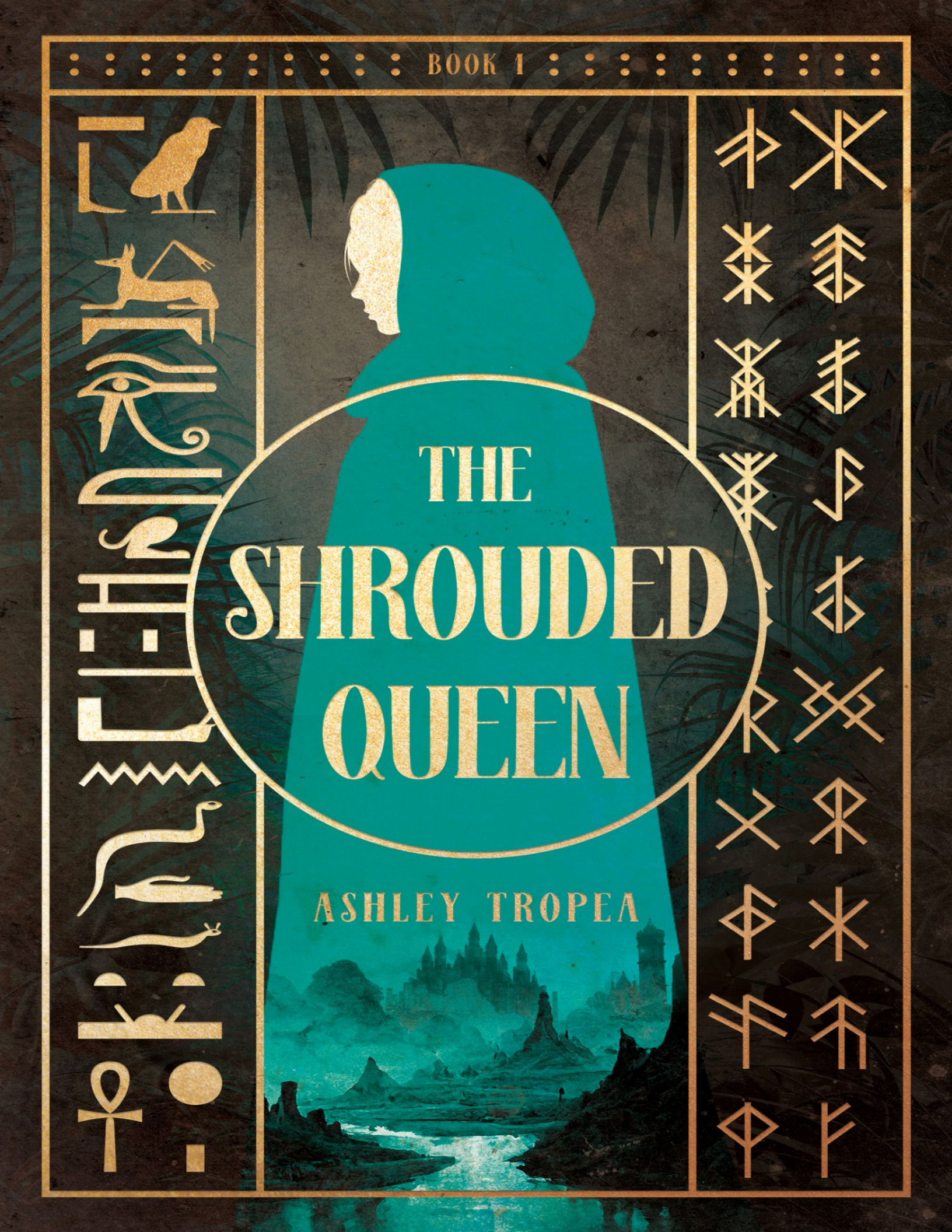
