

Lark

The stagecoach is visible only by the cloud of dust it kicks up along the track. It's moving at a fast clip, probably hoping to get to Snaketown before sundown.

Pickle shades his eyes next to me. "Bad position, Lark. Maybe we try tomorrow morning?"

"No. If they reach Snaketown, the ridgeline will block out the sun until nearly noon tomorrow. We'll miss the opportunity entirely. One coach, alone—it's too good to pass up." I tilt my hat brim to block the sinking sun. The greasy eyeblack on my cheeks helps deflect some of the residual glare. "I can get them turned around. No problem. You focus on jamming the wheel."

"There are guards," he says.

"I'll take the guards," Rose says on my other side. She shifts in her saddle, tightening the straps of her false leg. Sedge is checking his own gear, making sure his crossbow quarrels are in easy reach. Saiph keeps nervously threading the end of his brush whip through his fingers—it's only his third raid, and he's eager to do it right.

Pickle sighs and adjusts his grip on his long metal staff. "*I* wanted to have a nice relaxing soak today, but *no . . .*"

"Get ready." I look down at the ground, where my mutt, Rat, is crouched. He nearly blends into the dusty desert rocks—it's the coyote in him. His silly, too-big ears are perked up as he watches the approaching stage.

"Ready, Rat?" I say to him.

He rises from his haunches. I loosen my sword in its scabbard and adjust the straps of my buckler on my left forearm.

"On," I say.

Rat obediently jumps forward through the sagebrush and lopes down the hillside. He angles to intercept the team of horses, snarling as he reaches them. They don't panic, but the pace of the stage slows as they assess the danger.

"All right," I say. "On."

I urge my horse from the shadow of the boulders. The others do the same. We canter down the hillside in a V—Rose and Sedge swing for the front of the stage, and Saiph and Pickle veer for the back. There's a shout from the driver as we're sighted. His whipcrack splices the air.

I dig my heels against Jema's flanks, and she tosses her mane. A crossbow quarrel whizzes over her flank—she snorts. I kiss the air to encourage her and run her directly into the path of the oncoming stage. Rat is nipping at the hooves of the horses, who shy sideways. The rear guard is scrambling for a perch on the far side of the coach, trying to keep Pickle in his sights. The fore guard jams another quarrel in her crossbow. She cranks the lever, her jaw set and her eyes on me. She'll have a straight shot this time.

I wheel Jema around and sling my buckler over my fist. The late sun shoots straight across the sagebrush flats and ricochets off the mirrored curve of the little shield. I wash the light across the guard's face—she throws her arm up to block the glare. With only half a second to aim, I slap my crossbow over the top of my buckler and fire—I tag her calf. I swear under my breath—I'd been aiming for the empty space beside her, but a nonlethal hit is better than landing a killing strike without meaning to. At least it will keep her busy. The guard slumps; her crossbow clatters to the bottom of the driver's box. Her quarrels spill, flying into the air one at a time like little birds taking flight. While I wheel Jema around to canter ahead of the team, Rose takes aim at the rear guard—she releases just before he can pull his crank. It's a beautiful shot, flying so close to his ear I could swear it nicked him. She's always been able to tread that line between a shot to kill and a shot to startle, and unlike mine, it works. The guard curses and dives for cover behind the roof bench.

Saiph's alongside the team of horses now, flicking his brush whip to encourage them to veer to the right. Rat snarls at their hooves. But the driver is holding the reins steady. He switches them to his whip hand, groping with the other for the guard's fallen crossbow. He'll have a time trying to fire while keeping a firm hold on the team, but I'm not going to give him the chance. I twist in my saddle to wash the glare from my buckler over his eyes, and when he squints, I fire. *Shwizz*. The quarrel thumps into the wood just over his whip shoulder. He shouts and drops the reins. The stage rattles as two of its wheels catch in the rutted ditch.

"Come on, Pickle," I mutter, falling back to help Saiph steer the team.

Pickle bursts along the far side of the stage. He hefts the dented-metal staff and flings it at the front wheel. I hold my breath. He doesn't always make a clean hit—the staff is more likely to bounce off the axle or shoot under the carriage. But today it lands true, driving right between the spokes. The wheel catches for half a heartbeat, and then, with an ugly splintering crack, it shatters. The stage tips wildly; the team shies to the side. Rat narrowly avoids a hoof across his spine. Pickle spurs his horse clear just in time as well.

The stage rattles. It lurches. It bounds uncontrollably off a rock. And with a resounding crash, it smashes onto its side.

I let out my breath, easing Jema to a halt. Dust rises in a cloud. The horse team dances in their harnesses, kicking their heels and snorting, tangling their lines. The two wheels facing the sky spin crazily, *tika-tika-tika-tika*, like a rattler's tail.

I hook my crossbow onto my saddle and unsheathe my sword. The rear guard is motionless on the ground, but the driver and the fore guard are groaning and trying to rise. Sedge jumps from his horse and hurries to hold the guard down, putting a big knee on her back and jerking the quarrel out of her calf. Ignoring her swearing, he pulls out a length of bandage and sets to work binding the wound.

I slide off Jema's back, surveying the damage. Honestly, we *do* try not to make this big a mess. It's a measure of self-preservation. It would be easy to kill every driver and guard team that comes through, or run off with the horse teams and leave the travelers to die. But I expect the sheriff in Snaketown and the higher-ups in the more habitable parts of Alcoro would take a stronger initiative to root me out if I left a trail of bodies in my wake.

There's only one kind of traveler I make an effort to kill, and that's the slavers.

This coach doesn't belong to a slaver, though, and I'm hoping the fact that we've wrecked it isn't going to come back to bite us. We've never tipped a stage. A busted wheel and a jammed axle are our usual outcomes, if luck is with us. Today, not so much. But we can't change the past, although it looks like the driver still thinks he can change the future. He's sprawled halfway out of the box, trying to wiggle a carving knife from his boot. I lay the edge of my sword gently across his neck.

My red bandanna puffs over my lips as I speak. "How about you take a little rest?"

He drops his knife. I kick it away and move aside as Rose reins her horse to a halt in my place. She trains her crossbow down on him. He flops his head back against the rocky sand with an angry sigh.

A groan comes from inside the stage. I go to the skyward-facing passenger door and haul it open. Slouched against the far side is just about the palest person I've ever laid eyes on—I've seen the moon reach darker shades. He's old, too—his blond hair and reddish beard are shot through with silver, and he's alone. This will be an easy job. He squints up at me, bleeding from a cut near his right ear.

I angle my sword down into the coach. He doesn't move or even look at the point.

"You're the Sunshield Bandit," he says.