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RONIE KENDIG



KINGS

THE BOOK OF THE WARS - BOOK 2

FALLING

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Prologue

STUTTGART, GERMANY

Being hunted by the monsters she had created was a horrifying, well-deserved death. God forgive her for the terrible things she'd done, but it had been for good. For the good of all humankind.

Only it hadn't turned out . . . good.

Cobbled streets threatened to catch her heel and wrench her ankle as she hurried behind Dieter, his large frame casting deepening shadows. Katrin stumbled down the wet, darkened road, gulping air and adrenaline. A whimper begged for freedom just as she begged for life. But neither would come. Gods and demons had nothing on the men chasing them through dark alleys. In their attempt to prevent the unimaginable, to thwart a focused, shrewd enemy from succeeding, she had helped breed a pure form of violence. And now that violence demanded blood. Their blood.

"Wait, wait," Dieter said, shoving her back into a doorway of shadows. "Here. Quiet."

Was he crazy? They would be found! But his bulk pressed her into the corner next to some rubbish bins. The former warehouses now held low-wage factories and small flats crammed with numerous families. Flattened against the damp stone of a factory building,

the chill seeping through her thin blouse, Katrin tried to steady her racing pulse. With aches and exhaustion squeezing her muscles and lungs, she found it impossible to breathe normally. Her heart thundered after running for blocks.

In novels and movies, people in their position would hear the slapping feet of the approaching killers. Grunted threats. But not in real life. Not with those who hunted them. They were fast, stealthy.

She rested her head against Dieter's back. It was no use to calm herself—she would never again be calm. *We were wrong. We were so wrong.* Her fingers trembled as she wiped her tears. Was there no way to fix this?

Black shapes slithered through the night, streetlamps caressing lithe forms that moved as if they did not need light to see. The air swirled and stirred a reek of the refuse around Katrin. The stench of death.

It's your imagination.

A tremor spirited down her spine as she watched the four figures fade from sight. It should be no surprise that, of the lot, he'd sent the most violent. Which warned Katrin she would not survive the night.

But she must. They must.

When they reached her brother's home, he would chastise her, say she should have listened to him. He always said that, even as a child. He was six years her senior, and though she had multiple degrees, he had power and prestige. His name carried weight and influence.

She was the weight. He'd supported her, since the career she had fought so hard for provided little income.

The fabric of Dieter's wool jacket pulled away, pushing her breath into the back of her throat. *No, no. Wait awhile longer.* Fear's voice held her hostage in the cold, damp evening.

She watched as he slipped to the edge of the building, her nerves jammed yet buzzing. He would be detected. And their escape would be for naught.

To her surprise, he motioned her from the hiding spot.

But Katrin could not move. Dared not twitch a muscle for fear of discovery. When his motioning grew frantic, she peeled from the cocoon of darkness and stench. She drifted toward him, expecting with each step to be set upon.

He caught her hand and pulled out onto the open road. “They are g—”

“No,” she breathed. “It’s not safe.” It would never be safe again.

Dieter cupped her face. “My Katrin, trust me. We are halfway there.”

Halfway. Her heart crumbled both in relief and agony. Halfway meant they’d managed to get this far, which she hadn’t thought possible. But halfway also meant they had a lot of distance yet to cover. A lot of risk and opportunity to get caught. To be killed.

“What if we don’t make it?” It was a stupid question, but desperation forced the words from her mouth.

“We will,” he said ardently. “Remember, plans are in place, and we have the documents to end this.” He patted his satchel and nodded to hers, tucked beneath her coat.

They both had a set of files for when—not if—trouble came. That way, if one went down, the responsibility rested on the shoulders of the other to survive and succeed.

It was insane to think they could.

But the thought of this information never getting out made her heart writhe. What that could mean. What the world would look like in a few years.

“Come.” Dieter stuck close to shops and stoops as they darted through the warehouse district.

They rounded a bend onto a long, narrow road. Scurried across it. Each step made it easier to breathe, fanned the dangerous flame of hope. When they stepped around a manhole to avoid making noise, a shape dropped in front of them from a rooftop.

