

ALLY

ANNA BANKS



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

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For G,

My accomplice in all things that probably aren't a good idea.





PART ONE





1



S E P O R A

THE TIP OF SETHOS'S SWORD ALMOST CATCHES the bridge of my nose. As I sweep back, I use the inside of my foot to kick dirt in his face for daring to come so close to me. These are, after all, only practice sessions, and if he's going to test me this way, I'm most certainly going to return the favor. He glides to his left, an effortless movement, avoiding not only the sand, but the cloud of dust left in its wake.

I'm left infuriated and thrilled all at once.

I can't imagine there could be anyone faster than Sethos, Tarik's younger brother. I haven't seen many of the Master Majai train, as the king's highly skilled army of warriors spend their days at the Lyceum when not on duty, but of these Favored Ones I *have* watched from the balcony overlooking this courtyard, none are faster than Sethos, who only just turned sixteen. Even his shadow cannot keep up with his movements. I wonder whether his father, the Warrior King Knosi, was as nimble on his feet.

Sethos laughs. "Your antics might work—on a lesser warrior. But I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that, Princess, if you're going to overtake me."

We both know I'll never overtake him, no matter how much we practice. And we both know these lessons are not strictly for my instruction. Our sessions together bring us both relief from the delusions we used to call lives. There was a time once when we were both free to make our own decisions, free to marry whom we chose—or, at least, the illusion of that choice—and free to leave the palace walls.

Freedom now is like the hinge of a door rusted in place from lack of use.

Sethos's and Tarik's relationship has become strained. Where there used to be easy banter between them, it comes with sharper barbs and insincerity. Where there used to be shared opinions, Sethos takes the opposite side of Tarik, no matter the subject. It is difficult to watch sometimes, the deterioration of the affection these brothers once had for each other.

I shake my head, lowering my sword. Catching one's breath in the stifling Theorian heat seems almost as impossible as merely shaving Sethos with my sword. I want to graze him so badly, to at least nick him, anything to get that smug look wiped from his face. But other Majai cannot, and so when I get close, I know he is just toying with me. "Trust me when I say I'm doing my best," I tell him.

He makes a *tsking* sound with his tongue. I've come to abhor that sound, so mocking and condescending. "You know you're not. You know you could—"

"Do not say it," I hiss, lifting my sword again. I'm growing tired of this, the same conversation we have each session. He's bent on seeing me Forge, bent on teaching me to use my ability to protect myself. He insists that if I could produce spectorium fast enough, I could use it to scald my opponent. I suppose he's right. But even if I wanted to Forge, I couldn't. Not here in the open. I know it. Sethos knows it.

Our two impervious kings, Tarik and my father, have decided that my Forging should be kept a secret from the kingdoms. That my

power, as the only Forger of spectorium, puts me in danger. And that my well-being is of the utmost importance.

Indeed. Tarik's sense of duty makes my well-being his concern. But Father? His intentions strike the opposite direction entirely. Every day, he grows impatient of my "well-being," threatening to chain me in the dungeon (the palace in Anyar, the heart of Theoria, has no such dungeon) until I Forge spectorium for him. He has thrown outrageous fits in our moments of privacy, demanding that I Forge, and when we are in the company of the Falcon King, he finds many diplomatic ways to suggest the same to Tarik. But for some reason, Tarik is not willing—not yet, at least—to force my hand. The Falcon King must think I will acquiesce, that I will give in and eventually supply him with the spectorium needed for the plague.

He is wrong.

I will no longer supply any of the five kingdoms with spectorium. Not Theoria for its plague nor Tarik's leverage, not Serubel for its economy nor Father's ambitions. The ice kingdom of Hemut will have to make do without the element, as will Wachuk and Pelusia, which I'm thankful have shown no interest in it in the past. The age of spectorium has ended.

I will no longer be used as a pawn in a game of power. And I will no longer trust anyone to decide what is and is not for my well-being.

Which, sadly, must include Sethos. How am I to know whether Sethos is secretly siding with Tarik, planning to bring him the fresh spectorium I Forge during our training sessions? Sethos, though one of my favorite people at the moment, is conniving and cunning enough to pull off such an act of betrayal. Perhaps that is why he constantly pesters me to Forge—Tarik has put him up to it. Though, the thought is truly unlikely. Sethos barely speaks to Tarik anymore, and while I'm not a Lingot as Tarik is, having the ability to discern the truth from a lie, I'm not a fool, either. It is plain that Sethos considers

his older brother a tyrant—and the fact that Tarik has ordered him to wed the Princess Tulle of Hemut is irrefutable proof of that accusation. It came down as a royal order, one that the entire kingdom of Theoria knows about and one that Sethos cannot forgive his brother. No, Sethos is not trying to betray me. Not for Tarik.

Truth told, our practices together are the only time Sethos resembles himself anymore. Something happens to him after we finish—after we are sapped of energy and of sweat, after we’ve returned to our lot in life. When he arrives for the evening meal in the palace—another one of Tarik’s requirements—he is sullen and quiet and bereft of charm.

He is no longer Sethos.

I know that it is his imminent marriage to Tulle that has him so depleted of his usual charm and so filled to the brim with ill temper. I cannot fault him there, for a marriage without love is what we are both facing, and the prospect of it makes most of my food lose its taste. But Sethos’s circumstances are unique in that he actually despises his betrothed, whereas I have resolved to simply remain aloof. Any love Tarik and I once felt for each other has been twisted into something that resembles manners and diplomacy.

With Sethos, manners and diplomacy have never come easily.

“Why do you loathe Princess Tulle?” I immediately regret the question, which was blurted as an afterthought. I watch the moment he closes himself off to me. Our lesson is all but over now; I can see it in his eyes. Disappointment makes my sword even heavier.

He gives me an odd smirk when he says, “Don’t worry, Princess. Tulle harbors no love for me, either. You’re fortunate to be able to marry for love.”

All at once, my face is full of warmth, a flush I know cannot be concealed. I should not have this reaction to Tarik, not after everything he’s done. There was a time when I would have married him for

love. But our time for loving each other has passed. And so has my willingness to marry him.

Yet Sethos grins wickedly. “You and my brother assume I’m blind, then? Did you know that you do not steal glances of each other no fewer than a dozen times at the evening meal alone?”

I lift my chin. I’d been working on that, not looking at Tarik. Not giving attention to his presence at all. And I’ve been failing, apparently. “I’m merely striving to be attentive. Perhaps you could set aside a portion of your busy day to reflect upon good manners.” It is a blow, suggesting that Sethos is busy. He has been assigned to the security of the palace, and according to him, the place runs by itself. The only distraction he finds is when he feels of the mood to round up a group of guards, portraying himself as an intruder and tasking them with finding him, how he got in, and what he was after. This only serves to irritate him in the end; his ego does not allow him to be captured, and so the guards must resign themselves to another session resulting in failure with a Master Majai berating them incessantly. It is not good for anyone involved.