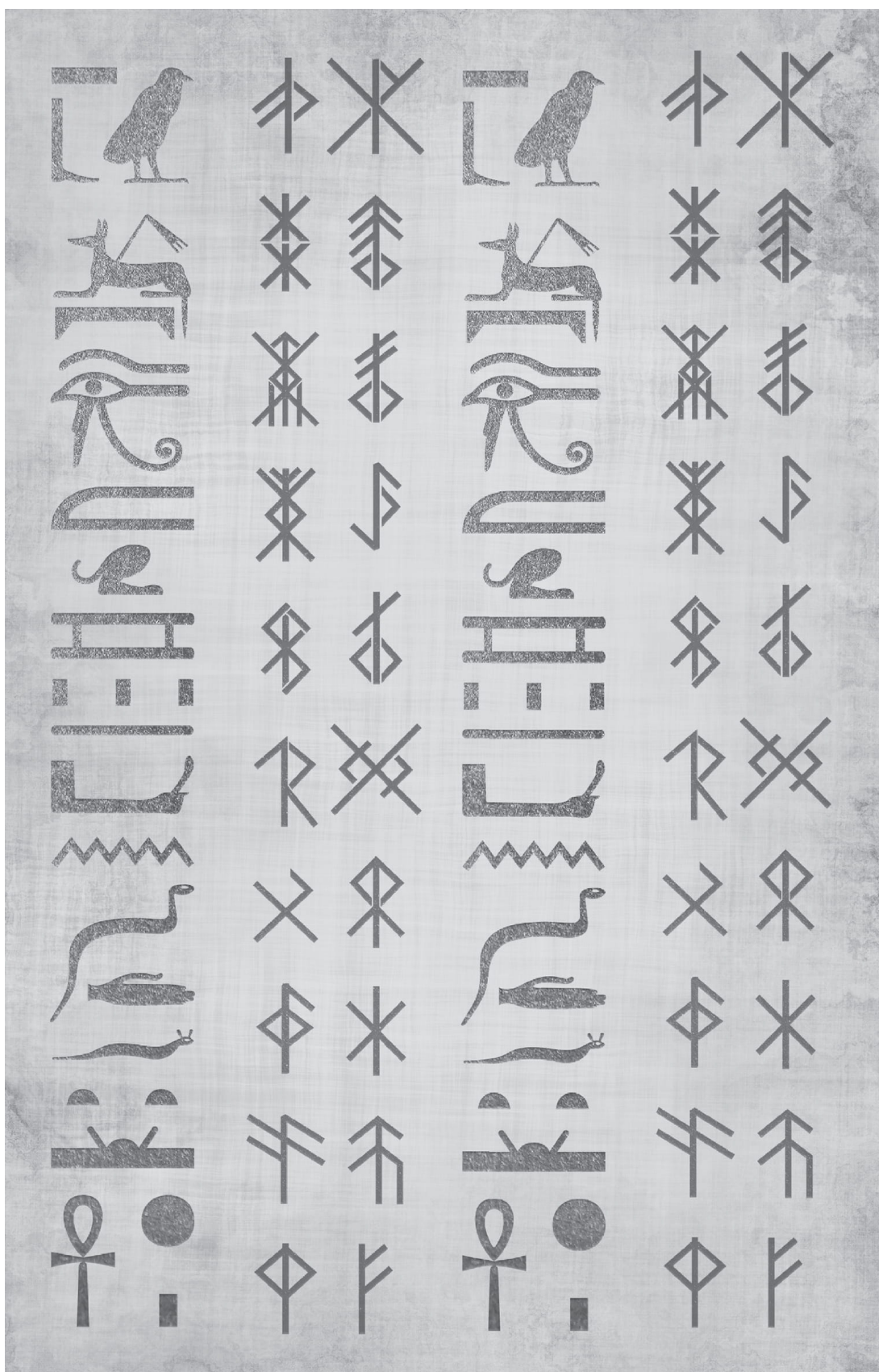


