliffs. Oona waits for me up there, probably cursing my tardiness as she peers out the window of the scribe’s quarters.

I barely make it a few more steps when a deep, familiar voice reaches my ears. “Kaia?”

I turn around as Elan steps out of the woodcarver’s place. Elan barely fits through the doorway, and as he straightens, I notice a bow in hand. He frowns. “I thought you were with Oona and the scribe.”

“Yes, well, I’m running a bit late.” I offer him a sheepish grin, though I welcome another distraction.

Elan glances from me to the tunnel behind us. “You were on the landing again,” he says, but I don’t bother responding. “To say goodbye to Ahkima?” Though he doesn’t say it, I know he’s grateful I didn’t get any bright ideas and decide to go with him on his journey down the mountain.

I nod, even though Ahkima’s journey is only one reason I went out for air. I glance up at the scribe’s quarters, wondering if it’s not too late to get out of my birth day markings and all that I fear lies ahead. But Elan, my most fervent protector, worries too much about me, so I don’t bother him with the details.

Instead, I look at the bow in his hand. “Have you finally decided to learn, Elan?” I ask, almost hopeful. “I could use some real competition.” I nod to the tunnel leading to the hunter’s practice range and smile at him. Being the age my father would be, were he still alive, I’m surprised Elan’s decided to pick up a new skill, especially since he’s one of many villagers stuck in the ways of the old. “Have you finally given up your axe?” *And the white devils’ gun.*

With a straight face and smiling eyes, Elan hands the bow to me. “Not for me . . . For your birth day.”

I accept it on instinct and lift a quizzical brow. “Are you trying to tell me something?” I smirk, but my amusement fades when I notice the bear carving where sinew meets bow, and my breath falters. “*Hon?*” I look into Elan’s pale blue eyes, clear and expectant.

“Your *katsina*,” he starts, and I nod. Yes, my *katsina*, and the significance of such a gift makes my heart swell. “For your transition,” he explains. “Your father would want you to have one of your own—one that will help protect you. He would be proud of you.” The warmth in his voice nearly brings tears to my eyes, and suddenly the future, as looming and uncertain as it is, seems almost too heavy to bear. Not without my parents. *I can’t do any of it without them . . .*

I force myself to swallow. “*Askwali*, Elan.” I thank him, my voice low and rough, but there is nothing I can do to prevent it. I grip the bow tighter in my hand. The rituals, the ceremony—I’ve been reluctantly waiting for this next phase in my path, but now that it’s here, I am more fearful than ever.

Elan says nothing, our exchange meaningful but silent as we stare at one another until finally, he glances away. “Your grandmother is waiting for you.” Elan’s voice is solemn because he knows how much I dread the future, and he nods toward the adobes settled on the highest cliff of the cave. It’s where my family home sits, where chieftains and leaders have lived for generations before me. Now, Oona and I are the only ones left, and the empty rooms are like ominous voids waiting to be filled, my future waiting to be embraced, and I fight the urge to run the other direction.

“Walk me to the scribe?” I ask Elan instead, not wanting to be alone.

With a nod, he falls into step beside me, and we weave our way up the stone pathway. My heart hammers in my chest and my furs are suddenly stifling. Every lesson has led to this moment. Every trial. Each death, whether it be villager or loved ones dearest to me, has shaped me into the person I am—the leader I must become, even if I’m not yet ready.

I take Elan’s hand in mine, surprising us both, and I lead him up the stone steps to the scribe’s adobe.

Before I can thank him again for such a beautiful gift, Oona shrieks my name. “Kaia!” The wicker door opens and she takes my hand, hers warm and wrinkled in mine, and ushers me inside. The air is thick with a potent incense I’ve never smelled before and it nearly burns my eyes.

The scribe stands in a beaded and feathered robe, a perturbed look on his decorated, narrowed face. I can barely make out his dark eyes against the black and blue painting his features, and I swallow thickly.

“You are late,” Oona says, glaring at me.