“Attentive?” Sethos is saying. “Your execution of ‘attentiveness’ is flawless, Princess. Coincidentally, so is my brother’s.”

I slide my sword into its sheath strapped across my back, as is the Theorian way. “If you are so proficient about judging everyone’s apparent feelings, how is it that you could not secure the affection of Tulle?”

Sethos spits on the ground beside him. “Why are you so bent on seeing me tethered to someone as vile as Tulle? What have I ever done to you?”

“Aside from purchasing me for your brother’s harem? Nothing. Why are you so bent on avoiding this discussion?” If I cannot beat him with a sword, I shall best him with words.

Or, perhaps not.

He closes the distance between us quickly, grabbing my arms before I can squirm—before I can even think of squirming. “Run away with me, Sepora. Run away with me tonight.”

I try to step away, try to wriggle out of his grasp, but to no avail. His hands are large and my arms are small, and he has his shins and groin protected with platelets of copper. So much for learning to defend myself.

“We could settle ourselves in Wachuk. Make a life together there,” he practically yells. “Say yes, and I’ll see to it that you can bring Nuna, your glorious Defender Serpen. I’ll never make you Forge. Not a drop.”

I feel my eyes grow wide, darting frantically about the courtyard partly for help and partly to make sure no one is hearing this madness. “Sethos, has the heat gotten to you?” I hiss. “Let me go!”

“We’ll make beautiful babies,” he bellows, pulling me closer. I swear his shouting would wake the dead entombed in the pyramids on the other side of Anyar. “I want a girl with eyes just like yours.”

Babies! If I kicked hard enough, surely the copper couldn’t protect—

“If you ever wish to sire children at all, you’ll unhand her directly,” a familiar voice calls from behind. We both face Tarik, whose fury cannot be hidden by the golden body paint forced upon him by royal obligation.

Sethos releases me and laughs heartily. It’s no wonder he was yelling. From his vantage point, he knew the moment Tarik arrived. Scoundrel.

“I’m going to kill you,” I decide as I say it, reaching for the sword at my back.

But Sethos is already walking away and is, decidedly, not concerned. “You really must sport with my brother more often, Princess. As you can see, it’s great fun,” he says over his shoulder. When he

passes Tarik, he doesn't deign to acknowledge him. But Tarik wouldn't have noticed anyway. He's staring at me now, as if I'm the one who'd planned to raise heathen children with his heathen brother in a heathen kingdom.

I cross my arms. "What are you doing here?" I nod to the bronze sundial situated in front of the courtyard wall, though I can't readily tell what it reads. "My lesson is not over."

Tarik raises a brow, making it a point to eye my sheathed sword. "Your tutor seems to think it is."

"You're early," I insist, nearly stomping my foot. The one liberty I do have is that I may practice self-defense with Sethos daily in the courtyard, though Tarik is not elated about extending this courtesy. Still, he does, and so I take full advantage of escaping the goings-on of the palace and my new place in it. When my lessons are cut short, I make it a point to be difficult.

"Your mother is early as well," he draws. He is good at keeping his emotions to himself of late. His expressions, his body language. The Master Lingot Saen taught me how to learn like a Lingot to watch for these things, that there is more to what a person says than their words. But Tarik shows me nothing. If he is excited to meet my mother, or if he dreads it, I couldn't know. "Queen Hanlyn arrived moments ago by Serpen in the far courtyard. I thought you'd like to visit with her before the evening meal."

Queen Hanlyn. My mother. She wasn't scheduled to arrive until tomorrow; she'll be joining my father to attend the royal engagement procession, as is the custom in Theoria. In the procession, Tarik and I will lead by chariot what I'm told is a rather ostentatious exhibition of the throne's wealth and integrity, bestowing gifts on all of the citizens and, in effect, sealing my fate with Tarik. The thought of it brings shivers to me despite the heat. Or perhaps it is the look Tarik gives me now, one filled with curiosity—and something else I can't quite name.

Against my will, I hold his gaze. To back down now would be too telling.

To calm the sensations swirling in my gut, I try to focus not on his face, but on his words. It will be the first time I've seen my mother since she sent me on the journey to Theoria months ago. Her short visit to Theoria will reveal whether I have failed, and I'm more than curious to see whether she holds praise or wrath for me, with the outcome such as it is. Surely sacrificing myself in marriage will count for something. And it will be a relief to burden Mother with the task of keeping Father at bay where my Forging is concerned. She alone can handle him best, even at his worst, and if she cannot, she can at least manage to distract him long enough from his endeavors until she *can* handle him. But before we discuss the matter of my father, we must discuss the matter of Tarik.

That the great Falcon King is a Lingot, able to discern the truth from a lie.

And that as such, he *cannot* be handled.



2



T A R I K

TARIK ROLLS AND UNROLLS THE SCROLL SET BEFORE him, wrapping the small message around his finger tightly and unwinding it rapidly so that it spins. He is more than a little preoccupied with the thought that at this very moment, Sepora is visiting with her mother, the queen of Serubel. What must Sepora be saying to her? What impression is Sepora giving to the queen before Tarik has a chance to prove he is worthy of her daughter? And why does he care so much what Queen Hanlyn thinks of him?

Rashidi, who has been sitting patiently across from Tarik's day-chamber desk, clears his throat gently. As his father's most loyal adviser, and now Tarik's closest friend, he has every right to show some impatience at his king's apparent detachment. Yet he is long-suffering, as though he understands to where Tarik's thoughts have strayed.

"Perhaps we could discuss this another time, Highness," Rashidi says. "We have a few days yet to sort out the details of the engagement procession." He lifts the kohl chalk from the map of Anyar. Obviously, he'd been tracing a pathway for the procession. Tarik can see that from the Half Bridge, the course is set to return to the palace. Normally this would go without question.

But nothing in his life is normal anymore.

Tarik shakes his head, tensing for the disagreement he knows will come with his next words. “We must include the Baseborn Quarters in our procession, Rashidi.”

The old adviser groans but does not appear surprised. “I had a notion you might say that.”

Tarik smirks. “You knew that I would. The Baseborn Quarters are made up of the descendants of the freed Serubelan slaves. I must include my future queen’s own people.”

“That is not the point of the procession, Highness. Nor the custom.”

“Do enlighten me then, Rashidi.” Though he’s well acquainted with the tradition of the procession and the custom. Rashidi had tutored him on both months ago, the moment he’d decided that Tarik should wed Princess Tulle. And if he had married Princess Tulle, this would not be a discussion.