With a gasp, Katrin leapt back and grabbed Dieter’s coat. She saw another shape appear on her right. Heard a thump behind her.

“Game’s up, old man,” the leader said.

Unwilling to fail, unwilling to die here and let all hope be lost, Katrin looked for a way out. Willed a car to come down the empty road. Searched for someone to help. But they were surrounded only by dark shadows, flanking alleys, and a vicious enemy. She shifted behind Dieter, easing to his left. Closer to the alley. Could she make it? A lazy fog snaked around them, adding to the ominous threat these men posed. No, not merely a threat. A foretelling.

Dieter reached back with both hands.

She touched him—only to feel that he held something cold and hard. A gun? She glanced down, strangled at the thought. But the shape—not a gun. It was cylindrical. With a tab and pin at the top.

Pulse slowing at the sight of the grenade, she wondered if he meant to blow all of them up instead of surrendering. “Dieter,” she whispered.

He tugged her close and pressed his lips to the spot in front of her ear. “When I say *go*, run!” He spoke so quietly, the fog nearly captured his words.

Terror gripped her. “No.”

“What’ll it be?” the leader demanded. “Now or never, Dr. Wagner. We are out of time and patience.”

Dieter shoved her aside. “Go!” He lifted his hand.

Even as Katrin threw herself toward safety, she heard the pin hit the cobbled road. Felt the tension thicken. Rustling fabric—the men shifting and taking aim. Shouts of “grenade” erupted. She raced to the alley, hunching low to use the fog for cover, and flattened herself against the wall.

The explosion punched the night, loud and painful in the confined space. It popped her ears. Heat gusted her hair, but the wall protected her.

Seizing the chaos, she rushed on. Wouldn’t stop. Wouldn’t look back. Though she didn’t hear the *thwap* of feet, she knew they were coming. She had the vain hope that Dieter had survived the detonation, but it could not be. He was dead. It was up to her now. She must get out alive.

It is impossible! She had no training for this! Katrin was not a soldier. She was a scientist, a doctor.

Which meant she had brains. A brain to use. But she was slow, and they were not. She was tiring, and they were not. Still, she ran, not heeding the aches and blisters that throbbed. In one alley, out onto a street. Through a market with stands that allowed her to dart in and out of view.

Shots cracked behind her.

Tapestries hanging overhead swayed violently—no doubt struck by bullets—and moonlight betrayed her location. Katrin ducked and hurried on, scurrying from stand to stand. From one shop to another. Then many alleys.

Another gunshot. Fire burned.

She tripped, pushed herself back up, and shoved onward. Dieter had made her vow not to use phones because they were too easily tracked. And whoever they called could be drawn into this nightmare, which she would not wish on anyone.

But they had hoped to do this together. Now she had to find a way to reach her brother.

At the end of another alley, she hesitated a few feet from the corner. Listening around the wild thunder of her pulse, she breathed deeply through her nose to slow her breathing. Her legs buckled. She frowned, catching herself against the wall, her shoulder scraping the brick. A strange ache pinched her side. She touched it, and her hand came away sticky.

She glanced down, stricken at the dark stain there. Oh no. They'd shot her. Mentally, she assessed her body and aches. There was too much blood loss, weakening her. Very quickly.

I'm going to die.

Not before I get this to my brother.

Death creeping nearer, Katrin slipped around the corner, using the wall for support. She had no time to waste. No time to pity herself. She must do this. For Dieter. For all those soldiers.

Light flickered ahead.

No, not light. A light-haired man. Bobbing in and out of view, scouring the market.

“She’s here,” another said. “I saw her.”

Katrin tucked herself into a shop alcove and up against the wall, protected—for the moment—from view. Tears burned as failure plagued her thoughts. The plaster dug into her spine. She struck the wall. Why? Why could she not make it? This had to happen.

Please, God! She blinked and saw her reflection in the shop’s glass door. With a start, she realized the men probably could, too. She sank deeper into the corner and noticed the counter inside had a cash register. And a phone.

