



1



S E P O R A

IF I WERE NOT SUCH A COWARD, I WOULD HURL myself from Nuna's back and plummet to the Underneath below. I would fall with purpose, headfirst on the rockiest part of the land. From this height, it would be painless. It would be swift.

It would prevent war.

But I am spineless, and so I urge my Serpen, Nuna, to fly higher and higher above the morning fog and mountaintops, which float against the sunrise and cast shadows like dark clouds onto the Underneath. Ah, the Underneath, that forbidden bit of land perched just beneath our mountains—mountains that are claimed by individual families or larger clans of families related in some way. Rope ladders sway in the wind all the way down, disappearing into the tall grass in places. If I weren't fleeing my home kingdom of Serubel, I'd be caught up in the beauty of it all, so high, scraping at what feels like the ceiling of the sky and looking down upon the monotony of the life I used to live, running through the grasses, throwing rocks into the River Nefari from the safety of Nuna's back, trampling over the undulating rope bridges connecting each of our mountains.

Yes, any other day, this would be a precious outing, a reprieve from Forging spectorium. Any other day, I would enjoy the freedom of flight, the time with Nuna, the endless possibilities of the morning.

But today will be the last of many things, and I mourn the loss of them already.

My thoughts wander again to far below us, far beneath the early mist and the waterfalls cascading into the River Nefari, to where my body should be sprawled, bloodied and lifeless and mauled. Yet, I tighten my hold on Nuna.

Saints of Serubel, but I am gutless.

Mother would have me believe otherwise: that it takes far more courage to hide, to live a life among the Baseborn class, who live in the poorest corner of our enemy kingdom Theoria. That the living conditions are rough, and the general mood of its residents even rougher. Those Serubelans who live there are not slaves anymore; stark poverty is what keeps them under Theorian control. If they could afford to, they would return to their homeland. If they could afford to, they would become citizens of Serubel again.

But I do not have that freedom. I can never return.

Not as long as Father wants to conquer the kingdoms. Not as long as I have what he needs to do so.

Nuna squirms beneath me as tears slip down my cheeks; she knows my feelings as well as I've come to know hers. She's beautiful, Nuna, even if she is a Defender. Most Defender Serpens are ugly, and not only because of their rugged training scars, but also because they are the color of the green mucus that seeps from noses when someone catches cold. Their spiked tails and thick underbellies resemble calluses instead of the glistening, pearly scales of other Serpens of different uses, and their facial features seem naturally arranged to be fierce, all arched brows and mouths set in an almost humanlike scowl.

But to me, Nuna could never be ugly, perhaps because I've handled her for ten years already, since a time before the weight of my body entrenched a natural saddle along her neck, just behind her head. Grandfather always said that time grew things, like trees and children and affection. Perhaps because of the time I've spent with her, my affection covers over Nuna's flaws. Oh, but it wasn't always so. When I was barely waist-high to my father, he announced that the entire royal family would ride Defenders henceforth to ensure our protection. I remember that day well, even though my understanding of the way of things was only proportionate to my age. I knew the people of Serubel were upset, and I knew it had been Father's doing. Father's decree had come as a shock—a king who felt he needed the protection of a Defender was concerning, especially after a fragile Trade Treaty between Serubel and Theoria had just been penned. It was a cold treaty, but one promising peace—and so why would His Majesty need a Defender Serpen all of a sudden? It put our people at unease, to say the least. But no one in the kingdom could have been more shocked than me, a quiet six-year-old princess, scared of Serpens in general and morbidly terrified of Defenders in particular. Politics were matters for the adults, but riding Defender Serpens was a most pressing concern for a child.

Still, Nuna struck me as different almost from the beginning. Her green coloring runs a bit deeper than the other Defenders, like fern leaves darkened by morning mist, and though she has the necessary scars from training to protect her royal rider, I had seen to it that the wounds were cared for and healed properly, so they are not as pronounced as the other Defenders'.

And when she sees me, I'd swear on the snowy caps of Serubel that she smiles.

Absently, I pet her head now as I spy the edge of the kingdom on

the horizon. Where the grassy, rolling fields of Serubel end, that is where the Theorian desert begins. No, that is not entirely true. The kingdoms technically do not border each other; there is the Valley of the Tenantless that sweeps between the kingdoms, a vast, desolate dust bowl full of thickets and thorns and nothing of value and so uninviting and void that neither kingdom will lay claim to it. No one knows why this phenomena occurs, where the bowl comes from, or what keeps it so bereft of life. Why the lush green grass of Serubel gives way to sand, then shriveling plants and prickly thorn bushes. Even the most intelligent of the Theorian scholars cannot solve the puzzle. And so the phenomena is subject to rumors of a curse. Looking down upon the Tenantless from the safety of Nuna's back, I could convince myself of a true curse. But curse or no, I have to cross the valley to get to the Theorian desert—which, in my opinion, might be considered cursed itself.