Ah, but so many things become a discussion where Sepora is concerned.

His friend leans back in his seat, resting his silver walking staff against his chest. Tarik can tell Rashidi is deciding how to choose his words. With words, Rashidi has conjured up peace when there was no peace, arranged marriage when there was no affection, and assuaged pride when pride was the only thing that was left. Rashidi and his words are powerful. But Tarik will not bend on this point, no matter the sway of Rashidi’s diplomacy. “The point of any royal engagement procession is to display the wealth and power of Theoria,” the adviser begins, “to impress upon the one marrying into our kingdom that they are by far on the receiving end of the most advantage. If they do not believe that to be the case, they are free to incorporate their own customs to display their superior wealth, Highness.” To Tarik’s knowledge, this has not happened before in the history of Theoria,

for a kingdom to try to outshine Theoria. And Tarik doubts Serubel has the ability to do so. Yet, Rashidi's eyes light up. "Perhaps King Eron and Queen Hanlyn could host a Serubelan feast for all the kingdom and include their own people. Surely that would appease the Baseborn Quarters and, of course, your queen."

"That would do nothing to make the Baseborn citizens loyal to *me*. And to Sepora. It is not simply a matter of pleasing Sepora. I want to be able to count those people among those willing to fight for Theoria, if the time comes."

Rashidi scowls. Tarik knows his thoughts are drawn to the kingdom of Hemut, where the possibility of war may already loom. "A wise thought, of course." The adviser grimaces, a sign that Tarik will not like what he has to say. "Forgive me, Highness, but it would be difficult for any in our kingdom to remain loyal to Princess Sepora after what she has done. I think even the Baseborn class would take exception, since it was the work of *those* citizens she destroyed."

So. Rashidi is not so concerned with tradition as Tarik had thought. No, he wishes to punish Sepora for what she has done. Or rather, for what she *hasn't* done. Tarik works to keep his expression neutral. Rashidi is still resentful of the fact that all this time Sepora could have Forged fresh spectorium for Cy the Healer to use against the Quiet Plague, but instead chose to remain quiet about it. If Tarik is being honest, he himself is still bitter. Bitter, and betrayed. But for some inexplicable reason, he feels the need to defend Sepora—something he resents as well. Still, among these complicated emotions agitating him to no end, he knows that allowing any servant—even Rashidi—to speak ill of his future wife could potentially start an avalanche of this sort of behavior that may be difficult to control. He and Sepora must stand united, even if she does not yet realize that.

"She has a dangerous gift, Rashidi. She sought only to protect it." Which is true enough. He still remembers the look on her face when

she saw the explosion of cratorium for the first time in the courtyard. It was a look of familiarity and of terror. She was afraid the weapon would fall into the wrong hands. And who could blame her for that?

Yet a small bit of blame does ease its way into his mind and settles there, where it will stay until he has the opportunity to confront her about her . . . *decisions*.

“At the expense of your own father’s pyramid?” Rashidi spits. “When the kingdom learns of that—”

Tarik jumps to his feet, leaning across the desk. He did not mean to startle his friend—but perhaps his friend needed a change of pace. He is speaking dangerously just now. If the people knew she could have prevented the dismantling of their dear King Knosi’s burial place, they would most certainly riot. “And how will the kingdom learn of that? I believe I made it quite clear that no one must know of Sepora’s Forging abilities. Tell me now, Rashidi. Do you intend to tell the people what has taken place?” He is, after all, an ambassador of the people. Tarik well knows that what he asks of his friend goes against his loyalty to the citizens.

His adviser inhales deeply and exhales his wrath in a slow, steady breath. Rashidi is prone to tantrums, especially when they keep private company. Tarik respects that he takes care to rein in his temper. Still, it does take a moment for his gaze to reach Tarik’s. When it does, Tarik can see that his friend has calmed down. “No, Highness. I would never defy you.”

The truth. Pride of the pyramids, but he needed to hear that. If he lost Rashidi’s loyalty in the face of all that he knows is to come . . . He cannot even think of the desperation in which he would be left. Tarik takes his seat again, leaning his arms on the rests of the chair. “You think that I have forgiven Sepora for forcing my hand in taking down my father’s pyramid.” It is not a question. His father, the Warrior King Knosi, had meant a great deal to Rashidi. It is natural for the

family's oldest friend to be bitter. Natural, and loyal, Tarik reminds himself. Rashidi's reaction is as it should be.

"She has secured your heart, Highness. I was hoping that despite this, she has not secured your reason."

"She has not." Even he can sense the turmoil in those words. Is reason not always inconveniently intermingled with the desires of the heart?

"If I were but a Lingot, so that I may know how you truly feel."

Tarik taps his fingers on the armrest. "I understand. You need reassurance from me, friend. And I have no idea how to give it to you."

"By not bringing honor to someone who has dishonored you on so many occasions. Highness, including the Baseborn Quarters in the procession tells your future queen that she can dance upon your pride and you'll do nothing about it."

Tarik sighs. "I cannot punish her for a crime she doesn't know she committed."

Rashidi stares at him for a long time. "Do you mean to say that you have not told her of your father's pyramid?"

"No, I have not."

"Why in the Five Kingdoms not?"

Tarik longs to wipe a hand down his face, but it would ruin the art painted so carefully there, and he doesn't have time to readdress it before the evening meal. "I've not had the chance to. We've barely spent time alone, and those times did not lend themselves to bringing up something so . . . precious to me. I must have time to think on it more, Rashidi. Right now she is bent on defying me in any way she can."

"You're afraid she will not have the proper respect the situation deserves."

"I am." And he is afraid of how it will make him feel if that happens. If Sepora were to brush off the discussion or to treat it with the

defiance she has grown so fond of and without due care, he shudders to think how a lifetime with her would be possible.

It simply would not.

“And what if she never composes herself? What if she intends to act this way for her entire rulership and marriage to you?”

“Oh, I’m quite sure that is her intention.”

“What will you do?”

“Sepora and I will not live our lives as strangers to each other—I won’t allow that. If I have to woo my own wife all over again, that is what I will do. When she is mine, in every sense of the word, that is when we will speak of this matter. But not a moment before. You see, I cannot risk a fight between us. That would give her an excuse to run away or to try to end our union. We need the Serubelans, as much as I hate to admit it, now that we have likely offended Hemut.” Though, truth told, he is more concerned about losing Sepora than of having to face the Hemutians without the likes of King Eron on his side. But this he cannot confess to his best adviser. For this alone proves that Sepora truly has stolen his reason along with his heart.

