

CHAPTER ONE

The stone door of her tomb rumbled and crunched and slid open, and she fell gasping out of time into a world she was never meant to walk.

The ground soared up to meet her.

It punched the wind from her lungs. She lay there awhile with gravel on her lips as her body returned to life. The breeze tossed her brown hair back and forth, and her eyes followed the strands that entered her vision. She watched the grass and the dirt. A heartbeat thumped in her ears.

When she'd breathed enough to know she was alive, she tested her fingers and dragged herself to her feet.

Rolling, treeless plains unfurled in every direction. Naked mountains like cones rose into the empty sky, and she stood alone, surrounded by it all, drinking it in, and remembered none of it.

Her first concerns were practical.

She studied the copper robe she wore. White streaks curled around its waist and torso. At her hip, she found a belt made of mirrored scales that shimmered in the sunlight as she jostled it. Something else dangled from it: a sheathe - she didn't recognize the material - where a spindly pink hilt emerged. Stone, perhaps. She removed it slowly, and stared at the spotless dagger that followed. The hilt grew straight into the metal of the blade. The whole ensemble looked alive, and that unnerved her.

No memory of the things or their purpose returned. She slipped the dagger back in the sheathe and looked around. Whoever had given her these artifacts was nowhere to be seen. She wouldn't have remembered their face, anyhow; she remembered no faces, not even her own.

But hers wasn't the only face in the steppe. Another stared up at her from the dirt.

It was a mask shaped like the sun, golden and faultless, with burnished rays pointing in every direction. The face itself suggested little: a nose that could've belonged to anyone, with anonymous lips and the barest slits for eyes. It seemed to be smiling.

She reached down and picked it up, wiping it clean with a sleeve as she held it. The metal felt cool and surprisingly light. The longer she looked at it, the better she felt, though she couldn't place why. She lacked the words to describe her fear, but comfort required no words.

Embracing that comfort unthinkingly, she turned the mask over and placed it on her face.

No strap held it in place, but there it remained, secure and unmoving, even once she removed her hands. Her unbroken view of the expanse hadn't shrunk. It was as if the eye slits had grown to fit her entire face. Cool air flowed into her lungs. She wondered if the mask had somehow disappeared; but, slapping a worried palm on her cheek, she touched metal once more.

An odd thing. But she felt safer with it on, and it was hardly her first concern.

The tomb she'd fallen out of was little more than a boulder with an oblong slab for a door, sanded down by wind and time. She scoured the insides for any secrets, but she'd been its only occupant. Across the wide bowl she found herself in, there were no rocks that could've been others; nothing but knee-high shrubs, and hills, and blue sky.

She picked the tallest hill in sight and began hiking towards it. Altitude would give her the lay of the land.

A voice spoke quietly in the back of her mind - her own voice - with questions, and doubts, and sometimes it rose up ready to scream. She shoved it down at every turn.

You are lost, and confused, and you cannot help right now, she replied. *Shelter and food, in that order. Nothing else until then.*

But the monotony of the landscape hid its distance, and it was a much longer hike to the top of the hill than she'd planned. Her boots, unadorned leather, slid down with each step. Pebbles rattled down the hill and broke the silence of the plain.

Night would be cold. Places without trees always were. She remembered trees, or at least the idea of them, and the remembering went unnoticed.

The woman in the sun mask climbed.

She crested the last ridge with burning legs and lungs that wept for air. Apart from a short break somewhere in the middle, she'd hardly stopped moving upward in a straight line. The smell of salt tickled her nose. When she looked back over her shoulder, she spotted her tomb: a grey pebble, down there on the flats behind her.

What are you doing in this place, she thought, and who are you?

Shaking it out of her head, she arrived panting at the summit. More hills waited on the other side, but so did other things.

Even at a distance, they were massive. They had the look of charred stone, but none of it had been sculpted by human hands. What might have been rocks took on strange dimensions: spirals, long cones with spikes; some straight, others twisting around themselves in rising points. Some opened at one end, like caves for monsters to slither in and out of. Dozens were thrown across the land or buried in it, petrified throughout the lonely valley.

No trees, however. No people. No homes. More grass, and more hills.

With an anxious hand on the mouth of her mask, she admitted that she'd desperately wished to find signs of life. The curves of those blackened, alien stones cut straighter to the heart of things than her own voice could have. This was a place that wanted nothing to do with her - in fact, it had never imagined her intrusion. Nothing had walked through here in ages.

One knee wobbled beneath her.

The sun is going down.