Who would choose to live in such a dry, desolate place, I wouldn't know.

Perhaps it's fitting that I should flee to an afflicted, bleak kingdom. That if I should live, it will be among the Baseborn class of Theoria. That each day I should break my back for my portion of food and shelter and that I should become a slave to my own hunger and thirst.

Yes, it's fitting, and I want that for myself. I want that for myself more than I want an eternity in the cold recesses of the prison cell my Father reserved for me. I want it more than the worry that he will soon grow tired of my resistance and perhaps trade my cell in favor of torturing me into Forging precious spectorium. I would rather hide in desolation and poverty, whether it be in the Baseborn Quarters or the Tenantless, than be the cause of thousands of deaths in all the five kingdoms.

And saints forgive me, I would rather hide than end my own life.

Nuna recognizes the boundary ahead of us—all Serpens are trained to halt at the sight of it—and she begins to slow, her three pairs of wings catching the wind instead of moving it. I coo into the small orifice that is her ear and bid her to land just before the grass fades into outstretched sand, the first of the overgrown thorn bushes standing guard in front of the rest of the valley.

Nuna cannot come any farther than this. If my father were to search for me, Nuna would be easily spotted, as I'd have to travel by air rather than by foot; she is much too big to navigate the thistles on the ground. Alone, though, I could hide among the thistles themselves, carefully of course, and from above be indiscernible and by ground be imperceptible.

It is the worst way to travel the valley, yet the best possible chance for escape. And so I dismount Nuna at the edge of the bushes.

According to my map, the kingdom of Theoria dwarfs the other kingdoms in size, though it's mostly desert and the population tends to accumulate in Anyar, where the River Nefari widens and cuts straight through. I'll follow the river to this capital city. I'll do as my mother says and I'll embrace this new life. She wants the best for me, Mother. But she also wants the best for Serubel.

And what is best for Serubel is that I never return.

I come around to face Nuna and rub her nose, which causes her tail to whip about in pleasure. Serpens have only wings, no hands or feet or hooves or claws. No limbs to scratch an itch or to self-groom—which makes them especially grateful for a good rubbing down. They enjoy being petted, bathed, touched. Serpens may look formidable, especially Defenders, but with their riders—their bonded riders, that is—they are as gentle as butterflies on a breeze.

And I will miss my Nuna.

I nuzzle the tip of her scaly nose with mine, which would be a ridiculous sight to see, I'm sure. Father would not approve. Even Mother might roll her eyes. And Aldon, my tutor, would sigh and mutter to himself, "Princess Sepora, a lost cause of a princess who treats her Defender as a pet." A pet that is longer than fifteen lengths of me, her head alone three times the size of my body—and so nuzzling really is a delicate matter indeed. But I need this one last comfort, this one last gift of affection from her, before I begin my journey.

She holds very still, careful not to open her mouth and expose her sickle-sharp teeth. I've had many stitches because of her accidental overexcitement, and while I usually do stay away from her mouth, this is a special occasion. "This is good-bye, my lovely friend," I whisper.

The words feel like a bite to my tongue, sharp and painful. Nuna nuzzles back, squirming to get as close to me as possible, slipping on the velvety sleekness of the undisturbed soft sand and losing traction. I step away from her. This is not good-bye for Nuna. She has no idea this will be the last time we see each other. She knows something is amiss, for I've never taken her this close to the border before. But she probably assumes I'll mount her soon, and we'll fly away together.

With my hands, I give her the signal to return to her holding on the far end of the mountains where all the Serpens are corralled. No one must know she's been out this morning. No one must know Mother flew her to my cell to aid me in my escape.

Nuna is not happy with my command and protests with a high-pitched squeal. She's leery of the boundary still, as she should be. I shake my head at her, firmly, and make the signal again. Another tear streaks all the way down to my throat when she slithers backward,

away from me. She watches me then, blinking once, as if to give me time to change my mind.

I gesture again for her to go.

I watch after her for a long time as she glissades through the air, leaving me behind. I watch until I can't see her any longer. Then I turn toward the Tenantless. Toward my new life. And I take the first step.



2



T A R I K

TARIK MAKES HIS WAY TO HIS FATHER'S BEDCHAMBERS in the farthest wing of the palace, the tension building with each barefoot step. Behind him, Patra pads along quietly, stealthily, the way only a feline could, pausing to stretch and let out an enormous, soundless yawn that brings the muscles in her back taut, the golden sheen of her coat glistening in the candlelight. Despite Patra's great size, Tarik suspects if his giant cat had the notion, she could sneak up on the wind. He waits for her yawn to subside, his lips curling up in a grin.