BOOK 1



THE SHROUDED QUEEN

ASHLEY TROPEA



Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

THE SHROUDED QUEEN



ASHLEY TROPEA



GALLERY BOOKS

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi

For my Egyptian grandparents, who have filled my heart with love for where we've come from and who we were. I know you think magic is silly, but you are both magical to me.

ONE



SAMIRA

Don't trip, don't trip, don't trip.

I clutched the tray of food tightly in my hands as I wove through the labyrinth of the palace, keeping my eyes trained on the ground. With each step I took, with each rattle of the gold-trimmed plates and silver chalice, my heart gave a fearful kick in my chest.

My princess had asked me personally to fetch her midnight snack. To be addressed by her, to be offered such an important responsibility, was an honor I never thought I'd receive. I held the golden tray in my sweaty hands and stared at every groove in the limestone floor with paranoia.

My back was still tender from the last time I'd failed my princess—showing up to her rooms with a stain on the thin linen dress that was my uniform—and I'd be damned to the Underworld's Trench before I let her down again.

Two guards came around the corner, and I quickly ducked into one of the many divots in the wall created for the exact purpose of making sure slaves could get out of the way.

I moved too fast. My heart stopped beating as the chalice of water tipped. If it spilled, I'd get so much more than a whipping. There was such little water in Ashorah, the gods would surely strike me down if I allowed a *cupful* to splash across the ground.

But then the chalice settled, only a trickle of water falling over the lip. I swiped it away with my finger, pushed a wayward grape back in place, and was able to breathe again.

As the guards came closer, I bowed my head and sank farther into the shadows of the divot, pressing my back into the warm stone wall and biting my lip as my cheap linen shift scratched the barely healed lash wounds.

They hardly spared me a passing glance, and I let out a sigh of relief before I scurried down the hall, grateful that the several hanging lanterns hadn't yet been doused.

Shadows flickered against the alabaster walls, illuminating the various hieroglyphs etched into them. Flashes of blue and sunshine yellow. The history of Ashorah etched with an expert artist's hand. I passed scenes of war, the blood spatter made beautiful by inlaid rubies. Various Gods-Chosens—half-human, half-god heroes—stood tall and proud throughout the centuries, and in the dim light, King Zaid's usually serene smile looked cruel. The emeralds used for his bright green eyes sparkled dangerously.

I shook my head, cursing myself for even remotely thinking such a thing. My king was not cruel. My king had sacrificed everything for us. I lowered my head and quickened my steps.

My sandaled feet padded noiselessly along the floor until I reached the golden doors that led to my princess's suite. One of the two stationed guards opened them for me.

Tabia, a slave who had been at the palace nearly twice as long as I had, greeted me. Her brown eyes drooped at the corners from the late hour, and the edges of her lips were pinched. My heart rate hitched. Something must have happened while I was gone. Maybe I'd taken too long. Maybe I'd angered my princess.

Maids weren't permitted to speak unless spoken to, but the fact that she was standing at the door instead of fanning our princess spoke volumes. I tried to ask her with my eyes what was wrong. Tabia just shook her head and stepped aside, ushering me in.

My princess's rooms were meant to awe. Vibrant colors filled the space, curtains and pillows and lanterns of bright pinks and greens created a kaleidoscope of beauty. The walls were painted with real gold, stretching high above my head where they met a ceiling with an image of an oasis painted on it.

My princess was sitting on her desk, feet crossed at the ankles and swinging idly back and forth, still fully dressed despite the late hour.

Princess Amunet Khada was beautiful in the way that all the royals were. Bright green eyes shone out of smooth tan skin, a slender nose above full lips. Though all the royals shaved their heads, Princess Amunet always wore intricate wigs, deep black and twisted in

elaborate braids. Pearls dusted both her wig and her silken red gown. It was a new dress, gifted to her by one of the four jinn-descended princes of the nearby regions hoping to win her hand.

A useless gesture. It didn't matter if the princes had a jinni ancestor centuries ago. My princess would not marry. She didn't need to. Not when she was Gods-Chosen.

Usually, I was eager to drink in the sight of my princess. As her maid, I was one of the few who had the honor of being able to look upon an actual child of a god, and I tried to take advantage of every second. But tonight, my eyes slipped off Princess Amunet to land on the drenched young girl standing before her.

Her name was Nailah. A scullery maid I'd glimpsed a few times in the kitchen, almost fourteen years old. Her ear-length hair hung around her in a soaked mop, and her sopping linen dress clung to her trembling, bony frame.

Princess Amunet looked up at me, and a wide smile broke across her face, lighting up the entire room. I felt my own lips twitch to match the expression even as my eyes darted to the girl in front of her. "Excellent!" my princess said, and hopped down to her feet. "Set it here."