Hope dangling, her heart quickened. She reached for the knob, but her palm was slick with blood and slipped. She tried it again. Locked. If she broke the glass, it would alert the men. But how else would she get inside? Jiggling the knob, she felt it give. Shielding the noise with her body, she jiggled harder. Shouldered into it. Ignored the pinch of pain.

Shouts in the market tore into her awareness.

“What’s that noise?”

“Came from over there.”

“Find her!” The barks came all at once, it seemed.

Panicked, Katrin glanced over her shoulder and saw them searching the far side of the market. Somehow the door gave. She stumbled inside and fell to her knees. Gritting her teeth, she refused to cry out and ignored the blood that coated her blouse and slacks. They would notice the open door. Carefully, she toed it shut. Dragged herself over and turned the lock. On all fours, she crawled to the counter, grunting at the pain slicing through her side. Behind it, she peered out the glass storefront.

A man stalked closer.

Fear nearly paralyzed her, but she snatched the phone. Dropped back out of sight. Dialed. Hand trembling, breathing hard, she put the phone to her ear. It rang . . . and rang . . .

“There’s blood in the alley. I tagged her!”

"Then she's around here somewhere."

Ring . . . ring . . .

"Please," she whimpered around tears that blurred her vision. She tried to blink them away, but realized she wasn't crying. Her vision was blurring, fading.

"Hello?"

"He—" Her voice cracked. "Hello."

"Is someone there?" came her brother's annoyed voice.

"Yes. I know it's late."

"Ka—"

"I am calling"—she hurried to protect him from saying her name and drawing the attention of those who might listen in—"from Goldmeier's Watches to let you know . . . watch . . . ready." She wouldn't make it. "You . . . you were right. . . ."

*"Mein Go—*I knew it. I'll be right over. Just don't—"

Katrin's world vanished.

CHAPTER 1

RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA

“Let them try. *Qui audet adipiscitur.*” Special Air Service Corporal Wafiyy Ibn Sarsour spoke into his comms piece, gaze roving the lush grounds and hundreds of workers hurrying about.

Who dares, wins. And it sure wouldn’t be some rogue element attempting to thwart the shocking marriage of a British royal to a Saudi prince. For the first time in decades, the world didn’t have their noses stuck in a rugby match or on social media. They had tuned in to watch the lavish wedding of Britain’s Lady Selene Northcott-Hale, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Kelton.

With practiced calm, Wafiyy positioned himself a few feet from the happy couple, who had returned from the mosque where the *nikah*, the official Muslim ceremony, had taken place. When the king and crown prince entered the room, Wafiyy assessed their escort, noting that both men were regular detail.

“They’re ready,” said Richard Northcott-Hale, the bride’s cousin. He clapped Wafiyy’s elbow. “So glad you could do this for us.”

“It’s an honor, my friend,” Wafiyy replied before keying his comms. “Royals ready to take the lawn.”

“Copy that, Six. Blades report your situation,” came the voice of Captain Shanks. The British SAS had joined forces with the Royal Saudi Land Forces, also known as the Saudi Arabian Army, for this auspicious occasion after a credible threat targeting the event had been detected and confirmed by both governments.

“Two all clear.”

“Four as well.”

As the reports trickled in, Wafiyy monitored the couple. Wondered at the ability to blend two entirely different cultures. Many spoke of it. Many tried it. Few succeeded. Even though he'd been born in Sussex and raised in London, had a proper British accent and education, most people could not get past the color of his skin or his Arabic heritage. Jess was the girl who'd persuaded him to try, and the royals convinced him such a relationship could be successful. Then again, they had only been married an hour.

His ethnicity had been a bonus for this mission, though the House of Saud had been reluctant to accept a "Westernized Muslim" on the detail. However, his high marks from Oxford and his SAS record won their approval.

"How is Jessamine?" Richard asked.

Wafiyy smirked, still listening to the team updating statuses. "Jealous she turned you down?"

"It's not every day a man in line to the throne gets rejected," Richard said with a wink.

"She's good." Wafiyy smiled. "In Switzerland skiing with friends."

"Six, we're all clear," Captain Shanks reported. "And we have one hundred percent agreement from their team as well."