"You didn't have to come with me," he tells her, and she responds by nudging his palm with her nose, leaning down to do so as it were, since her head nearly reaches the height of his shoulder. Even though it's late in the evening and Rashidi's messenger had put her on alert, she purrs at his side, recognizing that they are going to visit Tarik's father—something they've done together since he was a boy.

They walk past the towering marble columns and the layered stone fountains illuminated with small pyramids of spectorium and,

finally, the rows of guards on either side of them leading up to his father's door, swords and shields at the ready. *They can protect my father from any outside intruder*, Tarik thinks bitterly. *But they cannot protect him from the thing inside him, asking him for his life day after day*. Not even the Healers at the Lyceum can figure out what is killing the king of Theoria. Even they, of the Favored Ones, are powerless against this new illness.

The two soldiers standing at the great wooden barrier pull the ornate handles and open it wide for their prince and his feline companion, the hinges creaking loud enough to wake the statues in the massive garden outside.

His father's magnificent bed is at the end of the cavernous room, and it takes Tarik and Patra several more moments to reach it. Taking the steps up to the bed quietly, Tarik motions for Patra to stay behind. She obeys, spilling out onto the floor and resting lazily on her side as she watches him. Rashidi, his father's most trusted adviser, sits on the edge of the bed holding the king's hand. Tarik does not like this rare show of affection from Rashidi, does not want to consider what it must mean for his father's health.

"The Falcon Prince has arrived, my king," Rashidi whispers.

Tarik shakes his head, taking a place next to Rashidi. He cannot recall a single time his father has ever actually called him the Falcon Prince, not since he gave him the title when Tarik was but seven years. "You see into matters with the eyes of a falcon," he'd said. "Knowing discernment when others allow room for ignorance." The name had caught on in the palace and then throughout Theoria, and though he doesn't feel deserving, he could never admit such a thing to a father who had been so proud.

"Let him sleep," Tarik says, absorbing that the great King Knosi, in his weakened state, now takes up so little of the bed.

“I would, my prince, but he has summoned you for a reason,” Rashidi says softly.

“The reason can wait until morning,” Tarik says, already knowing what the old adviser will say. He doubts his father summoned him at all but rather it was Rashidi’s need for tradition, for formalities that brings him to the bedchamber this night. Tarik cannot imagine, though, that his father will even wake, much less speak the decree making his firstborn son the new king of Theoria.

“I’m afraid it cannot, Highness.”

“Please, Rashidi. I will never get used to you calling me Highness and meaning it.” As the royal family’s closest friend, Rashidi had had the displeasure of knowing Tarik when he was a boy. A very rambunctious boy.

The old man laughs. “Perhaps you are not a Lingot after all, my prince. Surely you would know my insincerity.”

Tarik snorts. Rashidi wants to convince him that he doesn’t mean *Highness*, that he is not officially acknowledging him as a ruler of Theoria. But as Rashidi said, Tarik is a Lingot. He can distinguish a truth from a lie, and right now, Rashidi is telling the truth. He is indeed calling him Highness. And he does indeed mean it.

“My father will recover from this,” Tarik says, recognizing the lie in his own voice. Rashidi does not have to be a Lingot to notice.

“No,” Rashidi says. “The Healers do not think him to live through the night.”

“The Healers have been wrong before.” Haven’t they? Tarik is not sure.

Rashidi sighs. It is full of pity, Tarik can tell. Sometimes he wishes he didn’t have the ability to deduce so much—even from body language. Rashidi is always composed, but tonight, there is an almost

imperceptible slump to his shoulders. Rashidi feels defeated. Tarik swallows hard.

“Your father has requested that if he ceases to breathe this night, we will not summon the Healers. You understand what this means, Highness.”

“I’m not ready, Rashidi.” Not ready to lose his father. Not ready to rule as king of Theoria. At eighteen years old, he has been groomed all his life for kingship. But that was supposed to be in an official ceremony whereby his father would relinquish power to his firstborn heir—an heir that would be at least thirty years old by then, if circumstances permitted. Eighteen years or thirty years makes no difference to Tarik. A lifetime of preparation is not enough to make one ready to oversee an entire kingdom of living, breathing people who depend on the decisions he makes. The risks he takes.

The risks he doesn’t take.

“What your mind does not yet know, your heart will make up for,” Rashidi insists. “You prove you have the wisdom to rule by admitting that you are not ready to do so. The people love you. Let them support you.”

Tarik mulls over Rashidi’s words and finds them to be true. The adviser believes the people of Theoria do love their prince, and Rashidi is confident in his ability to act as king. It’s reassuring, if only a little, that Rashidi is so steadfast. He is, after all, an advocate of the people first and foremost and adviser to his king second.

“The people do not know me,” Tarik feels obligated to say. The people know a boy who takes after his mother. A skilled Lingot. A dutiful son. But they do not know his ability to rule as king. How could they?