Rashidi actually smiles then. “Your father would be proud of you, Highness. He did not name you the Falcon Prince in error. You truly do see matters from a loftier view than most people.”

If only Rashidi were a Lingot. Then he would see through me and I could be relieved of the burden of this farce. Tarik picks up the kohl utensil Rashidi had been using to mark the path of the engagement procession and circles the part of the map denoting the Baseborn Quarters. “So then, we will include the Baseborn Quarters in our royal procession. And we will shower them with more gifts than the people have ever seen.”



3



S E P O R A

I FIND MOTHER WAITING FOR ME ALONE. INDULGING herself in a quiet tour of my bedchamber. Nothing about her has changed; she still wears her golden brown hair, sliced through with gray, in the same long, thick braid that trails down her back. She still moves silently and with purpose—never without purpose—and she still wears the same old-fashioned Serubelan gown, which she has in at least a dozen different, and drab, colors. Mother is not one for extravagance or garnering attention; she’s always taught me that men listen better to a woman when they are not distracted by her appearance. I wonder what she will think of my Theorian attire now: a pair of flowing, nearly sheer white pants gathered at the ankle and a matching linen top that doesn’t cover the shoulders and leaves my midriff exposed. My hair is piled high atop my head in many braids and silver clasps of dragonflies with delicate wings that flutter with my movements; it took nearly an hour this morning for Anku, my head attendant, to scrawl the silver and black swirling designs around my eyes. For now, as I am not yet queen, I have chosen not to adorn the full-body silver paint that comes with the duty. Silver for the queen and gold for the king. Tarik is not happy about this, but somehow

wearing the paint feels as though I'm admitting defeat and sealing my fate prematurely. As it is, Mother will notice that I have been exposed to the sun in inappropriate places for Serubelan royalty, but that, of course, could not be helped.

I watch her for what seems like an eternity, gliding elegantly about the room as though she has wheels instead of feet hidden under her long gown. I cannot help but feel pride at the expression on her face, which is that of being thoroughly impressed. It is how I felt when I was first introduced to my new accommodations as queen of Theoria, and that first night in the grand bed made of silver and curtained with sheer blue silk was a sleepless one, despite the extreme comfort of the linens and the soothing scent of fresh lavender awash among my pillows and bedding.

I still have not become accustomed to the luxury and splendor Tarik's mother fashioned for herself—and of course, for future queens of Theoria—in what is modestly called a bedchamber. Everything is accented with the most gleaming silver, from the sconces on the walls, which I'm sure would normally be filled with spectorium for lighting but which will be lit with fire as soon as the sun reaches the western horizon, to the silver carvings on the bed, to the legs of chairs and tables and even vases of desert flowers brought in fresh daily. Only the finest silver is appropriate for a queen of Theoria.

Flamboyant for a princess of Serubel.

Mother stops at a design embedded into the wall made entirely of blue Seer Serpen scales, iridescent and pearly and embellished with silver vines, as if the scales were the petals of a rare desert flower. I bite my lip as she frowns. I'd thought about having it removed; Seer Serpens are gentle creatures used by my people only for their gift of sight, and walking past this design day in and day out reminds me that Theorians treasure only their giant cats as pets and will kill any Serpen merely for its beautiful scales. It is as wasteful as killing a

camel for just one of its hooves. But asking for the design to be removed is a sensitive matter, because Tarik's mother arranged it herself and the servants assigned to me in these quarters have boasted so admiringly of it. It is apparent they served—and loved—their previous queen. If they are to be of any use to me at all, I must gain their trust and loyalty; destroying something so dear to them is not the way to go about it.

“I must endure it,” I tell my mother. “The servants adore it, and extracting it would put their loyalty to me in peril.”

Mother visibly startles. When she turns around, her smile fades as her gaze drips from the top of my head to my bare feet; I'd discarded my shoes the instant I'd hit palace floors. I rarely wear them anymore, and when I do, they are not slippers as is the Serubelan custom but are leather sandals, usually encrusted with jewels. I choose to go without, in most cases on account of modesty but on others because of the comfort that jeweled sandals cannot provide.

My mother recovers almost instantly, straightening her shoulders and approaching me for an embrace. When she folds me into her arms, her grip is fierce, yet her words are gently spoken. “You are right not to have it removed,” she says in my ear. “Loyalty from those closest to you is indeed necessary. But we will discuss that later.” If she is appalled at my attire, she does not say so. She would know that if I am to be queen of Theoria, I must dress the part.

She releases me then and leads me to a sitting area close to the balcony. I feel silly, following Mother around my own bedchamber when it is I who should be hosting her. But I follow just the same, as if things are how they always used to be. And in a way, they are. I am anticipating her telling me how to fix this mess. I am anticipating being the pupil and she the instructor once again.

The easy breeze from the arched entryways makes the light drapery dance in the setting sunlight, and Mother drinks it in for a moment

before looking at me. Her gray-blue eyes are steady, even steely, when she says, “We cannot trust your father, Magar Sepora. He would never exchange the annihilation of Theoria for a union with it. He could have had an alliance with Theoria for decades, had he chosen to meet King Knosi even halfway.”

Magar Sepora is my full name, and Mother never uses it unless she’s trying to impress something upon me. Before, when I was a child, that something could have been the importance of not overeating at dinner or rising early enough to Forge for Father. Now, it seems surreal to have such a conversation with her. A conversation that involves impeding my father. And she makes a good point. I had not thought of it in that way, that Father could have formed an alliance as easily as he could have started a war all this time. I assumed he wanted peace when he learned of Tarik’s power and assets, and that the kingdom of Theoria was prepared for his attack. Obviously, Mother does not think that is the case.

That is why I need her here now. I cannot juggle two kings with different interests. My Serubelan tutor, Aldon, never prepared me for such unlucky circumstances. Certainly he never envisioned me betrothed to the king of Theoria nor Father approving of the arrangement.

Tarik has already said that he mistrusts my father. That Father dances around the truth with murky words like “peace” and “for now.” The only thing that rings clearly true is that Father intends for me to marry the Falcon King. There is no deception when he speaks of the impending wedding.

“What could he be planning?” I ask Mother, suddenly aware that she is scrutinizing me.

“I have not spoken with him yet. His correspondences to me since he’s arrived here have painted a picture of happiness and contentment. Your father does not have contentment in his nature. Ambition has

always driven him, in everything he does. You must not Forge, Magar. You must not give him that power.”

“I haven’t. I won’t. But . . . There is something you must know. There’s a plague, the Quiet Plague, in the midst of Theoria. Master Cy, a Healer at the Lyceum, has created a cure for it. And the cure requires spectorium.” I breathe out, relieved of the burden of this conundrum at last. Mother will have the answer. She always does.

