Praise for THE IVORY KEY

'Raman has crafted a world bursting with colour and texture and kinetic energy, and a story of rebuilding a fractured family that will stick with you long after 'The End." – Sara Holland, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Everless* and *Havenfall*

'Set in a richly realised world ripe with magic, *The Ivory Key* is a dazzling new addition to young adult fantasy. Featuring a broken family fumbling towards healing and a perilous expedition into the ruins of a history that never should have been lost, this is a riveting adventure by a talent to watch.' – Traci Chee, *New York Times* bestselling author of The Reader trilogy and National Book Award Finalist for *We Are Not Free*

'Everything about *The Ivory Key* is vivacious – from the enrapturing setting of opulent forts and forbidden ruins to the larger-than-life characters who will ensnare your heart with their perfect balance of heroism and faults. Brace yourself for the single best portrayal of fraught sibling relationships you will ever read coupled with a complex, multi-faceted plot that unfolds as shockingly as the twisted puzzles the characters face. You will fall into this book and never want to come out!' – Sara Raasch, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Snow Like Ashes trilogy

'*The Ivory Key* has everything I want most in fantasy. It has a world so vivid and developed, I could taste the food and feel the magic weapons in my hand. It has flawed, developed characters I rooted for and cried beside. And it has a quest steeped in lore and mystery. Akshaya Raman is a new master of the genre to watch for.' – Susan Dennard, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Witchlands series

'*The Ivory Key* is the epic YA fantasy sibling story I've been waiting for. A rich world, a satisfying slow burn romance and a main character determined to forge her own path make this series a must read.' – Adrienne Young, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Fable duology

'A rollicking adventure of royal family drama, treasure hunts and hidden histories. I loved it.' – S. A. Chakraborty, author of the bestselling Daevabad trilogy

'*The Ivory Key* is a twisty, dazzling adventure that I absolutely fell in love with.' – Tasha Suri, author of The Books of Ambha duology

'A vibrant fantasy world, four estranged siblings and an action-packed quest. *The Ivory Key* is a richly woven adventure with a tender heart. I was completely enamoured.' – Amanda Foody, author of *Ace of Shades* and *All of Us Villains*

'A secret society, a hunt for lost magic and four siblings who are each hiding their own secrets . . . *The Ivory Key* is everything I love about epic, character-driven fantasy, brimming with lushly realised settings and deliciously slow-burn romances. An immersive, unmissable debut.' – Katy Rose Pool, author of *There Will Come a Darkness*

The Ivory Key

Four siblings. A country in ruin. One quest to save them all.

Vira is desperate to get out of her mother's shadow and establish her legacy as a revered queen of Ashoka. But with the country's only quarry running out of magic – a precious resource that has kept Ashoka safe from conflict – she can barely protect her citizens from the looming threat of war. And if her enemies discover this, they'll stop at nothing to seize the last of the magic.

Vira's only hope is to find a mysterious object of legend: the Ivory Key, rumoured to unlock a new source of magic. But in order to infiltrate enemy territory and retrieve it, she must reunite with her siblings, torn apart by broken relationships and the different paths their lives have taken. Each of them has something to gain from finding the Ivory Key – and even more to lose if they fail. Ronak plans to sell it to the highest bidder in exchange for escape from his impending political and unwanted marriage. Kaleb, falsely accused of assassinating the former maharani, needs it to clear his name. And Riya, the runaway sibling who cut all family ties, wants the Key to prove her loyalty to the rebels who took her in.

They must work together to survive the treacherous journey. But with each sibling harbouring secrets and their own conflicting agendas, the very thing that brought them together could tear apart their family – and their world – for good.

First in a duology from an incredible new talent, this Indian-inspired fantasy debut is epic, fierce and magnetically addictive, taking you on a thrilling journey where magic, a prized resource, is the only thing between peace and war.

Dear Reader,

I'm so thrilled to be able to share my debut YA fantasy with you. *The Ivory Key* is my take on the classic "princess must bring magic back to a world" story, but with a few twists: magic is a physical resource, and in order to get more, four dysfunctional royal siblings must piece together and follow ancient clues left behind by a secret society.

The book is part family drama and part treasure hunt, but the idea really began with how I conceptualized the magic in this world. Growing up, I most often saw magic as something passed down through long lineages, and those families with magical blood rarely ever looked like mine. I wanted to write about magic that anyone could learn to use – magic that was a skill, channeled through hard work and creativity, not inherent privilege. But just because everyone *should* have access to something, it doesn't always mean they actually do, and I wanted to touch on those topics too – like barriers to access and the role leaders play in making sure universal resources truly are universal.