Rashidi waves in dismissal. “I well know you, boy. I speak for the

people. You'll not disappoint." The truth, or at least what Rashidi sincerely believes to be true.

Tarik places a hand on the linen next to his father's legs and leans on it for support. The king's breaths come in shallow, wheezing whispers, and Tarik is sure it does not help that the air is so hot and so very dry. A trickle of blood seeps from his nose, and Rashidi dabs at it with a damp cloth. The bleeding from his ears and mouth has lessened, but Tarik suspects it's because his father doesn't have much blood left to give.

Rashidi is right. It will not be long now. "What will I tell Sethos?" Tarik whispers. His younger brother, Sethos, just turned fifteen years and is, by far, the most precious object of their father's affections. A son after his father, Sethos is. King Knosi was a great warrior, and so Sethos will be. And so Sethos already is. He studies his craft at the Lyceum with the other Majai Favored Ones. His tutors are pleased with his progress. Father is pleased with his progress. Father will not like missing out on his youngest son.

It is time Tarik summoned Sethos home. He will want to be present when their father dies. It has been difficult enough keeping him away this long. But Father had insisted he continue on at the Lyceum. Father never imagined this sickness would progress so quickly.

Rashidi bows his head. "I will call for him, Highness." A slight pause. Then, "Will you tell the people what took him?"

On this Tarik is torn. It is something he's given a great deal of thought to, and guiltily so. For if he was worried what he would tell the people, he was more certain than he cared to admit of his father's death. All he really knew, though, was that he could not shrug the thought from his shoulders.

"I fear it will cause a panic," he says finally. After all, the kingdom sees his father as the epitome of strength and power, as they

should their pharaoh. They may reason that if King Knosi can perish from such a disease, they cannot protect themselves from it. Yet, is that not the truth? If the illness has such far-reaching fingers, surely no one is safe. “On the other hand, if I don’t tell them, I fear they won’t give this the proper attention it deserves. They will carry on their lives as if he perished from some common illness. What if this new sickness spreads?” His father had just returned from the southern kingdom of Wachuk to negotiate the continued mining of turquoise there. It would be an easy thing to make the people assume he’d contracted something from that place. Wachuk’s methods of medicine are primitive at best, and disease is rife there, a fact well-known among the citizens of Theoria.

But the Healers have ruled out any foreign infection. His father has something new, something they’ve never seen before. Still, if he instructs them, they will speak nothing of it.

“The people need not give it attention so much as the Healers do,” Rashidi says. “It would be unwise to circulate news of a plague that our Healers do not have under control just yet.”

Just yet. “And if the people begin to present symptoms?” They’d only had a handful of cases and all had been inside the palace walls, easy enough to contain. Easy enough, that is, until his father contracted it. Tarik remembers the day his father suffered his first nosebleed. The king had waved it off, dismissed it as if it were a soldier or a servant, as if such a thing could be controlled with a command. “It’s nothing but an inconvenience,” he’d said. “Fetch my Healer at once and tell him to put a stop to it.” It had taken the Healer two frustrating hours to stop the bleeding. That night, his father had awakened with blood pooling in his ears. From that point on, he’d grown fatigued but refused food to help his energy because he could do nothing but wretch up even the smallest of bread crumbs. Within a week, a sturdy beast

of a man who'd personally trained his own guard had wilted into something that resembled a weed with bones.

Tarik swallows.

"By then, the Healers will have found the cure. They always do, Highness."

But it doesn't sit well with him. Hiding something from his people, especially something so lethal, does not seem like the best way to begin his reign as their new king. Not to mention, the Lingots will know something is amiss. There are always ways to bend truths, but they will sense deception coming from the palace. And what message will that send?

"What else do you require from me this evening, Highness?" Rashidi seems aware he is not going to convince Tarik of anything at this moment. He is often shrewd in that way, to know when his usefulness has met its threshold and when to excuse himself. It is obvious now that King Knosi will not be waking up again to do the formal bidding of his most loyal adviser.

Tarik sighs in resignation. "A miracle."

Rashidi leaves him then, alone with his thoughts and worries. Alone with his father for the last time.



3



S E P O R A

THE THORNS PULL AND TEAR AT MY SERVANTS' dress (Mother had known it wouldn't do to escape dressed as royalty) as I make my way through the Valley of the Tenantless. The path is beaten enough for me to conclude that something roams these parts, though not often, because the tracks are just holes puncturing the sand in some places. No, this trail hasn't been used in quite some time. Which is neither here nor there; if I came across trouble, I could defend myself. Mother gave me a dagger and a sword, and I've been trained in all the delicacies of fighting off a man. In fact, all Serubelan women are trained to wield a sword at the age of thirteen. Aldon says the other kingdoms think it barbarous to expect our females to fight, but Father insists it's a Serubelan tradition, and one that he'll not do away with, in view of the un-sturdy times. I suppose if I could protect myself against a man, I could protect myself against a dumb beast that has no sense of what my next move will be. Besides, I'm not so concerned with staying on the trail as I am with keeping alongside the River Nefari. I could find Theoria without a map, just keeping that river to my right at all times.