Mother crosses her legs beneath her gown. “Tell me of this plague.”

“It killed King Knosi; he was, in fact, the first victim. Since then it has swept through Theoria. It killed many before Cy found the cure. He mixes spectorium—old spectorium, because I will not Forge—with an element called nefarite that we harvest from the River Nefari. Together, they restore the patient to perfect health. The success rate has been absolute.”

“Interesting.” She taps a finger to her temple. “Nefarite, you say? An element long desired by all the kingdoms. How do they avoid the Parani?”

So Mother knows of nefarite and how it is found only in the River Nefari. I shouldn’t be surprised, of course. Mother is from Pelusia, where the River Nefari empties into the great ocean. Parani at the mouth of the river can grow twice the size as the Parani in Theoria. Aldon said that creatures of the oceans are always much bigger than creatures of the river.

I wonder if Mother knows that Parani are not creatures at all. Well, not exactly.

“And where are they getting this old spectorium?”

“Some of the citizens donate it when their family members become ill. But mostly it comes from dismantling structures made from it. They will run out of it, sooner than later.”

“Have it out, child. I can hear in your words that something ails you.”

Of course she can. “If . . . When Theoria runs out of spectorium, what am I to do? I will be the queen. How can I stand by and watch the citizens die, when I have their remedy at my fingertips?” The question is telling, I know. It reveals that I care for the people of Theoria, while all my life, I was raised to think them my enemies. But I hope that it also reveals that I am dedicated to becoming a good queen if I must—and that I still defer to Mother’s judgment.

She thinks on this a long time. I am both relieved and irked that she considers it so carefully. On the one hand, it means that she cares about the fate of the people of Theoria and that she wants me to succeed at being their queen. On the other hand, it means that she fully *intends* for me to be queen. That she will not be helping me find a way to escape this marriage. I’m quite sure now that Mother has no interest in the emotional trespasses Tarik has caused. That he was going to marry another, until it was convenient to marry me. She would say, in her current state of mood, that he did what any good ruler would do.

Yet I had hoped she would be my ally in this. And the disappointment is almost unbearable.

Finally, she says, “This Cy, the Healer at the Lyceum. How trustworthy is he?”

Cy and I are friends, that I know. He wished Tarik and me well when he learned we were to marry, and when he’s with us, he is no longer formal and stiff. But I well know where Cy’s loyalty lies. “Cy’s allegiance belongs to Tarik. If he had to choose between the two of us, he would choose the Falcon King.”

Mother nods. “It’s as it should be. And the boy king? How trustworthy is he?”

I fidget my hands in my lap, an action that does not go unnoticed by Mother. I would like to say that Tarik is trustworthy. As a king, he

is dutiful beyond measure. But in being so dutiful, he has betrayed me so terribly. He would have wed Princess Tulle, even though we shared such intimate feelings for each other. He had apparently expected me to stand aside while he took her to his bed to produce an heir—something he himself would never stand for if our roles had been reversed. And then he chose to use the weapon cratorium, a mix of spectorium and Scalding venom, against my father in what he thought was an impending war. He had chosen to inflict harm on my people. I clench my teeth and lift my chin, leveling my gaze at Mother. “He would use spectorium in any manner he sees fit.”

“Hmmm” is all Mother has to say about that. Then, “Let me think on this, Magar. Spectorium cannot fall into the wrong hands. But I’m not so sure that the Falcon King could bear blood guilt the way your father could. My spies tell me he is fair and decisive.”

Spies? I had no idea Mother had spies. And I had no idea they reached as far as Theoria. I have much to learn from her about being a queen.

“Still,” she continues, “power is power, and it tends to go to a man’s head, to where even his heart can be fooled by it. Yes, I must think on it, child. Until then, however, you mustn’t Forge. How have you hidden it so far?”

“There is running water in the lavatory. It eventually dumps into the Nefari. I Forge only small bits at a time, late in the evening after everyone has gone.” It is an understatement, to say the amount of spectorium is small. Before, I didn’t worry about purging in the lavatory, Forging into the hole leading to the Nefari to regain my strength. Few people would be venturing toward that part of the stream, where the refuse ultimately settles. Besides, if the spectorium had been found, all that could have been assumed was that it had come from the palace—not directly from my chamber. Now, though, Father knows I must Forge every day. He’ll know where to look. But even his

scrutinizing eyes will not see what I do. The spectorium I Forge now is mere droplets, as small as beads of sweat; if they make it to the Nefari, their glow could be mistaken for the reflection of the sun or a mirroring of the stars upon the river's surface. They are even too small to meld together, too tiny for any ill intentions he may have. In fact, it takes me all night, Forging this way, to regain my energy only to have it stolen away again by lack of sleep. Even now, I long for my bed. But we have the evening meal to attend and begging off is not an option. I want to see how Mother will entertain Tarik, how she will manage his ability.

Just then, Anku quietly opens the great door to the bedchamber and allows herself in. She carries with her a lighting torch. The only acknowledgment she gives us is a slight nod as she proceeds to light the sconces around the immense set of rooms. Darkness creeps in from the balcony and settles over us as if a haze of kohl dust has wafted in. Mother yawns, covering her mouth with the back of her hand.

Standing, she says, "My darling, it is wonderful to see you again. I must go and ready myself for the evening meal now. And it looks as though your face paint could use some touching up." With this, she embraces me once more, the way a person might embrace a muddy child, all angled and without affection. A show of decorum although Anku is not watching.

Perhaps our meals will be less awkward with Mother here. She knows how to entertain Father, and she is an exceptional hostess. For a reason I cannot explain, I want her to impress Tarik, to show him that Serubel is not a kingdom of crude barbarians with primitive customs. If there is anyone who can prove this, it would be my mother.

Oh, but there is one thing I've forgotten. Perhaps the most important thing. I grab Mother's arm before she gets to the door left open by Anku. "Mother, do you know what a Lingot is?"



4



T A R I K

TARIK ISN'T SURE WHAT HE EXPECTED OF QUEEN Hanlyn, but this is not it. Perhaps he expected her to be ornery and unpleasant with forced manners, as King Eron is. Or perhaps he expected her to be quiet and submissive, merely an ornament at her husband's side. More important, he expected her to leak puzzling untruths and deceit with every word, as the king of Serubel does—or, at the very least, emanate insincerity through body language alone. He had hoped to garner more clues as to what the two of them truly have planned for his union with Sepora.

But the queen's body language is straightforward and confident, and her words strike true to his ears. The only thing she seems to be hiding is how tired she is from her journey to Theoria. She is so bent on hiding it, in fact, that she has taken over the dinner as though she were the hostess and he were the guest.