Distractions. She took deep breaths and shut her eyes. Shelter and food: her goals were unchanged. And if nothing else, one of those shells would have space for her inside it. She sought the most promising one, and as she gazed down into the valley, a light on the horizon caught her eye.

At first, it was hardly there, unless she looked straight at it; but soon, it became impossible to deny the bonfire on the far rim.

Moments before, she might have run straight down the hill towards it. She stayed put, crouched on one knee, and tried to make herself smaller against the setting sun at her back.

She remembered fire, but she'd never known it to be green.

From the look of it - an hour's walk or so across the scrubland, past the fossils, and up a rise on the other side - it couldn't have been large. No smoke trail rose above it, and no gathering of humans crowded it. She was all the more startled when the fire changed color from violet to bright purple, then icy blue, then blood red, and once more back to green.

She watched each change clearly. As the shadows in the valley grew longer, the shine of the little candle stood out clearer. Its colors morphed quicker. It called her more urgently. She knew it could see her.

At the first touch of evening breeze, colder than expected, she stood and walked down the hill.

The light danced from side to side as she descended.

Knowing there'd be no peace with that thing watching her, she brushed her mask with a finger for good luck and tucked her arms inside her robe. The bones watched her pass. She felt decidedly unwelcome. Rest in the shadow of those dead giants would be impossible.

And if whatever tended that fire was luring her to her end: well. Better to get it over with. Anyone capable of building a fire out here, without so much as a twig in the dirt, was better prepared than she. Anything that wanted her dead would kill her. That was that. Better to be snuffed out before her bearings returned than linger in this evil place until she froze.

The fire flickered as she drew closer, never out of sight.

It rose like a beacon over the lip of the last hill, and burned ever brighter as the sun disappeared behind the mountains: green against the purple of the setting sun, cold blue against orange, ghostly white against the night sky, where stars twinkled and bloomed.

And then she reached it: a steady green flame, cupped in the palm of another human; another woman, girdled in the shadows.

Her shoulder-length hair was blood-red, down to its roots. A fringe of it fell across her forehead. Against light, unblemished skin, her sharp features stood out, especially her eyes: they were as red as her hair. Her lithe black robe matched the night sky in its darkness, except where ornate patterns ran through it, nearly invisible: unfamiliar animals, leaves, vines, and skulls. Especially skulls.

She sat cross-legged on the ground, watching the flame in her open hands. When the newcomer had inched near enough to the circle of light, she met her masked stare with an eager smile.

“Welcome back,” said the red-haired woman.

The one in the mask said nothing, dared not move. Dark green light bathed the face of her sun.

“Won’t you come closer? You’re in no danger.” The red-haired woman passed a hand over the fire. It shrank into itself, then blossomed again: a new light, pinkish-yellow, that illuminated both their faces. Petals of flame opened slowly on all sides, and she presented the glowing flower to the woman in the mask.

You remember flowers. You’ve seen them before. Not here. Somewhere else.

“Let me help you,” said the other. “You must feel lost.”

“Who are you?” croaked the woman in the mask, in a dry voice she didn’t expect; husky, gravelly.

“I’m a friend. Call me Ralsa.” The red-haired woman waved her fingers, barely a movement at all, and the flower spun delicately into the air. It burst into a shower of petals that fluttered to the earth. Somehow, the hilltop shone as brightly as before, if not brighter still.

The woman in the mask didn’t speak. She didn’t know where to begin.

Ralsa’s expression turned grave. Her hands rested in her lap, and she raised her chin when she talked. “You have questions. I’ll answer those I can. Begin with a simple one, if you like.”

“Where are we?”

“You truly don’t know?”

“No.”

“We are a night’s walk to the northwest of Yassos, the only city in the world.”

The woman in the mask scoured the blank walls of her memory. She found no ‘Yassos’ there, but cities - and a world with more than one - weren’t unfamiliar. Certainly more than one.

“How long was I in that rock?” she said.

“You’d best sit down before I tell you,” replied Ralsa.

The masked one was puzzled. One answer was as good as another. She took the advice regardless and sat across from Ralsa in the dirt, imitating her cross-legged pose at a healthy distance. She hid her limbs in the folds of her copper robe. They held an apprehensive, red-eyed stare for a few moments, then Ralsa spoke.

“Everyone you’ve ever known is dead,” she said. “Without exception.”

“I don’t remember anyone else.”

“For your sake, I hope you don’t have to.”

The masked one breathed, and thought, and tried to understand. “How long, then?”

“Long.”

“How long?” the masked one said, more grunt than question.