The trail simply makes it easier to navigate the thistles until I hit desert, until I hit the boundary of Theoria.

Theoria. I've been wandering through the Tenantless thinking of my new home, trying to imagine all the things Aldon, my tutor, tried to instill in me during our history lessons. It goes something like this, I think:

Untold ages ago, the Serubelan king at the time and his highest councillor had a falling out. The councillor (whose name survived generation after generation of being written in the copyist's scrolls, only to elude my own limited memory at the moment) broke away from his king and led nearly one third of the Serubelan people beyond the Valley of the Tenantless and into the desert. He set out to prove that even under the harsh living conditions, he and his followers, who named themselves Theorians because of their willingness to try many theories on how to execute efficient rulership, could still provide citizens with a kingdom superior to Serubel in every way. Many of the great thinkers of Serubel joined the high councillor, including none other than the princess of Serubel. Indeed, she actually married the high councillor—oh yes, Vokor was his name—and remained at his side while he established his kingdom. But the bliss of marriage and rulership did not last long; she died within months of becoming his wife.

When the king of Serubel caught wind of the demise of his daughter, he blamed Vokor for tickling her ear and persuading her to leave the safety of her home. The king immediately set out for the desert in pursuit of war with Vokor. But somehow Vokor's fledgling army prevailed; rumor holds that he used unscrupulous trickery and dark magic to win. Aldon, who is not given to belief in magic or trickery, suspects that Vokor simply was expecting the king, and having been on the war council, knew the king's most likely moves and

countered them with vigor. Vokor captured nearly one half of the Serubelan army and immediately pronounced them slaves, setting them to work on the great pyramids of the city of Anyar and beyond. (It is said that Vokor believed his precious Healers could find a cure for death, and so he made pyramids and kept the dead there, including his beloved princess, until one day they could rise again. As of my last history lesson with Aldon, that had not yet occurred.)

The defeat left a bitter taste in the mouths of my Serubelan ancestors, and Serubel has considered Theoria its enemy ever since. Though the actual fighting had come to an end, and trading eventually did open up again, it was with a cold and polite unease that we've traded spectorium for the splendor of Theoria's riches. It was even rumored that King Knosi had released the Serubelan slaves and invited them to return to Serubel, and while Aldon believes it to be true, my father is vehement that the decree, too, was some sort of trickery, because why else would slaves remain in Theoria instead of returning to their home kingdom?

It's a question I intend to answer, as it is to the Baseborn Quarters I flee now, where the freed ancestors of the Serubelan slaves live and work and die. Slaves to their lot in life, Aldon suspects, instead of to any master.

It is not lost on me that I do not have to live as my brethren in Theoria. I am a Forger of spectorium, the last Forger, and I could produce enough of this valuable element to make me very rich in that kingdom. But with wealth comes more than the price of fine clothing and nicely appointed chariots; with it comes attention and even scrutiny. And under scrutiny, my ability becomes a danger to all.

Aldon used to say that my Forging makes me powerful. Perhaps that is true, but in light of the circumstances, it is nothing more than a lonely burden. No one can know that I alone possess the capacity

to Forge. In fact, no one can know that a mere person possesses the capacity to Forge at all; the world must continue to think spectorium is mined from deep caverns in the Underneath in a secret location in Serubel.

And as the last Forger, no one can share with me the responsibility of keeping spectorium safe from those with ill intentions. I'm a Forger of spectorium. And I have become its last protector.

Soon, trading for spectorium will come to a halt. Father will run out of it without me there to make it for him. Leaving will stop the war, but it will also stop the trading. How will Serubel survive without trading? But how will Serubel survive if I stay and Forge enough for a mighty war? My father is ravenous with the need for power; he would stop at nothing to get what he wants. Theoria would be razed to the ground, its citizens bowing at his feet. And who knows if the war would stop there? Perhaps Father would extend his power to all the five kingdoms. People would die. Father would kill them, and I would give him the means to.

And so I continue on with my escape.

Churning the history lesson over and over in my head, I kneel to the ground. The Tenantless sun beats down upon me while I dig a hole in the sand with my bare hands. It has been mere hours since I last Forged and though I still have many more hours before I'll become faint and weak with the power building up inside me, I want to expel as much as possible while I'm alone in the valley and can hide my gift. Besides, stopping to Forge and bury the evidence is a good excuse to rest. The heat is more taxing than I'd supposed it would be, especially in the long, modest servants' attire Mother had given me, and I've not even stepped foot upon the Theorian desert. Sweat trickles from my temples, down my throat, down my back. If the Theorians are as clever as their reputation, they'd have picked a more

hospitable place to live. If it gets much hotter, I will think them foolish indeed.