And he finds that he doesn't mind at all. Entertaining Eron for so many nights has been exhausting in its own right. The king of Serubel speaks only of war, of the need for cratorium, or of the importance of forcing Sepora to Forge. In so doing, he has admitted to beating her when she resisted back in Serubel. "Sometimes she needs more

punishment than encouragement, you see,” the king had said. “Nothing a good rod couldn’t fix.” If it had not been for Rashidi placing a gentle hand on his shoulder, Tarik would have had his own hands around Eron’s neck before he could take his next breath. Even now, it is an easy thing, for his mind to wander with thoughts of doing the Serubelan king harm.

It is a wonder Sepora did not desert her father sooner.

Yet, Tarik enjoys a sense of relief that Queen Hanlyn seems to be of a completely different nature altogether. She speaks highly of Sepora, assuring him that she will one day make a great queen. She slides glances of encouragement to her daughter when she thinks no one is looking. She compliments Tarik on the food, the décor, and the well-appointed fleet of servants attending them. She has even tried to coax Sethos into conversation more than once, which is twice as many times as Tarik. Yet Sethos seems impervious to the enchantment of Hanlyn, setting upon moving food around his plate instead of inhaling it for once.

In more ways than one, she reminds him of a girl who once escaped his harem and led his palace guards on a merry chase. A girl with effortless courage and a penchant for solving problems.

Of course, it should not surprise him that Sepora should resemble one of her parents. And for all the physical traits Queen Hanlyn passed on to her daughter, such as her full figure and lips, it is the quieter traits he admires the most about them both, such as their shared unapologetic confidence and their strategic wit. Already this evening, Queen Hanlyn has put Rashidi in his place and handled Sethos’s intolerable mood with an ease and a smile that suggests hospitality is an art to her. Too, it is not lost on Tarik that Sepora studies every move her mother makes, hangs on her every word, eyes filled with pride.

Tarik is thankful Sepora has one even-minded parent, since the other seems to be quite mad.

“When Sepora first learned to ride Nuna, she would sneak out at night to practice,” Queen Hanlyn is saying. “When it was time for her studies the next morning, she would fall asleep at the table.” She shakes her head in mock exasperation. “Even *I* would not dare fall asleep in the midst of a lesson from Aldon. It was not long before he made her stand for her lessons, and she learned very quickly that sneaking out at night would have to stop.”

“You *knew* she was sneaking out and did nothing?” Eron says around a scowl.

Hanlyn smiles at her husband—her first disingenuous action this evening. “Of course I did. A mother always knows what her daughter is up to. Oh, don’t be angry with me, dearest. It was not important enough to bother you with. Besides, I had faith that Aldon would straighten her out, and he did.” She takes a dainty bite of her honey cake, effectively ending any further commentary on the matter.

So. The queen is not fond of her king. The word “dearest” rang solidly in Tarik’s ears as false. As did the bit about not wanting to bother him. Curious though, that she apparently *does* know everything her daughter is up to, or so she believes. Tarik is left feeling envious of this revelation, of how it must feel to have experienced firsthand all there is to know of Sepora.

It also makes him wonder what Sepora has told her—and in how much detail—so much so that he very nearly squirms in his seat. Some things are better kept private, surely Sepora knows. A number of their kisses come to mind, but Tarik forces the memories away as soon as they appear. Blushing in front of his guests will simply not do.

“Queen Hanlyn,” Rashidi says, his face full of diplomacy. His adviser is ever-diligent, it would seem. “Princess Sepora tells us you are from Pelusia.”

The queen takes a sip from her chalice, and Tarik wonders if this is a stall. Curious, that she would need to suspend before answering

such a simple question. After a moment, she says, “Indeed, I am. My father was Serubelan, my mother Pelusian, but I was raised in Pelusia. Until, of course, I married Eron.”

“And do you still keep up correspondence with your home kingdom?”

Another moment passes before she nods. “Yes, I do. Quite often, in fact.”

The truth. But Rashidi is digging for more than just that, Tarik can tell. The older man says, “Do you suppose it possible that if we were to war with Hemut over this marriage alliance, that Pelusia would offer their support?”

Tarik pinches the bridge of his nose. The queen has only just gotten here hours before and now she will be interrogated at dinner? It will be an unpleasant thing, to chide his oldest friend later in private.

“Of course they would,” Eron cuts in. “Pelusia has been our ally since the splitting of the kingdoms. We would have their full backing.”

To Tarik’s relief, the king trusts in his words. It is good to know that Pelusia, a neutral kingdom by decree, would support their efforts, were Hemut to pursue war with them. Thus far they have heard nothing from that kingdom, which could mean a swift retaliation is underfoot. Hemut will not catch Theoria by surprise, but they may well catch them insufficiently prepared. The Majai are ready at all times, of course, but Anyar’s other means of protection are not quite in place. Orders have been given and projects set in motion, but will they have enough time to complete all that has been set forward? Tarik doesn’t know. His highest commander does well to pledge with words his loyalty to his king, but his body language suggests he agrees with Eron—they need cratorium, and as much of it as they can get.

Tarik glances at Sepora, wondering if he should not share more of that pressure with her. She is to be queen one day. She must be able to view unpleasant situations more objectively, he thinks. But at the

moment, his most pressing issue is to ensure that she is queen at all. For all the ways they interact, she seems more likely to run away again than to wed him.

“Pelusia could provide ships, in fact,” Eron is saying. “With ships, we could attack Hemut’s border from the north, where they go whaling. They would never see us coming.”

This could be true. Like Pelusia, Hemut is situated on the northernmost part of the Five Kingdoms, bordering the ocean. Because of Pelusia’s notorious neutrality, Hemut would not likely suspect an attack from them at their own northern border.

Tarik remembers one visit to Hemut when he was very young, when Sethos was too small to travel. His father and King Ankor had taken Tarik whaling one day, and though they came back to shore empty-handed, Tarik had found the experience exhilarating. He had never been upon a ship before; the only boats he was familiar with were the small, slender fishing vessels used to navigate the Nefari. The whaling ship had ropes and sails that creaked and groaned with each hearty wave of the ocean. He’d been unsteady on his feet at first, but by the end of the trip he was climbing the ladder to join the lookout far above deck. He wonders how a Pelusian trading ship compares with a massive Hemutian whaling vessel.

“Yes, well,” Rashidi is saying, “of course, our hopes are that we will not need to bother your Pelusian friends with the burden of war. I’m confident King Ankor can be reasoned with. After all, our kingdoms have been strong allies for centuries as well.”

“Yes, well,” Eron says, mocking Rashidi. “You’re quite the optimist. I do hope you’re not so idealistic that you aren’t actually preparing for the worst—and as far as I can tell, you are not. That, friend, is a folly.”