Nailah dared to glance up at me, her large brown eyes pleading. I quickly looked away and set the tray on the desk. If Nailah had done something to upset my princess, there was nothing I could do. There was nothing any of us could do. We all learned that within our first year at the palace. If the lesson had somehow missed her, she was going to learn it now.

As soon as the tray was out of my hands, I retreated to my spot in line with the other maids standing against the wall and assumed the default posture—hands clasped in front of me and head down. But I peeked up to see Tabia across the room. She fanned our princess with a long palm leaf, fighting against the oppressive heat that even this late at night hadn't let up. She did her best to keep her expression blank, but years of reading her face told me the glint in her eyes was one of worry.

Princess Amunet rounded her desk and sat in the plush chair. She lifted the elaborate chalice of water from the tray and set it on the edge of the desk, directly in front of Nailah. She stared at the scullery maid expectantly. "Go on, then."

Nailah's clasped hands flexed as terror shone in her eyes. "I—I don't understand, my princess."

“You’re thirsty. Here is water.”

The scullery maid’s gaze moved from the cup to the royal, the *drip, drip, drip* of her clothes going off like drums in the nearly silent room. “I’m not thirsty,” she answered, voice small. “It gets so hot in the kitchens, my princess. I just wanted to cool down. I didn’t drink from the river, only swam in it, I swear.”

Princess Amunet nodded as she tore off a piece of bread and chewed contemplatively, not taking her eyes off Nailah.

The heat in the kitchens did grow to nearly unbearable conditions. Just the short amount of time I’d spent there gathering my princess’s snack had been enough to make sweat coat my entire body, and the natural Ashoran heat didn’t help matters.

My princess pointed at the chalice of water. “The Lotus River sustains every single person in Ashorah. It is blessed by my father, Shaya.” My whole body reacted to the mention of the Underworld god. I stiffened my spine against it as my princess went on. “It is not your bathing tub. It is sacred. And you thought you would just... swim in it.”

In a tiny voice, Nailah said, “It was only five minutes.”

Stupid, stupid girl. My stomach twisted in knots as I mentally braced myself.

Everyone knew the strict rules about using and rationing water. Just sneaking a single extra glass of it from the kitchens led to my princess carving an *X* over my heart in punishment, a mirror of the injury I’d inflicted on the gods with my insolence. I’d been forbidden from bandaging the wound, and it had gotten infected. Now it was a permanent scar on my chest, a constant reminder of my guilt and shame.

I deserved it.

And Nailah was about to get what she deserved, too.

Princess Amunet sighed. “You spit in the face of the gods and your own people.”

The girl’s eyes drifted closed in defeat.

Princess Amunet set the bread back on the tray and stood. Nailah’s whole frame shook as the Gods-Chosen passed her and came to a stop beside her large brass bathing tub. Flower petals bobbed on the water’s surface. My princess pointed to the floor beside her and ordered, “Kneel.”

Nailah trembled harder as she obeyed, lowering herself so that her chest was parallel to the lip of the tub. I curled my fingers into my palms, resisting the instinct to speak or step

forward. This might feel wrong, I reminded myself, but it was for the best. Nailah deserved her punishment as much as I had. It was the only way we'd learn.

Still, nausea built in the back of my throat.

"Five minutes, you said?" Princess Amunet confirmed.

Nailah nodded haltingly.

"That seems fair." Princess Amunet seized the back of her head and shoved her face into the water.

I steeled myself against my flinch.

Nailah didn't fight at first, accepting the Gods-Chosen's punishment. But that only lasted a few moments. Her instincts kicked in, and she splashed up water as she struggled violently, seeking air. Princess Amunet held her down, face blank, regal. She never looked malicious or unkind when carrying out punishments. She was a righteous goddess meting out justice.

Nailah's movements slowed. Princess Amunet yanked her out of the water. The girl drew in a deep gasp, sputtering, her hair sticking to her face.

"How long was that?" my princess asked.

Tabia replied, "Forty-five seconds, my princess."

Nailah tried, "Please—"

Princess Amunet dunked her back in the water. Even as it made my stomach turn over and my heart seize, I didn't look away. None of us did. We weren't allowed to.

I watched my princess bring the girl to the point of death over and over and then reel her back before she could fall over the edge. As horrible as it was, this was the exact reason all of Ashorah looked to the Gods-Chosen as our salvation.