Father always did say they were too proud to admit folly. Perhaps Father was right about some things.

The increasing heat is enough to make me miss my Serubel even more. The cool mountains and faces of rocks devoured by vines full of wild orchids and broom brush and campion flowers so vivid in color they could be made of spectorium itself. The smell of the ravines; the air gravid with the aroma of a blossoming spring. I miss running across the rope bridges swinging precariously between the mountains, the fleeting sensation of flying when my feet lift from the safety of the boards. What could there be in uppity Theoria, among their sophisticated machines and complicated inventions, that is more beautiful than a simple, vibrant gully? For the smartest kingdom among us, they seem to overlook a great deal in the wake of their search for knowledge.

I dismiss the thought of Theoria and its haughty ways as I summon the liquid element deep inside me and direct it toward my palms. The spectorium seeps out in beads, as sweat on a forehead, building and collecting in a pool in my hand, an accumulation of all the colors in a rainbow with the indiscernible colors in between, glowing brilliant white and metallic at the same time. It feels refreshing to release, a cool rush of energy that opens my pores and slides out as though I were a faucet at the well. Because spectorium attracts spectorium, it amasses the static energy it creates, allowing it to float between my hands. I spin it into a ball and poke at it, trying to decide if I will just deposit it into the ground or if I shall make something. Before I know it, I'm structuring a figurine of Nuna in flight. I stretch and smooth the runny spectorium before it solidifies. With my thumbs, I press and prod the element into a replica no longer than my arm.

The wings are the most difficult to shape and I make them as thin as possible, blowing on them to cool quickly.

She really is beautiful, my miniature glowing Nuna. I decide to keep her, this small statue, to bring her with me on my journey. It goes against Mother's instructions and really, against my better judgment, but as soon as I set the eyes, I know she can be a substitute companion for me. I place her aside in the sand to cool as I expel more liquid spectorium into the small, deep pit I've dug. In the Tenantless heat, the puddle takes longer to cool, but gradually it begins to congeal at the bottom and solidify fully as I fill the trench with bright molten energy.

Energy that I must hide from the world for the rest of my life.

Yet, I cannot be entirely sorry for it. There was a time when spectorium was not understood, and the kingdoms survived without it. Serubel, because of the shelter and defense that our mountains naturally provide. Theoria, because of its advances in science and numbers and architecture. Hemut, because of brief moments of ingenuity and scads of time and experience gathered in the aptitude of simple survival in a land covered in ice. Wachuk, because of a primitive nature requiring only the barest of necessities, and because of their peaceable beliefs. And Pelusia, because of the ocean at its fingertips, which carries with it fish and trade by sea to the Foreign Kingdoms. I rarely count Pelusia as part of our five kingdoms, because it is so far north and it chooses to seclude itself entirely from the rest of us. Even when spectorium became recognized as a source of great power, Pelusia never bothered to trade for it.

All the kingdoms survived before spectorium, I remind myself. They will all survive again.

After the element has completely solidified, I cover the hole and spread around the remaining dirt, taking care to walk on it, leaving

footprints in the direction I'll be heading. The blustering desert wind will soon smooth over any evidence that the area had been disturbed at all, making rivulets in the sand like natural steps ascending toward a peak. I take a sip of my water jug and consult my map of Theoria once more, hoping perhaps this time something will have changed, that I'll be closer to Anyar than I'd originally thought. But if I'm still in the Valley of the Tenantless, I have much, much farther to go. For a brief moment, I am homesick, for I'm closer to the comfort of my castle and Nuna than I am to my new home in the Baseborn Quarters of Theoria.

But the only comfort I can take now is that I'm no longer within my father's reach. As Mother said, he'll never suspect that I've headed in the direction of Theoria, his greatest nemesis, the kingdom that fuels his hate. He'll never think to look for me in the Baseborn Quarters, where the freed slaves of the old war still reside. And he'll never suspect that Mother helped. To my father, Mother is a waif, a servant with a title. She does as she's told. No, Mother would not defy Father. I'd be a fool to think that she helped me flee out of some sort of maternal affection; the fate of Serubel is her concern. Father will think I've flung myself into the Nefari far below my cell, which opened over a steep cliff. Father will think me dead.

Oh, if only he hadn't been so greedy. If only he'd been content with his own kingdom instead of conquering others. If only he'd been reasonable. Then I would not be on this wretched journey to begin with.