Elan is about to leave us, but I shake my head. “No.” He and Oona look at me, knowing tradition forbids anyone but family to witness such a sacred moment, but Elan and Oona are my family. “Stay,” I tell him, though it’s more of a command.

Oona and Elan exchange another look before Elan moves to the back of the adobe room, lit only by candlelight.

“Disrobe,” the scribe says without ceremony. He’s always been an expressionless, tight-lipped man—just as frightening to me now as he was when I was a child—and I can’t tell if, like some, he is against my approaching accession, or if he’s simply doing his job and marking a young woman on her eighteenth year. Either way, he’s a spindly man whose hands shake too

much for comfort as he picks up a Saguaro thorn. It's enough to tip the scale and make me flee, but the small part of me that clings to the beliefs of our people, hopes the markings will protect me from the sickness that claimed my mother and the *soshos* that plague the desert floor, as the symbols are meant to.

My palms and brow sweat, though I school my expression into one of indifference and drop my furs to the floor. Elan turns around as I remove my top, but Oona is quick to hand me a wide cloth. I nod in gratitude and climb onto the raised cot, then cover my exposed breasts.

I'm not sure where my mind goes after that, only that the prick of the needle against my skin goes unnoticed as the significance of the day settles over me, haunting my thoughts.

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Sitting at the edge of the crystalline pool, I stare up at the mineral columns spearing down from overhead. In this particular cave, where the water is still, it's calming and settles the hum in my body that vibrates just below the surface.

I peer down at the tender flesh of my neck and chest. The markings are different than I remember my mother having, bigger and more vibrant. They are red and tingling and feel alive on my skin. I thought I stood out as a child, being the daughter of descendants from the Unification Council, but now I am marked as such. Forever and for all to see. The rush of the river beyond the cave is a distant murmur. It's not just the absence of chatter and the whir of wind through the tunnels above that I crave, but this sacred place I often retreat to, known only to Oona and me.

Peeling off the last of my clothes, I let out a heavy breath and lose myself in my still, blue reflection. My outline is the same as it's always been, though I feel as if everything has changed in a single moment. This morning I was just me, eighteen and fighting against the future I didn't

want. Now, I'm a step closer to that future and it feels as though I can no longer escape it. If I refuse my heritage, it would be a dishonor to my people. If I accept the *etsi*, I accept that I am taking my mother's place; I become a prisoner to my fate despite my wavering belief in everything my people believe. I cannot help but feel . . . lost.

Cupping the water in my hand, I pour it over my skin. The water is cold, but that's expected, and my skin no longer reacts the way it used to when my mother would bring me here as a little girl, when I struggled to get along with the other children. My skin was lighter than theirs, my eyes too bright. As if my lineage didn't set me enough apart, my appearance did.

"I know it is difficult," she would say as she bathed me, her voice in the quiet calming my nerves. "But you must accept the *etsi* one day. You are the daughter. You are special and this is your future." In a village where women are the voice of the people, it is the greatest honor that an *etsi* have a first born daughter. Even if I was the only child my mother would ever have.

"As *etsi*, you will give the people hope and they will love and respect you. But you must watch the fire that burns in your heart. Your passion and quick tongue must not make you reckless, and you must never forget that all of this is for the people and our survival. Not for you." I'm not sure if my mother's words were meant to inspire or guilt me, but I've never forgotten them. Some days, when I miss her the most, I even resent them.

Oona believes my wandering soul is amplified by the emotions and unrest of my ancestors. And because of her idyllic nature, my grandmother also believes my Claiming, starting with my markings, will ground me. Not Kaia, the soon-to-be *etsi*, but Kaia, leader of her people. Leader of an entire broken village and a sanctuary for landless people.

But who can live up to such a fate? Certainly not an orphan who would rather be fighting for her people than holed up, speaking words to placate them instead of fighting for them.

And if I fail my mother's memory?

Chest nearly too tight to breathe, I slip into the water and immerse myself completely. No more dwelling on what cannot be undone today.