I'd learned the story my first day in Khada Palace: In times of great strife, the gods smiled upon their people and sent a child of theirs to save us. And Ashorah—as well as the rest of the continent—was indeed desperate after centuries of drought. So desperate, in fact, that King Zaid had decided to brave the Wastelands in search of a legend.

No one ever survived the Wastelands, the terrain of dunes and mountains and blazing climate practically engineered to kill humans. But forty years ago, King Zaid had marched through it in pursuit of a forgotten city, buried beneath miles and miles of sand.

The Buried City was said to be a paradise on earth, where water flowed endlessly, where there was no famine or disease. A thing of myth.

King Zaid's advisors warned him that these myths were likely fabrications, either conjured by the northern enemy nation known as Kaldfold or spread by the freshly conquered jinn-descended princes.

Though the jinn-descended might have been powerful once, the current four princes didn't possess even a fraction of the strength their ancestors had, making their defeat an easy one, which they'd resented. And the cannibalistic, shape-shifting Kaldfolk were constantly encroaching on Ashoran territory, forcing us into war often. Neither were to be trusted.

Stories of the Buried City were meant to send the king on a journey, not to a divine water source but to an early grave.

But the Lotus River, the continent's last remaining water source, had almost entirely dried up. Everyone, from the farthest Ashoran village to Kaldfold in the north, relied on that river. Without it, petty squabbles among principalities and territory disputes with the Kaldfolk would be moot. *All* would perish.

So King Zaid had to try.

He'd gotten lost in the Wastelands, was near death, when he was approached by a pack of jinn—minions of Shaya, God of the Underworld, beings of sand and fire. They offered an end to Ashorah's drought and to the war with the cannibal Kaldfolk, and promised to return King Zaid safely home to a prosperous land.

In exchange, the king's firstborn would be Shaya's.

The king—delirious with dehydration and heatstroke—accepted without question.

When he returned home and told Queen Neema of the deal, she was appalled. Over the centuries, the other six gods had all borne half-human children, but Shaya was different. King of Death, Sire of Monsters. Queen Neema could not bear his spawn. A child of the Underworld would be too dangerous. Power over death wasn't a power any mortal creature should have.

Queen Neema ensured she would not have a child. Details on just how are vague, but it is said she almost did not survive the process. Mutilation might have been involved.

It was decided that the crown would pass to the king's cousin, Hamadi, and the succession would be settled without a direct heir.

The Lotus River rushed with gallons and gallons of water, just as the jinn had promised. The king promptly dammed it up and claimed complete control over it.

Together, the King and Queen of Ashorah had outsmarted the God of the Underworld.

But a deal with a jinni cannot be broken.

Nearly two decades later, the middle-aged queen fell pregnant. Though she had been so very careful, so very smart, Shaya was smarter. He wore the king's skin when he came to her. Neither she nor the king were any the wiser until she missed her monthly bleeding.

The queen died during the birth, but my princess survived. King Zaid's deal with the jinn was upheld. And in one month's time, my princess would turn twenty, go through the Igniting, and receive the full might of the Underworld.

She was one of us. Had lived nearly twenty years as a mortal. She'd take care of us. She'd make hundreds of rivers flow and stop death from snatching so many of us.

She was going to be our salvation.

"It's been five minutes, my princess," Tabia murmured.

Princess Amunet jerked Nailah's head out of the water for the last time. The scullery maid gasped and choked, water exploding out of her mouth and nose, strands of hair flung across her face like blindfolds. Her limbs trembled from exertion, and her eyes rolled in her head.

My princess gazed down at the scullery maid without emotion. "You are forgiven."

Still heaving, the girl replied, "Th-thank you, my pr-princess."

"You may go." Princess Amunet turned away from the girl and returned to her desk, where she picked up the water chalice and took a big gulp.

Nailah staggered to her feet, her face red and chest rising and falling erratically. I wanted to step forward and offer my arm for her to lean against, help her back to her room. But I didn't. I just stood with the other maids and watched her stumble out the door.

It was an honor to work in Khada Palace. We were luckier than most Ashorans. The rest of the kingdom—the *world*, really—battled drought daily, but here, I got a glass of water every two days. Plus, we would be the first to witness the Gods-Chosen's transformation. We would be by her side when she saved us all.