4



T A R I K

TARIK GRIPS THE LEDGE OF THE ROYAL CHARIOT and looks up at the small gathering of clouds overhead. They'll not actually erupt into rain, he knows, for it never rains in Theoria, but even the skies seem to acknowledge the kingdom's great loss in the death of King Knosi.

Beside him, Sethos stands stiff, his jaw locked. It has been a long time since his brother was required to wear the ceremonial gold and silver body paint of the royal family. In fact, it was at their mother's funeral that he last wore it, and being only a boy, he'd smudged it before even leaving the palace for the procession to the pyramids. "You are sure you called in only the best embalmers?" Sethos whispers. The horses meet a bump in the pathway, and Sethos is forced to grip the ledge, too.

Tarik fixes his gaze on the elaborate gold-plated cart ahead of them. The cart that bears the king's body to its final destination in the Canyon of Royals. "He will be well preserved for many years," Tarik says softly, knowing his brother needs reassurance but unsure of how

much he'll actually accept. "Surely long enough to find the cure for death."

Sethos nods, as though this is what he'd been truly meaning to ask. If anyone in the five kingdoms could undo death, their Healers could. No other realm has come even close to the advanced knowledge of the healing sciences that the Lyceum has gathered over the centuries. And as soon as his father drew his last breath, Tarik had already doubled the resources designated to the Lyceum to perform its research—all the resources he could divert from the living, that is.

But this new illness has left the walls of the palace and now creeps through the Superior class, Rashidi reports. Some perish sooner than the King had; some last a few days longer. All suffer greatly. All waste away, losing blood and vitality before their families' eyes.

Yet, it does not appear contagious; the servants attending their masters and those closest to the sick are not falling ill.

"Curious," Tarik says more to himself than to Sethos.

His brother looks at him sideways; to be having a conversation during the funeral procession would be disrespectful. Tarik bows his head against the hypocrisy—his brother had, after all, spoken not a minute before—careful to keep the rest of his thoughts to himself. Sethos's body language seems to beg for privacy and silence. He is not taking the death of their father well; he would not appreciate an accounting of symptoms their father suffered before he died, and how some in the kingdom seem to be immune.

Tarik himself has not had time to mourn. In the days since King Knosi's passing, he's been rushed to session after session of council gatherings. His coronation ceremony was a hurried, informal affair to which the public—and surrounding kingdoms—had not been invited.

If it had not been for Rashidi, Tarik is certain he would have buckled under the pressure.

Rashidi continues to disagree. “You were born a ruler,” he insisted. Something else Rashidi sincerely believes. But Tarik has not had time to correct his father’s—and now his—closest adviser. He has not had time to take in a decent meal, either. A fact that his stomach reminds him of now—and loudly.

Sethos cuts him a look as if he’d done it on purpose, as if somehow the people gathered along the procession road could hear it above their wails and weeping as the chariot passes by.

He sighs. Sethos relieves anxiety through combat. He always has, and he’s probably looking for a reason to start a brawl with his brother, king or not. Tarik knows if his brother can make it through one public appearance without causing a scandal, he will count himself fortunate. Sethos’s moods have the tendency to swing as if on a hinge, and he can go from brooding to elated within moments—and brooding nearly always means a display of temper. It’s his only flaw, as far as Tarik can tell, but a crippling one at times. Even his tutors complain of it. But their father never kept Sethos on a leash. And neither will Tarik. No matter how many moans and groans he hears from the council.

He will allow his brother to mourn in his own way—as long as his now-clenched fist does not make it to Tarik’s jaw on this day.



5



S E P O R A

I'M NOT OF THE TRAVELING SORT, I DECIDE AS I STOP for the second time in as many hours to rub my aching feet. My calves burn with the task of digging my feet out of the sand with each heavy step. I haven't eaten in three days. I would trade enough spectorium to build one of the legendary Theorian pyramids for a single apple or a sliver of smoked meat. I'm out of water again, too, which means I'll have to brave the banks of the River Nefari to refill my jug.

The river is a fickle snake of water, widening in places and thinning in others, flowing straight for a day or two, only to become a winding stream, with strong visible currents lapping at the surface. Sometimes the water runs brown and muddy, and sometimes it changes to a deep red. I only get drinking water when it runs clear, and not just because it tends to taste better.

River Nefari is home to the Parani—evil, finned creatures with webbed hands and humanlike faces and a craving for the flesh of a man. I've never actually seen one, but I've heard stories about them and they are the stuff of nightmares.

In Serubel, parents warn children of the river by telling the tale of Ragan, the boy who was dared to swim in the river alone. While his taunting friends watched from shore, he made his way across the stream, taking care not to splash too much for fear he would alert the Parani to his presence. Even so, right before he reached the other side, he disappeared from the surface as if snatched under. Within minutes, two Parani sprang toward the bank where the other children stood screaming, and with one steady hoist, they tossed the full skeleton of Ragan at them, the bones clattering at their feet. The only flesh left was the skin keeping the hair attached to the skull.