I filled the book with a lot of what I love about India: ancient forts, regional food, traditional art forms, and extravagant celebrations. And while the book doesn't follow the cultural or mythological traditions of any one specific state, there is one exception. The temples are largely inspired by Dravidian architecture which originates in South India where my family is from.

It's my love letter to the complicated family dynamics of shows like The Originals, as well as the clever puzzles and ancient mysteries featured in movies like Indiana Jones and National Treasure. Those were my favorite kinds of stories growing up, and getting to write a similar one with Indian characters and a world inspired by my culture has been the most joyful experience. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I loved writing it.

Yours,
Akshaya Raman

THE IVORY KEY

AKSHAYA RAMAN

UNCORRECTED PROOF COPY

HOT KEY BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
4th Floor, Victoria House
Bloomsbury Square
London WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
www.hotkeybooks.com

Copyright © Akshaya Raman, 2022

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Akshaya Raman to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-1073-4
Also available as an ebook and in audio

1

Design by Kaitlin Yang
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

For my first storytellers: Sugandham Paati, Kothai Paati,

and Srinivasa Raghavan Thatha

TK

CHAPTER ONE

— VIRA —

THE DEAD BOY'S face was as gray as a cloudy sky moments before a storm. His short black beard sculpted and whittled his cheeks down to a point. Thin lips glittered in the watery moonlight that managed to penetrate the canopy, brighter than the famed rubies of his home province.

But Vira knew it was blood that made them shine so enticingly.

She lifted the flameless lantern higher. The ball of yellow light within crackled with magic as it washed over his embroidered sleeve, illuminating the row of silver fish encircling his wrist. A wave of nausea hit her. The crest of Onaar.

The scouts hadn't been wrong. This was her betrothed — Lord Harish, son of the Viceroy of Onaar — now dead in the city of Dvar.

Vira's legs wobbled as she rose from her crouch. But she steadied herself. A maharani didn't show weakness. She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders before turning to face the warriors who had found the body.

Three girls stood in a row, dressed in matching red kurtas and loose black pants, whispering to one another. One leaned against a neem tree, propped up by a shoulder, using the edge of a knife to file her fingernails. She straightened and nudged the others when she realized they'd garnered Vira's attention.

"Where's his horse?" Vira's voice rang out sharper than she intended.

The girl with the knife, who looked barely older than Vira herself, toyed with the end of her braid. "There wasn't one around here, Maharani."

"And his convoy?"

"He didn't appear to be traveling with one."

Vira bit back a snarl. These warriors — ones her Council had claimed were the best in the country — were obviously missing something critical: common sense. "Lord Harish did not journey here on foot with no mount and no supplies. *Find them.*"

For a moment Vira thought the warriors would refuse. But then they bowed in unison, palms pressed together in front of their chests, before scattering into the woods without another glance behind them.

Wind raked through the Swapna Forest, and leaves from the mango and neem trees cascaded down, enveloping Vira in a cocoon of green and brown. Now that she was alone, an uncomfortable lurch tugged at her stomach.

She looked down at Harish again. His kurta was light enough in color to reveal the three pools of blood that had killed him. An arrow pierced the center of each red stain, black feather fletchings quivering in the late-summer breeze.

He was to have arrived at the palace days earlier, but there had been no letter, no news of a delay. And when he hadn't shown up, she'd assumed that he was a reluctant noble plotting an escape from a marriage he wanted even less than she did. She hadn't expected this.

This wasn't the plan. It wasn't how any of this was meant to happen. She couldn't face the Viceroy of Onaar. She couldn't face her Council. She couldn't —

Breathe.

Reason broke through her haze of panic as her mother's voice sounded in her head.

A maharani never runs away from a problem. She faces it head-on.

She could picture her mother's severe face as if she were standing right there, hissing the same lessons in Vira's ear a thousand times, not expecting Vira to retain any of them.

Face it head-on.

Find out who killed Harish — quickly. Guards had already been dispatched through the forest and the surrounding neighborhoods of Dvar, searching for witnesses, for any clues that might lead them to a suspect. But it had been more than an hour since the scouts had reported the body. If the guards hadn't yet found the killer, Vira had a sinking feeling that they never would.