Some days it was more difficult to remember that than others.

"I want to sleep," my princess declared.

“Yes, my princess,” we all murmured, and jumped to action, laying out her nightdress while slipping her out of her current gown and wig.

Tabia looked pointedly at me and then the tray of barely touched food, wordlessly ordering me to take it away. I mentally chastised myself for needing to be told and hurried to collect the tray.

For all my princess’s claims of hunger, she’d hardly touched the pita bread and chicken.

It used to be torturous to watch her eat, even harder to see what she didn’t. Leftovers went to the livestock. And at the end of the week, anything the livestock didn’t touch came to us. It was a message. A reminder of our place in the palace.

My first week as a maid, my stomach had growled in response to all her food.

I’d received ten lashes.

I’d learned to control my stomach after that.

Though Princess Amunet didn’t look at me, I curtsied before I left, taking the wide stone steps down to the servants’ quarters two at a time. All maids were required around my princess’s bed for Nightly Prayer. I wouldn’t be late.

But when I turned the last corner to the kitchen, the smell hit my nose and stopped me dead in my tracks.

The kitchens always smelled good. Like garlic and paprika, mostly. But tonight, after the princess’s midnight order, it smelled like bread. Gods, freshly baked bread.

I peeked around the corner. The kitchen was empty. Chef Nena must’ve gone to bed after handing me the tray. But the stone counters were still lightly dusted with leftover flour, and the large, curved oven’s mouth lay open like a sob. I could just glimpse the dying embers inside, a tongue of slumbering fire. A warm breeze blew in through an open window and carried the smell from the oven all the way to me at the threshold.

I glanced down at the tray in my hands. The thin disk of bread was mostly untouched. Despite how hard I clenched my stomach, it let out a stubborn rumble. Thank the gods no one was around to hear it.

I hovered my hand over the bread but didn’t dare touch it. Faint warmth rippled up to meet my palm. I imagined how soft it would feel, how delicious it would taste. I hadn’t had fresh bread since Mama’s birthday, before I was snatched off the street and brought to the palace. Sixteen years ago.

My eyes darted around the hallway. No servants. And the next round of guards wouldn't be due for at least five minutes. It would be nothing to slip the thin disk under my neckline. As long as I kept my head down in the hall, no one would look twice at me, and once I was in my room, I could have the whole disk to myself. I'd eat it under the covers. In the morning, rats would rid the bed of any crumbs. No one would know, and I was *so hungry*—

No! I screamed the word in my mind, the scar over my heart pulsing in warning. *The gods would know. My princess would know. Do not disobey.*

Tears burned my eyes as I set the tray on the counter with shaky hands, sending up prayer after prayer of contrition to my gods, the Seven Monarchs, for even thinking of stealing.

I stared at the food a moment more, swallowing back the saliva gathering in my mouth. Salivating like an animal. Shame shot through me. With a shuddering breath, I turned on my heel and went back to my princess's rooms.

I did not miss Nightly Prayer.

TWO



SAMIRA

Most nights, I collapsed into an exhausted, dreamless heap on my cot. But that night, it didn't matter how long I tossed and turned, I couldn't sleep. My stomach cramped painfully, and my ears echoed with the sound of a young girl's desperate gasps.

I sat up with a huff.

My room was little more than a cubby in the clay walls beneath the kitchens. There was a small window offering a view of the Lotus River and a curtain for a door. Neither I nor my roommate, Nadia, had many belongings, just our uniforms, cots, and a pair of sandals.

I shifted onto my knees, moving slowly, cringing when my cot creaked.

But Nadia just made a soft snuffling noise and rolled over.

I folded my legs under me, sitting back on my calves and heels, and held my hands out to either side of me, palms facing up. Then I let my eyes drift to the Lotus River through the window, a perpetually reassuring sight. Past the river, I could see all of Ketopolis, the capital city of Ashorah, named for the Mother of All, Ketet. The glimmering lights of the city shone like stars in their own sky.