Ralsa sighed. She scratched her cheek. “I don’t know how you conceived of time. In Yassos, each pair of seasons is called a cycle. Thousands have gone by. Tens of thousands. More, perhaps. Whatever language you spoke has been forgotten. None alive remember your people, or their names, or their history. All but you are dead.”

An unpleasant sensation lapped at the woman in the mask: the same as when she’d looked across the field of blasted ruins. She felt dizzy and ill. With a hand flat on the ground to steady herself, she shut her eyes until the wave of distress passed.

It didn’t escape Ralsa’s notice. She saw every movement of hand or foot, and even the mask didn’t block her red stare. “I didn’t release you from that prison to torment you. Matters in Yassos require your assistance,” she said.

The last of the nausea held on by a thread. The woman in the mask snipped it loose. “I won’t be any help,” she said decisively. “I remember nothing.”

“Mm. That’s where I’d like to begin, with your permission.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your memories. I wish to see them.”

Some animal in the night took up a screeching cry; what it was, the woman in the mask didn’t know.

“With your permission, there’s a theory I wish to test, ” Ralsa continued. “It won’t be painful, but you may consider it invasive.”

“I don’t understand,” said the woman in the mask. She stiffened, and tried to hide her stiffening from Ralsa.

“We might recover aught of who you were. Your name, to begin with. I can listen to your thoughts. Not all at once. Nothing that could harm you. It is possible.”

With stark awareness, the woman in the mask felt her agency die. Only a score of hours alive, and already preparing to surrender herself? “Keep out of my head,” she said. Without considering why, she stood and paced the flat hilltop. “I don’t know anything about you. What trust do I owe you?”

Ralsa lifted a palm. “Step back into the light,” she said sternly.

“Or what?”

“If you trust nothing else I say, trust this: the darkness will kill you. Don’t add to your troubles - do not ask me to explain - just step closer.”

The woman in the mask considered Ralsa’s urgency, decided she had nothing to lose by obeying the order, and returned to her place. She flipped her robe brusquely forward and sat.

Ralsa nodded her thanks from the other side of the circle, where soft light glowed without a source.

“If it eases your mind,” she said, “I’ve been into your head once already.”

The woman in the mask drew her dagger and scrambled back to her feet.

Unmoving, Ralsa’s face glowered out of the dark. “You may try that, if you wish, but I advise against it. We have far to walk tonight. You will need your strength,” she said. “Did you think this language we’re speaking was yours? I told you nothing remains of it. None

remember it existed. None know its words, or its name; not even you. I gave you an understanding of mine before unlocking your prison.”

It was strange to consider. The woman in the mask suppressed her mistrust and thought it over; but now, she knew her thoughts were arranged in a foreign tongue. Her mind belonged to Ralsa. Her well-being was Ralsa’s purview now, too. There was no end to what had been taken from her.

Though, perhaps...

If nothing remained of the old words, as the witch claimed, it was a fair bargain. And if the danger in the dark was as real as the witch thought, it wasn’t all robbery: whatever else, she supposed Ralsa had released her from endless sleep. She owed her this present moment and whatever future came after. Everything, in other words.

She was alive. The witch had dug through her memory once before, and she still drew breath. Let her try again.

Uneasily, she dropped the dagger into its sheathe. “I don’t know what you are, and I don’t understand the things you can do. This... this light, or your words in my mind,” she said. “But if you can find anything, do it.”

“It won’t hurt,” Ralsa replied. She waved the masked woman closer, who was more careful than ever to remain where the light was brightest. They sat close together, with the soles of their boots nearly touching. Ralsa’s were as black as her robes, made of some impossibly sleek material. When she extended her hands and beckoned the other to do the same, the masked woman hesitated a moment before assenting.

If she could put a language in her head, she could do far worse. It made agreeing simple, but it didn’t make it pleasant.

Ralsa said nothing. She sat straight-backed with her eyes closed. Night-sounds crept into the circle: insects, birds, and a barking creature out on the flats, larger than any of them. The coldness of the air faded; the woman in the mask dangled her fingers loosely in Ralsa’s palms, and warmth met every touch. It wasn’t so different from the warmth of her mask, and if that was a concerning thought, it passed quickly to make room for others.

The sounds of the steppe vanished at once.

“Here I come,” whispered Ralsa.

The woman in the mask braced herself for the worst, but what came was agreeable. The warmth in her fingers turned as cool as fresh water. It ran between her and Ralsa, back and forth in a controlled stream. It rushed into her arms, into her chest, up and down her veins, then back into Ralsa before swimming through her once more. When she closed her eyes, she saw its currents on the backs of her eyelids, or she thought she did: red, like Ralsa's hair, like her eyes.

