

THE FORGETTING

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CHAPTER ONE

I am going to be flogged, and I don't know why I'm so surprised about it. No one could take this many risks and never get caught. I don't want to be caught. I drop flat onto my back without a sound, stretching full length along the top of the wall, a wall that's only a little wider than I am. There's a long drop on either side. I clutch my pack to my chest, squint my eyes against the brightness of the sky. No. I've always known I would get caught. I just didn't think it would be today.

I chance another quick glimpse over the edge of the wall. There are two people down there, standing close together in the shaded alley, my rope ladder dangling just above their heads. I don't think they've seen it, and I don't think they've seen me, though practically everyone else can. The walled city of Canaan spreads like a wide and shallow bowl of winking glass and white stone below me, and here I lie, ten meters high on its rim. Just one set of eyes on the streets during the resting, awake—as I am, as those two below me are—one pair of hands pulling aside a sleeping curtain from a well-positioned window, and they will see. And they will come for me.

My fingers find the twisted rope of the ladder, tied to a metal ring sun-hot and burning through the cloth of my leggings. I could pull up the ladder, flip it back over to the forbidden side of the wall, climb down, and wait until they've gone. Or I could try jumping for the roof of the Archives. That would be an easy drop, only the width of the alley and a meter or so down. But that roof is thatch instead of turf, the pitch steep, and how could either of those people in the alley not notice a girl jumping over their heads? Or the ladder pulling back up, for that matter? It's a miracle they missed it coming over the wall the first time.

And so I force myself into stillness, into patience. Balanced high inside the dome of the blue-violet sky, the white city on one side, a wilderness of mountain and waterfall on the other, eight weeks of the sun's trapped heat scorching my back through the wall stones. I'm not good at patience. The wind blows, a hot, swirling breath, and I wonder if it can push me off this wall; I wonder which side I'd rather fall on. Two words float up from the shaded alley.

"How many?"

It's the kind of question asked when you think you haven't heard right. I know most of the people of Canaan, at least by sight, though not by the tops of their heads. But the murmur of the answering voice I know right away. Polite. Always pleasant. It's Jonathan of the Council, enforcer of Canaan's many rules. Finding him in defiance of those rules is my second non-surprise of the day. Jonathan will have me flogged all right. And enjoy it. I wonder how many stripes you get for climbing over the wall.

"Eleven," says Jonathan.

It takes a heartbeat to understand this answer wasn't for me.

The other voice replies, much louder, "And what am I supposed to say to these people when they request their books? What reason am I supposed to give?"

This is Gretchen of the Archives Jonathan is talking to.

"The reason is mine, Archivist. What you tell them is your affair."

I hold my pack tighter to my body. My own book is inside, its tether worked through a hole in the cloth, tied to the braided belt at my waist. Surely Jonathan can't be telling Gretchen to not let eleven people read their archived books. Your books are your memories, who you are. The thought of being denied one of my books brings a familiar tingle to my fingers, my legs. I shove the feeling down. I can't afford to panic, not here, on the wall, right over Jonathan's head and in full sight of the city. Then I catch a movement from the corner of my eye. One of my braids is free from its pins, dangling over the wall edge like a long blond banner.

And there's no more talk in the alley. The pause grows so long I can almost see the two necks craning upward, watching my braid flutter and the rope ladder sway. I think of the ridge of scars I saw on Hedda in the bathhouse, her back like a badly plowed field, and I make a decision. If they come for me, I'm going to pull up the ladder, climb down the other side of the wall, and go back into the mountains. Then I decide the opposite. Hedda survived. And my mother and my sisters need me. Even if they don't know it. It's only seventy days until the Forgetting.

The moment passes when Jonathan's pleasant voice says, "Here is your list." After a soft word from Gretchen his voice

comes back, this time with an edge. “And what if your food ration depended on doing what you’re told?”

I pretend to be Gretchen of the Archives. *Well, Jonathan of the Council, if your own ration depended on how much you love punishing a rule-breaker, I’m pretty sure there would be nothing left to eat in Canaan. And if you’d just look up, you could see one great big rule being broken right now . . .*

Gretchen says none of these things, of course. I never say them, either. But I almost wish she would. I need for her to end this so I can get off this wall. I snag my wayward braid, tuck it up behind my head, and wonder what Janis, Canaan’s Head of Council and Jonathan’s grandmother, might have to say about back-alley meetings during the resting. I’d bet she doesn’t know anything about them.