When I'd first been brought to Khada Palace, I'd resented the city's beauty. The vibrant tapestries hanging from the Ketopolis Market, the tall domed structures, the bustling energy, the potent smells of spices that wafted toward the palace all the way from across the river. I'd missed Mama and Baba and our little hut near the river, where our

world consisted of the fish Baba caught, the bread Mama baked, and the handful of similar homes around us. I had friends, I thought. But I'd only been six years old when I was taken, so my memories were mostly blurry.

I'd been desperately afraid without Mama and Baba. All I knew were the scary stories they'd told me about Ketopolis. Children slaughtered, criminals around every corner, evil royals overseeing it all. But I was too young to understand how important all of this really was, how important the royals were.

Now I loved them. I'd sworn to it in front of my king, my princess, and dozens of guards. I loved them, and I'd vowed to love them until the day I died.

I let the sight of the river and city ground me as I prayed for Ketet to take away the gnawing in my stomach.

Prayer always brought me peace. It centered me. Blanketed me in comfort, whether or not my pleas were answered. As if for that moment, I wasn't here in Khada Palace; I was suspended in a serene lake. Tranquil, placid, quiet.

But then my stomach rumbled again, wrenching me back to my tiny cot. A whimper rose in my throat.

You should've taken the bread, Samira. Not for your own selfish hunger, but so you could sleep and better serve your princess tomorrow.

My stomach groaned again as if in agreement, and I bit my lip. Maybe the bread was still there. It wasn't even close to morning. Chef Nena wouldn't have had a chance to clean up yet. Maybe I could sneak back to the kitchen—just for a tiny bite. And then in the morning, I'd tell Tabia what I'd done, and she could decide if it warranted a punish—

Something in the river caught my eye. A disturbance in the current. I frowned.

I'd watched the Lotus River for the last sixteen years. It lulled me to sleep every night, greeted me every morning. I knew the way it jumped over every rock, around every obstacle. But the way it was rippling now, going in the opposite direction...

Moonbeams streamed down on the river in perfectly straight columns.

And then they flickered.

It was dark. I was tired. There couldn't be someone in the river. No one would dare, especially after Nailah's punishment.

Unless it wasn't a palace servant but rather someone from Ketopolis, a towns person who wouldn't know about a scullery maid's disciplining.

The moonbeam flickered again.

There. A silhouette against the deep blue of the water.

Or rather, *silhouettes*.

One by one, they emerged from the river. Almost entirely silent. I could've dismissed them as Ashorans braving the crown's wrath for a sip from the river.

If not for their hair.

The moonlight reflected off the sides of their scalps where their heads were shaved, and a long braid hung down each of their backs, varied in length. No one in Ketopolis wore their hair like that. No one in all of Ashorah wore their hair like that.

My hair was dark and short, barely reaching the bottom of my ears, like all female citizens of Ashorah. Men let it grow to their shoulders. And royals, like my princess, shaved their heads entirely, relying on wigs.

There was only one place I knew where people had such strange hair.

Kaldfold.

My heart hit my feet, and I shook my head, terror seizing me.

Stories about the monsters to the north were whispered in the pitch-black of night. Tapestries and hieroglyphs all over Khada Palace depicted King Zaid's battle against them seventeen years ago, when he'd delivered the crushing blow that successfully pushed them beyond the Frozen Sand Mountains.

The Kaldfolk were battle-crazed. Foamed at the mouth when they so much as scented fear. Rabid, depraved monsters that weren't satisfied with just killing their victims. They mutilated them, defiled their corpses, *ate* them. Heretic witches who could manipulate you into killing your own family, friends, yourself. They'd plagued more than one of my nightmares.

And they were coming straight for the palace.

THREE



AMUNET

The sound of scratching was infuriating. Like a thousand little nails over stone. All I could hear was that consistent *chick, chick, chick*. Not the Lotus River. Not my own heartbeats.

I huffed and clutched the candle tighter, its grooves cutting into my palms. “Come on,” I muttered, eyes screwed up tight. I waited for the telling warm breeze to smooth over my scalp. If not a breeze, I’d settle for a feeble sigh. A fucking *fart*. Anything that said Shaya heard me, that he was there.

All I got was more of that infernal scratching.

With a grunt, I dropped the ancient obsidian candle in my lap and opened my eyes.

My father stared back at me.