The sensation disappeared a little at a time. Wind tickled the branches of the shrubs. The women opened their eyes to each other; the one in the mask cautiously, but Ralsa wide-awake and smiling.

"You are what I thought you were," she said. "A great relief. How do you feel?"

The woman in the mask shrugged. "No different."

"I'm grateful."

"Did you find my name?"

"No. I'm sorry. You were put in that rock by something much stronger than I, and that's all I know - but that's something, isn't it?" When the other woman's shoulders slumped in disappointment, Ralsa added, "I offered to help you, and my offer was genuine. Come with me to Yassos. We'll both find answers we seek there. But if you'd rather follow your own path, I won't force you to come. You may wait until dawn and part ways with me, if you prefer, though be warned: I speak truly. Yassos is the only city in the world. It is the only sanctuary. There are no others. Here in the pampa, only my circle of light stands between you and death. You would not be so lucky tomorrow."

"So if I refuse to come-"

"You will perish," said Ralsa. "Your position is regrettable. I understand if you require time to consider it."

The woman in the mask shook her head and scooted back from Ralsa. "I need a name," she said.

"Ah," replied Ralsa. "Good."

"What are people in your city called?"

Ralsa squinted. "I don't understand your question."

The woman in the mask scratched an itch on her wrist. “I don’t know. You are Ralsa. What are the others called?”

With a glance that lingered on the golden mask, Ralsa said, “There are countless others, but I will give you an ordinary name. From now on, you are Nino. Many Ninos live in Yassos, but many cycles ago, one of them used to fill the tombs with her flower arrangements. No one asked her to. She never told anyone she was responsible. I may have been the only one who knew. The city is darker without her.”

“What happened to her?”

“She fell to her death. Three seasons ago. A kinder end than many in Yassos, if you believe that. It will be good to think of her again.”

A cricket chirped in the bushes behind them. The woman in the mask shifted uncomfortably. “What will we do once we get there?”

“To begin, you will not wear that mask or that robe for any reason once we arrive,” said Ralsa, standing straight up without using her hands. The black folds of her robe rippled down to the ground. “Don’t fret. I won’t make you remove them yet. What’s more, we will keep everything we’ve discussed a secret. Never speak of your true circumstances to anyone. To everyone you meet, you will be just another Nino.”

Nino. Two short, simple sounds. Nothing more. Was she content with that? How did it compare to her old name? Perhaps she’d betrayed the woman she used to be in a thousand ways already. Then a name was a name, and that was all; it could not be more, must not be more.

Nino pushed herself off the gravel and brushed her robe clean of dirt. “Is that all?”

“No. I will explain as we walk. Are you ready to leave?”

“Yes,” replied Nino, who stood still and watched, waiting for Ralsa to lead the way. A long trip was fine by her. She no longer had any desire to sleep.

Ralsa snapped a finger. The circle of light poured outward in every direction. Moths darted out of the shrubs it touched. She pointed in the direction of Yassos, more or less behind her, and set off.

As Nino turned to look at the ruined shells of the valley a final time, her eyes leapt into the night sky, her heart caught in her throat, and she screamed.

A sickly white sphere dangled motionless in the black, like a hanged man at the end of a rope. Craters pocked its stony skin like boils. It was too close, too close, far too close: no sun, no star; some other aberration, a bald mountain that had taken flight into the darkness.

Before she was aware of it, she'd dropped wailing to the ground. Then Ralsa was beside her, cradling her head, cooing "It's the moon, it's the moon, it's only the moon," but Nino didn't know what a 'moon' was. Flat on her back, she sucked in rapid, shivering breaths. She stared at Ralsa to avoid looking at anything else.

When the black fog at the edge of her vision retreated, she said, "I don't remember moons."

"There's only one. Calm yourself. Take slow breaths and hold the air in," said Ralsa. Her nose, this close to Nino's, was thin and elegant. Nothing like the ruined face in the sky. It must have been strange for Ralsa to look down and see a faultless sun, while the one behind it struggled to stay whole.

"Flowers, bugs, I remember those," said Nino between gasps. "Cities, and people, but--"

"It's all right."

"But I don't remember that thing at all."

"We'll find answers in Yassos," said Ralsa. "We'll find them together."

Nino sought reassurance in those words, and in the cooing voice that spoke them; but a tiny frown broke Ralsa's composure, and her red eyes darted aside more than once.