It's with this in mind that I head toward the river with my jug, feeling fearful yet silly and superstitious all at the same time. Steps away from where the water meets shore, I glance around me and unsheathe my sword. If a Parani wants to surprise me, well then, I'll surprise it, too. With sword in one hand and jug in the other, I take the last few steps toward the river, squatting to refill my jug. The water is warm and not unpleasant, and it takes all my willpower not to drink it as soon as I've collected enough to gulp down. Uneasily, I keep my eyes on the river flowing past me, looking for shadowy figures below the surface or splashes of movement above it.

I see nothing. For several timeless moments, I stay and watch the waves and the current and the water separating me from the opposite embankment. Fear ebbs away from me as if caught up in the flow of the river. The story of Ragan simply could not be true. It would take more than a few moments to separate a boy from his flesh, and if the Parani were so predatory then why hadn't anyone else ever been eaten? Certainly not because all children obeyed their parents and stayed away from the river henceforth. I knew a servant boy who would exercise the Defenders and come back from the Underneath with hair as wet as a mop and sopping clothes to match. I told Aldon

once about the boy and Aldon had said that sometimes young men get the ideas of bravery and stupidity horribly mixed up. But he didn't deny that the boy swam the Nefari when he went to the Underneath.

The Nefari is clear here, and the bed of it is full of round pebbles with small aquatic plants that look like weeds sprouting in between them. A bath would be nice. I've no soap, but mud would do for scraping most of the dust from me, and my hair might be more manageable if it were wet. It's in sore need of rebraiding as well.

I could keep my sword with me and be watchful. I could be quiet as a cloud. And I could be clean.

I set down my leather satchel and place my water jug next to it. Bathing nude is risky. Aside from the obvious exposure to unexpected strangers, it makes for a sloppy getaway in the unlikely case of a Parani attack. If, of course, I make it out alive, which, if I'm to believe the tale of Ragan, is also highly unlikely. And, well, my clothes need a thorough rinsing if truth be told, and if I do it now, they'll have time to dry before it gets cold. The Theorian desert is a flat, parched, unforgiving adversary during the day but at night is when it becomes truly miserable. At night is when the crawling and slithering and flying creatures come out, and the air is so cold you can see your breath in the moonlight.

Despite all of this, I convince myself that a bath is a good idea. Not only a good idea, but an absolute necessity. The only things I remove are my tattered, worn servants' shoes. Shoes that were meant for padding around the castle floors and across bridges and perhaps into the Serpen stables, but were never intended to walk for days across the Tenantless or traverse across a scalding desert whose tiny grains embed themselves into my feet, in between my toes, rubbing the skin there red and raw.

At first the water stings the blisters that gnaw on my heels, and I

gingerly scrub the sand out of the open welts. I breathe a sigh of relief as the pain begins to subside and my feet become used to being unrestrained. The pebbles feel smooth and inviting and before long I'm completely submerged, basking in the way my body feels weightless instead of encumbered by the terrible burden of my own flesh and limbs I've been dragging around for days.

Slowly, I dig a hole underneath the pebbles and get to the muddy riverbed, scooping up a handful of the rough silt. I tackle my face first, scrubbing it violently until I'm sure it will shine in the midday sun. Next I scour my arms and legs and neck, careful not to get mud inside my clothing. Rinsing is a thorough affair, and I spend more time doing it than I do actually cleaning myself. My servant dress is lavender linen, and the stains easily disintegrate from it in the warm water with some wringing and twisting.

Feeling pleased and refreshed, I untangle my braid and begin to sort it out into something more manageable. Just as I tie the end back in place, an immense dunking sort of splash, a mere Serpen-length away, startles me from my vanity. A bit of terror steals through me as I imagine a large fin making just that size ring of ripples swelling outward ahead of me. It was something big. It was something that isn't *there* anymore, something that could be *here* now. Part of me wants to tear out of the river as fast as I can, to put distance between myself and the ripples. The other part knows that would be a mistake. That the clamoring sounds of escape would only attract attention to myself.

But so will the sound of me trembling in the water, of my teeth chattering in fear, of my throat closing around a whimper of desperation to flee. These are things I cannot keep quiet, these are things that no longer fall under my control and so if I'm to be loud, I'll be loud while retreating to the safety of the riverbank. Making no further

attempt to keep quiet, I leave my sword abandoned in the water—oh why had I put it down in the first place?—and sludge toward shore and—

Run directly into the largest man I've ever seen. My head doesn't even reach his shoulders. Where the water hits my waist, it hits him at the groin. With the sun shining behind him, I can only make out his gigantic silhouette. But I do recognize when he raises a fist above him. And I wait for the blow.