Find a way to appease the viceroy. It would be only a matter of days before he learned of his son's fate — a precious few days in which Vira had to strike a new deal with him or find some other way to protect the country from Lyria, their northwestern neighbor. Lyria hadn't made a move in months, but the threat of the war she'd inherited had been a constant shadow lingering over Vira's rule from the moment she'd become the maharani eight months earlier.

How do I do this, Amma?

But her mother had never offered comfort even when she was alive.

Vira's hand drifted down to the iron hilt of the talwar strapped to her waist, as if it would give her strength. It had been pried from her dead mother's stiff hands and thrust into hers. It was polished and sharp, the curved silver blade gleaming, as if it had never been covered in the blood of her ancestors. It hummed against her hand with latent magic, a demanding buzz that Vira was still unaccustomed to.

In truth, everything about the talwar was unfamiliar — the weight, the balance, even the elaborate designs carved into the hilt. *This is a maharani's weapon* was the only response she'd received when she fought to keep the

one she'd trained with for years. That weapon was simple, elegant, comfortable. But because it hadn't been forged with magic, it now hung on the wall opposite her bed, mounted there as a reminder of the life she'd left behind.

At the sound of rustling, Vira turned to the shadows, her talwar drawn. Its magic grated against her palm, harsh and unforgiving as her hand trembled. The blade glowed white, crackling with sparks of lightning as she braced herself for the return of Harish's killer.

But it was Amrit who stepped out of the trees. Vira's grip relaxed, the magic waned, and blood rushed back into her fingers. She shoved the talwar into its sheath, trying to ignore the weight of her mother's ever-present judgment.

A maharani's talwar is an extension of her rule.

She couldn't even hold a talwar. How could she expect to hold on to her country?

"You should have waited for me." Leaves crunched under Amrit's feet as he crossed the length of the clearing, walking toward her. A dull shard of moonlight illuminated his angular face. He hadn't changed out of his formal guard attire, and a thick silver bangle wrapped around the silk sleeve of his upper left arm. She couldn't see it from where she stood, but she knew there was a medallion in the center that was stamped with a swan — a sign of his rank and service to the royal family.

"Contrary to what the Council believes, I can protect myself against a few wild deer," she said.

Vira kept her voice light, but her mouth burned with the bitter aftertaste of the lie. She hadn't been able to wield a blade with a steady hand since the battle at Ritsar eight months before. Not since she'd failed to command Ashoka's armies to victory. Not since she'd lost Ashokan land for the first time in four hundred years.

Not since she'd erred so badly, the viceroys of two provinces had walked

out of her Council, taking with them countless troops and resources she desperately needed.

Amrit looked at her, and for the span of a heartbeat she was certain he could see right through her. She hadn't told him — told anyone — about the nightmares, about the way her hand shook each time she had to draw her weapon. But Amrit sometimes seemed to know her better than she knew herself.

"I should certainly hope so," he said. "I did train you, after all."

And what a great student she had turned out to be, freezing in battle, letting innocent citizens die in her stead.

"You were busy. And I wasn't recognized." Vira gestured to herself. With her plain red kurta and simple braid, she could have been twin to any one of those careless warriors. She'd even taken off all her jewelry except for the thin gold chain she always wore around her neck, the small pendant hidden beneath her collar.

Amrit gave her an exasperated look. "That's precisely what concerns me. You don't have to do this alone, Vira."

Vira. Yet another thing her mother would have disapproved of. Amrit was the captain of her guard now, but he'd been her friend first. And she hadn't been able to bear the thought of him calling her Maharani and bowing to her with deference. No, this one small thing was a reminder that not everything was different. That there were still some parts of her the title of maharani couldn't strip away.

Amrit crouched before the body. "This is bad."

"The Council won't be happy." That was an understatement. It would be a miracle if the Council was anything short of furious.

"They're your elders, Vira. They don't want to take orders from an eighteen-year-old. You have to charm them."

"Pretty words woo councilors, not angry demands," Vira recited. An-

other saying her mother had drilled into her head. But frustration laced her voice. She wasn't her mother. She didn't have the gift of pretty words.

Even the alliance with the Viceroy of Onaar had been difficult to negotiate. The engagement to Harish had been a last-ditch strategy to convince the viceroy to return to serve on the Council, to lend his province's troops and considerable wealth to secure the western border. But it had always been shortsighted, a temporary solution meant to delay the mounting problems. Because it wasn't armies that Ashoka needed. It was magic.

Vira reached up to grip her pendant, her thumb tracing the familiar, comforting grooves of the image carved into the gold coin: twin blades crossed over a lotus. Magic was how Ashoka had maintained its independence over the last five hundred years. Magic that was mined from the quarry beneath the palace — a source of raw power, inherently useless until the mayaka, those who worked with magic, processed and used it to forge items of immense power.