Tarik sighs. Another of Eron’s attempts at steering the conversation toward preparing for war—and one likely to turn into a plea to

pressure Sepora into Forging. He's curious to know how Queen Hanlyn will handle this delicate situation and if she is of the same opinion as her husband.

Still, Tarik knows how *he* will handle it. Sepora already views her marriage to him as an obligation, and he'll not ask her for more than that at the moment. Perhaps he is the optimist, but he wants Sepora to trust him enough to Forge of her own volition, not because he demands it of her. And he's willing to wait a little while longer for that to happen. As it is, fresh spectorium is not needed so badly for the plague now that the nefarite works so well combined with the dying supply they have of the other element. And pride of the pyramids, he'll dismantle every Forged piece of spectorium in Theoria if he has to, in order to give Sepora the time she needs to trust him again. And then he will show her how much he has entrusted her with already; he will tell her of his own father's pyramid.

Yes. Like pyramids, trust takes time to build. Time and patience.

Which is why he'll not allow King Eron to bully Sepora further. "There are many ways other than creating cratorium to prepare for war, King Eron," Tarik says. "And we are doing those things in abundance." Indeed, they are. In fact, just today, he signed a ruling for his engineers to construct ten more Slingers. Normally, the mechanism that rapidly dispatches dozens of arrows per second runs on the power of spectorium, but his chief engineer showed him a design where the thing could be set in motion by springs, though it would now require two men instead of one to operate it. Still, using more manpower is a small price to pay for not depending upon an element that he may never see again.

That the Five Kingdoms may never see again.

Eron waves his hand in dismissal. "Yes, yes. You're doing exactly what Hemut expects. But we need the element of surprise. And they will never suspect—"

“You speak as though we will be attacking them first, which is not the case,” Tarik says.

“I can assure you Hemut will meet with surprise if it intends to go up against our Master Majai,” Sethos interjects, no doubt on Sepora’s behalf. If Sepora does not want to Forge, Sethos will defend her right not to, probably to the death. With Sethos, everything is to the death. “The Majai are not going to tickle them with pitchforks, you see.”

Tarik winces. Sethos means to insult Serubel—a kingdom whose army Sethos often jests is made up of volunteer farmers. If he were sitting closer to his brother, he would kick him under the table. Putting Eron in his place is one thing; insulting Sepora’s home kingdom is quite another.

“Speaking of the Majai, how goes your *palace* duty?” Eron returns with a sneer.

“It goes well,” Sethos says, lifting his chalice. “Though, I had wanted to tell you, sending secret messengers to your advisers in the middle of the night is not necessary. This is a palace, not a prison. I’m sure my brother would hope that you felt comfortable in corresponding with your own men.”

Eron slams his fist on the table. “If this is not a prison, then why am I being watched?”

Hanlyn brings his fist to her mouth and kisses it gently. Tarik is forced to note that despite his like for the queen, she is an exceptional liar with her body language. He’s quite sure only he—and perhaps Sepora—can discern that she detests the man she shows such adoration for now.

“Dearest, I’m sure at this sensitive time, everyone is being watched, is that not so, King Tarik? It’s a precaution we should all strive to observe. The line drawn between peace and war is fragile at the moment.”

Tarik nods. “I couldn’t agree more. And I assure you Sethos has not been assigned to watch you.”

“No,” Sethos draws. “I do it strictly for entertainment.”

Sepora, for all her show of silent disinterest, actually giggles, earning her a severe look of disapproval from her mother. In an effort to please, Sepora tucks her lips together in a straight line. Tarik hides his own smile behind his dinner cloth as he dabs at the corner of his mouth.

“So then,” Rashidi says, pressing his fingertips together over his plate. Tarik dreads what he could possibly bring up next. But to his surprise, his adviser merely seeks to lighten the mood. “Now that we’ve discussed alliances and battle plans, perhaps we could steer the conversation toward a more happy occasion: the royal engagement procession tomorrow, of course.”

At this, Sepora stands. “I’m not feeling well.” A lie. And one she doesn’t even bother to try hide from Tarik’s knowing ears. She has a way of evading that he’s never seen before. Her bluntness simply shows her disregard for his feelings in the matter. He chooses not to take offense.

Sepora holds up her palm to her mother, who had begun to stand as well. “I must excuse myself. But please, finish your meal, all of you. I’m just going to rest in my chamber.” Not the entire truth.

Will she be sneaking out with Nuna again tonight, then? It would seem Sepora had taken up old habits of late; it has been reported to him that she flies Nuna out of her stall almost every evening. Since she has always returned, Tarik has not intervened. He hopes he does not regret that decision tonight. Standing him up at his own royal engagement procession could be a slight Sepora may well not be able to resist.

“I’ll have a servant bring you the rest of your dinner, in case you feel well enough to eat it later,” Tarik says, standing as well. If she is going to beg off, he will let her. If discussing the royal engagement

procession makes her uncomfortable, he'll not force her to listen. But if she intends to evade the procession itself tomorrow morning, or the marriage altogether after that, he will have to take action. "It is good that you rest up. I'll not have you swooning during the procession, unless of course, it's over me."

He earns chuckles from around the table, but from Sepora, he receives a dire look. "Trust me when I say, Highness, that I do not swoon." She turns and leaves the great dining hall then, her long sheer cloak trailing behind her with the lie.



5



S E P O R A

NUNA FOLLOWS MY COMMANDS, LANDING US gently in the majestic main garden of the palace, sliding us smoothly along the grass so as not to make too much of a trail. Coming to the garden is bittersweet for me. It is here, in this spot, that I first saw Dody, the Seer Serpen I trained for Tarik. The beast's motionless body had lain in the grass by the grand marble fountain, having been shot from the sky by Tarik's wall guard. Though Dody was the Serubelan general Halyon's Serpen, I had come to accept him as my own. And how could I not? I saw him every day. Had been the one to feed him and exercise him and coo words of endearment into his ears before putting him away at night. Having Nuna back helps soothe some of the sting of his loss. But the memory of Dody still pierces my heart now and again.

With Nuna, I will be more careful. I will protect her, the way I couldn't protect Dody when we fell from the sky together. In fact, as a precaution, I've already taken steps to ensure that Nuna and I would not be shot down when we sneak out at night. I am not supposed to leave the palace walls by order of the Falcon King. Yet, Sethos was more than happy to help me maneuver around that rule. He has

somehow persuaded the guards to let me and Nuna fly away unbothered, and though he couldn't promise that the king would not be notified of our nightly escapes, so far Tarik has not acted upon this information.

Until now.

