DEFEND THE DAWN

Books by Brigid Kemmerer

Letters to the Lost
More Than We Can Tell
Call It What You Want

The Cursebreaker series

A Curse So Dark and Lonely
A Heart So Fierce and Broken
A Vow So Bold and Deadly

Forging Silver into Stars

Defy the Night
Defend the Dawn

DEFEND THE DAWN

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For Jonathan and Kara

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THE KINGDOM
The Kingdom of Ostriary
TRADER'S LANDING
SUNKEEP
STEEL CITY
W
S
N
E


OF KANDALA
Flaming River
The Sorrowlands
Moonlight Plains
The Wilds
Mosswell
Queen's River
The Royal Sector
Emberridge
Artis

The Political Leaders of Kandala

Name	Role	Sector
King Harristan	King	Royal
Prince Corrick	King's Justice	Royal
Barnard Montague (Deceased)	Consul	Trader's Landing*
Allisander Sallister	Consul	Moonlight Plains
Leander Craft (Deceased)	Consul	Steel City
Jonas Beeching	Consul	Artis
Lissa Marpetta	Consul	Emberridge
Roydan Pelham	Consul	The Sorrowlands
Arella Cherry	Consul	Sunkeep
Jasper Gold	Consul	Mosswell

*Sometimes called "Traitor's Landing" after the former king and queen were assassinated by Consul Montague, leaving Harristan and his younger brother, Corrick, in power.

The Rebels

Name	Role
Tessa	Apothecary*
Karri	Apothecary
Lochlan	Metalworker

*Now working in service to the king

The *Dawn Chaser* Crew

Name	Role
Rian Blakemore	Captain
Gwyn Tagas	First Lieutenant
Sablo	Second Lieutenant
Marchon	Navigator and Quartermaster
Dabriel	Cook

The Cure

The only known cure for the fever is an elixir created from dried Moonflower petals, a plant native only to two sectors: Moonlight Plains and Emberridge. Moonflower petals are strictly rationed among sectors, and quantities are limited.

Consul Sallister has promised to provide enough Moonflower for the population of Kandala for eight weeks.

Many citizens fear that it won't be enough.

Chapter One

The Outlaw

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

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

Drinking is still common. Maybe more so.

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

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

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

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

I step off the trail and slip a few coins from my pouch. The first house is smaller than most, likely only one room inside, but there's a chicken coop and a rabbit hatch out back. I've never seen who lives here, but the animals seem well cared for. I intend to leave a few coppers on the barrel of grain, but then I see a small bundle wrapped up in muslin, next to a misspelled message written in the dust.

THENK You.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aha!" a whispered voice says. "I caught you."

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

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

Regardless, I stand my ground, the ax ready.

The figure springs back, hands raised. "Whoa!"

It's not the night patrol. It's . . . it's a girl. She's tall, nearly as tall as I am, which makes me think she's older, but her features still have the softness of childhood, and her limbs are lean and willowy. She's in a pale sleeping shift that leaves her arms bare, the hem trailing in the grass. Her blond hair is in a messy braid that reaches past her waist.

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

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

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

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

"I am."

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

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

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

"I've heard those stories."

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

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

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

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

"It doesn't matter."

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

"Go home."

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

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

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

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

"So you don't think that's true?"

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

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

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

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

"Is it bad?" she's saying, and there's a hint of a tremor in her voice.

"I can't tell. Sit."

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

She grimaces. "Ma will kill me."

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

"I wanted to know who you are. My cousin won't believe I caught you."

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

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

She clenches her teeth and nods fiercely.

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

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

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

I shake my head. "An arrowhead."

"From the night patrol?"

I shrug. "From someone wearing shoes, most likely."

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

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

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

"Call me whatever you want," I say. "I won't come this way again."

"No!" she calls. "Wait. Please. This is my fault—you don't—" Her

voice breaks like she's going to cry. "You don't know how much we all need—"

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

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

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

I do know how much they all need. The outlaws Wes and Tessa once provided a lot to these people. I've heard so many stories that it makes my head spin. I can't make up for their disappearance with a few coins left here and there. I'm not entirely sure why I keep trying.

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

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

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

"You'll come back?" she says.

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

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

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

"Violet."

"Take care of that foot, Violet."

She nods. "Thank you, Fox."

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