Wafiyy nodded to Richard. "They're ready." Then he eyed the royal security detail and inclined his head, indicating his readiness.

A colonel whispered to the crown prince, who in turn nudged his father. And with that, the entourage headed to the lawn amid applause and cheers from the hundreds waiting for the celebration to begin.

"Eyes out," warned Captain Shanks. "They had trouble at the gate."

Wafiyy felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle as he trailed the wedding party out into the evening. With no expense spared, the lawn had been transformed into an affair that glittered with lights, flowers, and sheer curtains billowing from columns. Guests were adorned in bejeweled gowns and tuxes that cost thousands. Live TV crews filmed from the side, because tonight

not only did King Ahmad bring a Briton into his family, but he would also push a peace initiative between the West and the Muslim world unlike anything attempted before. At last, the millions funneled into Saudi Arabia by America, Britain, and France would pay off.

An hour into the festivities, Wafiyy battled a tension headache and began to question the credibility of the threat against the royal families. His phone buzzed, and he glanced at the caller ID. With a smile, he made sure his comms mic was off as he put the phone to his other ear and answered. "How is Switzerland?"

"Cold," Jessamine said. "And I'm jealous you're there at that magnificent party. I can see you on TV."

He arched an eyebrow, glancing to the bank of cameras. "You can?"

"Yeah. You're in the background, but I know my man when I see him."

"Why are you not partying instead of watching TV?"

"We're heading out now. But I had to call. Let you know I'm officially jealous that you're there with a king and a proper duke." Her smile bled through the phone. "Think they'd miss it if you nicked a ring for me?"

"Are you proposing again?"

"You have to say yes sometime."

He grinned like an idiot. "I must go."

She gave an exasperated sigh. "A ring—at least try."

"I love you," he said, still smiling. Thinking of the ring waiting for her back in London. He'd propose at Christmas. He'd already asked her father for his permission. Old-fashioned, yes, but it was a good show of respect.

His comms crackled as he pocketed his phone and wandered closer to the tent, adjusting his earpiece.

"Six, you're needed near the king."

Stiffening, Wafiyy didn't hesitate. "Roger that. Moving in."

When there were only two meters between him and the king,

one of the Saudi soldiers trudged toward him. "Sorry, brother. Not feeling well."

Again Wafiyy's comms crackled. "Harbah. Two. One. Five. Initiate rise. Rise. Rise."

Warmth sped up his spine and neck, then arched over his crown and ears. A pain much like drinking a milkshake too fast on a hot day. Heel of his hand to his temple, he grunted.

"Who is this? Clear the line!" Captain Shanks ordered.

"What was that?" one of the team asked.

"Strange. Sounded mechanized," another said.

Wafiyy swept his gaze across the festivities. Noted the Saudi soldiers, the British Blades—as they called themselves—and then the royals laughing and chatting beneath the white tent's dangling net lights.

Spine straight, blood cold, he intercepted the king's server and lifted the glass from the tray. Using a test strip, he dipped it in the sherbet drink, a favorite among wedding guests and the king himself . . . and let the pill slip from his cuff.

Sudden awareness spiked through his mind as the tiny white tablet plunked into the liquid and melted.

The pill. He didn't recall concealing it there yet knew he had. Must have. Why was he not alarmed?

He was alarmed.

Yet he delivered the glass back to the official server, who glanced at the test strip, which did not discolor, indicating the sherbet was safe—or had been a moment ago. Wafiyy watched with satisfaction as the crystal goblet was set before the king.

Deep in conversation with the Duke of Kelton, the king reached for the glass and sipped it. Nodding, he returned to his discussion.

But only for a second.

His throat would tighten. His blood would thin. Run down his nose.

The crown prince quickly handed his father a napkin, thereby coming in contact with the blood. With the chemical. Father and son

would die within minutes, despite the medical staff rushing to their aid. The bride's dress was now stained crimson. Another casualty. That couldn't be helped. It was symbolic, yes? The blood by which her husband—being dragged from the king and his brother—would take the throne. The blood by which . . .

I will rise.