This candle was the most perfect depiction of Shaya I’d ever seen. Dressed in the solid metal armor reserved for kings, face both human and feline, beautiful and deadly. High cheekbones, slitted eyes, and curling, full lips.

I’d purchased the candle nearly five years ago, and it had cost me a small fortune. The woman running the stall in the Ketopolis Market, renowned for the authenticity of her products, said it was one of the oldest ever found, probably dating all the way back to the War of the Ancients. Which could mean Shaya himself had touched the candle. Or at the very least had been close to it.

For the past five years, whenever I focused on the candle, Shaya lit the wick. A warm breeze heralded his presence, and then a burst of flame would alight above his otherworldly face. An assurance that he was here. That he was with me. That we were family.

Until a few days ago. Now, no matter what prayers I recited, it stayed dark.

Chick. Chick. Chick.

I ground my teeth.

It could be rats.

I knew it wasn't.

I also knew it wouldn't go away unless I checked. Sighing hard, I placed my candle back on the nightstand, marched to the door, and wrenched it open.

Just as I expected. The hall was empty.

Jasim—one of the two guards stationed by my room—glanced over at me. I didn't miss the eager glint in his brown eyes or the way they lingered on my thighs, my short nightgown tailored for ventilation, not modesty. "Yes, my princess?"

I ignored that look and glanced over his shoulder. No mice. Not even an errant servant with particularly loud sandals to shout at. A defeated breath filtered out of my nose.

So it was to be one of those nights. I didn't know why it still surprised me.

"My princess, are you all right?"

My eyes slid back to Jasim, to the concern momentarily eclipsing the hunger in his face.

Part of me was tempted to invite him inside and let him tire me out so I could sleep. He'd done it before—rather impressively, I might add—but nearly drowning that girl over and over had exhausted me enough. Punishments were one of my more annoying responsibilities as Gods-Chosen. Now all I wanted was some sleep. And for that gods-damn scratching to *stop*.

I would be getting neither.

Ugh.

I ducked back inside to grab a shawl and wrapped it around my shoulders. Then I stepped out of my room. Both guards straightened in anticipation. Neither one spoke, thank the gods, but shadowed me as I stalked down the hall.

Chick. Chick. Chi—

“Fuck.” I shook my head. Cracked my neck. The scratching remained. A soft yet incessant noise in my head.

“My princess,” the other guard ventured. His name was... Tarim? Parim? Who cares. “Should we send for a healer?”

I ignored him. My nails dug into my palms.

A healer would not help. Nor would wandering aimlessly through the palace, but it was better than lying in bed with nothing else to listen to. The noise was always there, day or night, but it grew worse when I could not reach Shaya.

The king believed it was the whisperings of the gods, that I was more in tune with them as a Gods-Chosen. He told me that I ought to listen to it more closely, even though no other Gods-Chosen in Ashorah’s history had ever reported hearing such noises, or that focusing on it caused sharp pain. I told King Zaid what he should have known already—that I wouldn’t be able to reach the gods until I was twenty, and trying to bridge the divide early only hurt me.

The king didn’t care. He insisted; I called him an idiot. He struck me. I grinned despite the blood leaking from my lips, which only frightened him, and he hit me again.

Strange to think the most accomplished conqueror in Ashorah’s history could be frightened of his daughter. But when said daughter was really the daughter of Death, I supposed it made sense. If he were a smarter man, he would hold back his fury. Ah well. He’d learn the error of his ways once I had the power of the Underworld at my fingertips.

Although... it was strange for Shaya to hamper our connection just a month from the Igniting. My stomach filled with acid that felt a bit like dread. A byproduct of prolonged separation, I reasoned. Just like the increased volume of the scratching.

The king’s voice drifted toward me. My steps slowed, and I peered over the balustrade.

The throne room stretched out beneath me, as expansive and ostentatious as the rest of Khada Palace. Mosaic floors that swirled with cerulean blues, massive alabaster columns, and atop a raised dais a throne made of gold, so large it dwarfed the skeleton of a king within it.

King Zaid was a pile of bones half-heartedly arranged into the shape of a man with the finest layer of skin cloaking him. The bastard was old. Every day I expected some good news, but alas, he refused to die.