After the way I acted at dinner, I shouldn't be surprised to find Tarik sitting on the ledge of a fountain just outside the shadow of a citrus tree as we land. I wish I had seen him from above before, but I have the suspicion he had taken care that I wouldn't.

He'll ask questions about my behavior at dinner. Out of an irresistible urge to defy him, I'll decline to answer. He has forced my hand in almost every way. I'll not relinquish control over our informal conversations. After realizing I'll not bend, he'll leave my company, brooding, and I'll let him go, hoping I've bested him.

It is the way of things now.

"I see you're feeling better," he says. There it is again, his impassive expression. Either he doesn't believe I felt ill, or he doesn't care. Most likely it's both. He pats the marble next to him on the ledge in an invitation to sit.

"Surely you jest." I train my eyes upon Nuna, aware that doing so turns my nose up ever so slightly.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see his chest fall in a burdensome sigh as he rises and makes the short walk to where I rub Nuna behind her ear. She deserves a good rubbing down after the flight I took her through this evening, but that will have to wait until Tarik has left us. Rubbing down Nuna takes the better part of an hour, and since she was particularly obedient tonight, I'll run along her spine to help ease the tension in her muscles there.

"You were quiet at the evening meal," Tarik says.

"If only *you* were so quiet."

"What? Surely you're not angry that I expressed my wish for you

to swoon over me.” There is a playfulness in his tone that I can’t quite ignore. Blast.

“Such wishes should be kept private.”

“We are in private now.” He leans upon Nuna, cocking his head at me. It feels like even more of an intrusion, because Nuna seems at ease with this Falcon King. And why wouldn’t she be? He comes to us often enough in her stable, feeding her apples and slivers of meat while attempting polite conversation with me. He even pets her absentmindedly while asking me how my day has been. Indeed, he has lowered the defenses of my Defender.

Since the evening meal, Tarik has washed his body of the royal paint, and his hair is a bit straggled, as though he’s just awakened. I used to prefer him this way, as Tarik and not the Falcon King. What’s more, he knows it. The thought of him coming to me as himself instead of as my ruler forces me to tread warily with my emotions. Perhaps I would not be so nervous if I had not left him with such an intimate lie earlier at dinner—a lie that only he could detect.

“Were you sleeping in the garden, Highness?” I say, hoping desperately for a change of pace. I do not like how his eyes stay trained upon mine.

He gives me a passive shrug and an equally lazy grin that still does not soften the intensity of his gaze. “I might have dozed off waiting for you.” He slides closer, his shoulder nearly touching my jaw. “I’d hoped you might stop by the garden before putting her to rest for the night. The guards tell me you visit often.” His voice is almost a whisper, and yet it resonates with me down to my bones.

“If you needed to see me, you could have just asked. Though I can’t imagine a moment of the day when we’re not thrown together over kingdom matters as it is.” Which is true enough.

“Nothing I have to say tonight could be counted as kingdom matters.”

I feel the burn of a flush at my cheeks as he moves ever closer. His breath is a delicate breeze on my hair when he says, “In fact, at this moment, I am not a king at all, but a servant. *Your* servant, Sepora.”

Saints of Serubel. Now he’s as serpentine as Sethos can be. “My servant? Well then, Tarik My Servant, go throw yourself from the Half Bridge.”

He pushes a tendril of my hair from my face. I try to turn away, but he grabs my arm and pulls me to him. I could easily pull away, just as easily as I could have missed his reach altogether. Nuna stirs uncomfortably behind him. Tarik’s eyes are intent upon mine. “Perhaps I’m not being clear. By saying I’m your servant, I meant that I’m here to offer my services.”

My eyes go wide and I hate myself for it. He sees everything, even the smallest of flinches. He knows his words do not fall on deaf ears—as least not completely.

“Services?” We are not yet married. What *services* an unmarried Tarik could offer an unmarried Sepora, I do not know. Or perhaps I do. And that is why my voice cracked in the first place.

“You said that you do not swoon. I thought that to be a shame, since swooning over someone can be quite enjoyable. So, here I am, ready and willing to help you swoon.”

“I do not need help swooning.” *Well played, idiot.*

“No? So you *do* swoon?” His teasing is relentless, his gaze even more so.

“Stop that. Immediately.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. You challenged me at dinner.”

“I did no such thing.” It doesn’t take a Lingot to hear the desperation in my voice. “You really should see a Healer for these delusions. Surely Master Cy can help.”

“And unfortunately—for you—I accept.”

For all of my bluster and everything that has come between us, I

still do not move away when he entwines his fingers in my hair and pulls my lips to his. When he opens my mouth with his tongue and demands an answer from me, I give it to him. When he presses his body into mine, I allow it. I more than allow it. I press until there is no space left between us.

And when he groans into my mouth, I return one in kind.

With one hand in my bun of tresses, he uses the other to lace our fingers together. But he is not satisfied with that for long. He moves his hand from my hair, his fingertips blazing a trail down to the small of my back where his palm lies flat against my bare skin.

With his touch, he has halted the world and left me here melting under his attentive supervision. And I'll not have it. Yes, he can make me swoon. Of course he can. I'm angry with him, but not impervious. Never impervious to Tarik.

But blast it all, I can make him swoon, too.

I unlock our hands and move mine behind his neck, then wrap my legs around his waist. He groans, leaning me against Nuna, his hands grasping my thighs, pulling me more tightly around him. I revel in the feel of being at eye level with him, but my concentration is quickly stolen when he slips his fingers along my waist, intermittently tucking them between my skin and the fabric of my nearly sheer pants. Not to be outdone, I arch against him, surprising myself with my boldness and with the immediate need the action created within me. Despite my intentions to make *him* swoon, heat fills me everywhere, and I suddenly regret my adventurous decision to seduce him.

Because kissing Tarik is not possible to do without involving my heart. Not in my dreams. Not in my wakefulness. Not ever.

Tarik senses the moment I consciously withdraw from the kiss, because he pulls his lips from mine. Has he won? I'm not sure. Still, I'm pleased to see that he is as breathless as I am. He lets my legs and arms drop slowly so that I'm standing before him. A cloud passes over

the moon, blocking out the light, but not before I catch a glimpse of his expression.

He is as affected as I am.

He runs a hand through his hair. We look at each other's shadow for a long time. I see him swallow once. I fidget with my hands, thankful for the darkness. When the moon peeks out again, revealing Tarik's face, I take a step back, pressing myself into Nuna.

His face is awash in frustration. "I was wrong to approach this as a game," he says gruffly. "I can see I'm well matched." He steps toward me, tilting my chin up with the crook of his finger, and none too gently. "But the next time you kiss me like that, I'll take it as an invitation to bring relief to the both of us."

He turns abruptly then and I watch as he takes the garden steps two at a time toward the palace.