Magic was woven into the very fabric of Ashokan society. It was threaded into the currency — into the skinny seyrs and square tolahs and gold jhaus, ensuring that they couldn't be forged. It was laced into every brick that made up the border walls, shielding and protecting the country from intruders. It powered their carriages, their lamps, their messages. It was even Ashoka's biggest export, traded to Lyria and other countries for painted pottery and plush rugs, for medicines and crops not found in Ashoka.

Or it had been. Trade had stalled months ago, the bustling ports and endless caravans already a fading memory. The Emperor of Lyria was convinced that Ashoka was hoarding all the magic they had. But that wasn't why Vira hadn't renegotiated the trade agreements.

It was because there was no magic left to trade.

It was her biggest secret: the horrible truth of just how little was left in the quarry. Magic waned with use, and without regular replenishment,

Ashoka's magical borders were already wavering. And if Vira couldn't protect Ashoka against invaders, there would be no Ashoka for her to defend.

"Look," Amrit said, tilting Harish's chin. Purple veins spidered down the dead man's neck and chest, disappearing into his kurta. "Poison, likely."

Amrit yanked out the arrow embedded in Harish's stomach, turning it over in his hand before holding it out for Vira to see. The arrowhead wasn't flat and notched, like the ones she'd used in her brief and catastrophic attempts at wielding a bow. This one was conical, the metal twisting in half a spiral. It was beautifully elegant, and unlike anything she'd ever seen. But judging from the look on Amrit's face, he had.

"You know who killed him," Vira said.

Amrit hesitated and then nodded once. "I can guess."

"Who?"

He said nothing for a long moment. In the distance, a mynah bird trilled. Another one answered its song. "Later," he promised. "We should move the body before —"

"Amrit —"

A twig snapped.

"What was that?" Vira's hand slid to her talwar as she turned. And froze.

Three figures stood several feet away, arrows nocked and aimed. They had dupattas wrapped around their faces, covering their mouths and noses, masking their identities.

Amrit stepped in front of her, talwar drawn.

The boy in the middle spoke. "Put down your weapons, intruders. We have you surrounded."

As proof, an arrow whistled from behind, traveling over Vira's head to lodge in a tree trunk in front of her. She whirled around, her heart racing as she scanned the dark tree line for invisible figures.

"Who are you?" Amrit demanded, not lowering his weapon.

"Who are *we*?" the boy mocked. "I'm surprised you don't recognize us. We recognize you. *Guard.*" The word was spat out like a curse.

There was only one group of people who were arrogant enough to expect their reputation to precede them, who would dare speak the word *guard* with such hatred.

"Ravens," Vira breathed. The boy's eyes snapped to her. She stepped out from behind Amrit. "You're thieves, not killers."

Stories of bandits who lived within the Swapna Forest and robbed merchants and travelers and anyone associated with the crown had been circulating for years. The Ravens, as they called themselves, had pledged to fight against the maharani long before Vira had ever taken the throne. Another war she'd inherited from her mother.

The boy pointedly glanced at Harish's crumpled body. "Clearly, the same cannot be said for you."

"We didn't kill him." Vira let go of her hold on the talwar, raising both her hands to showcase her empty palms.

The boy was unmoved. "That may very well be. But your fate is a matter for our leader."

Desperation drove her forward. "You don't und—"

The figures drew their bowstrings back. Vira stopped.

"Make no mistake—" The boy's voice was sharper than a blade. "We don't *like* to kill, but if you run, we will hunt you." This wasn't a warning. It was a guarantee.

Vira blinked, licking her lips once. Twice. They were outnumbered. She glanced at Amrit, and she could see him coming to the same conclusion. He lowered his weapon.

Her breaths came out in small, shallow pants as thick gray smoke sud-

denly swirled around them — curling around her knees, snaking around her waist and chest.

Amrit coughed. "Vi —" He coughed harder as the fog enveloped him.

Vira's eyes watered. "Amrit?"

The smoke burned down her throat, her lungs, her stomach. She gasped for breath. She coughed, too, reaching for Amrit. But there was only air. She couldn't see anything. Or hear. Or . . . think.

She had . . . she had to find . . . Amrit.

Vira fell to her knees. Dirt coated her hands, lodging under her fingernails. Her arms could no longer hold her up. The faintest scent of coconut clung to the air.

And then there was only darkness.