More muttering from Gretchen, and then the air settles into quiet, lulled by the *chick chick* of the sun cricket song. I risk another look over the edge of the wall. The dim alley is empty. No feet on the flagstones, no creak of an opening window, no shout that means I’ve been seen. As far as I can see, the city sleeps.

I move. The pack goes to my back, feet over the wall as I roll onto my stomach. My sandals find the rope ladder and I shinny down, but only halfway, a meter or so above Jin the Signmaker’s roof garden. I get my feet planted sideways, push hard, and make the short drop into the garden, half turning as I fall. I land feet, knees, then hands in the prickling grasses, the view from below now obscured by the huge, hulking, windowless building that is the Archives.

I hurry to a bed of dusk-orange oil plants and pull out a pole made from a fern stalk, light and thin, its end carved into

a hook. I reach out, catch the hanging ladder with the hook, and work the ropes up and over the wall, letting the weighted last rung finish the job of pulling the ladder over to the other side. Then I slide the pole back into its hiding place and straighten, listening.

The streets below are quiet, the low, slanting sun making the shadows long, blocking out patches of bright light, leaving others in a shrouded dim. Jin's house is one of the old buildings, and even dry and untended it's pretty up here, white stone arches mimicking the curve and flow of the fern forest I've just been hiking through. Shaping stone like this is a skill we've forgotten. Jin doesn't spend much time in his roof garden, especially in the last, hot days of full sun. He's old, with no wife, no children he can remember or identify. That, and his nearness to the wall, and the privacy created by the Archives, makes this roof a good one to jump into. Not to mention that the old man is nearly deaf.

I lower my pack to my feet, its tether snaking down around my leg, and for the first time feel my pulse begin to slow. I'm not caught. I'm not going to be flogged. At least not today. I reach for my falling braids, seven or eight of them out of their pins and brushing the bare skin of my waist. I've taken the tail end of my tunic and tucked it back through my collar in a way that makes my mother frown, but it's cooler like this, and useful when the foliage is dense. Extra fabric snags. I re-braid and pin, braid and pin, fast, getting them as neat as I can. I have to get home before my mother sees my empty bed. Sometimes I think she knows when I've been out, deep down, but appearing at least somewhat presentable helps her keep up the sham.

Did you have a good resting, Nadia? she'll say to me, even though my tunic will be wrinkled where it was pulled through my collar and I'll have dirt on my knees that wasn't there when the curtains closed. *You've brought the water? Thank you . . .*

And I'll say nothing, because I never do, and she'll say nothing about the yellow apple on the table, an apple she would know didn't come from our stores if she'd bothered to count. But once in a while her brow will crease, as if she's unsure. Confused. Maybe she is. I'm not sure how many Forgettings my mother has lived through. She wears her book on twine, heavy around her neck, but I know she doesn't remember me. Not really.

"Have a good resting, Nadia the Dyer's daughter?"

I snatch up my tethered pack, my last hairpin lost to the grasses. That voice was not my mother's. It was deep and very male, coming from the shaded shadows beyond the arches, beneath the covered corner of Jin's garden. I step back, glancing once at the place I've hidden the pole. I'll never get the ladder back in time. The roof is too high to jump from and the voice is between me and the stairs to the street. Correction: Today is the day I'm caught. I feel sweat on my neck, and not from the sun.

The shadows in the corner shift, reshape, become a person, and then the person steps into the light. Not Jonathan, or any other member of the Council. It's Gray. The glassblower's son. Of all people. He's taller since we finished our time in the Learning Center, the weeks of sunlight leaving deep gold in the dark brown of his hair. But that smile he wears is the same. "Cheeky" is what his own mother might call him. I just call him a *zopa*, a word my mother sometimes uses, though not if she thinks I can hear.

Gray hooks a thumb on the lower end of the book strap that crosses his chest, waiting for me to do something. I think what I would say if I were a normal person. *Hey. Or maybe, How long have you been on this roof? Or, Why, exactly, are you on this roof? Which way did you take to sneak up here during the resting? Does your hair really grow all wild and curly like that?*

He just stands there, grinning at me. I wish I'd listened to Mother and never tucked up the end of my tunic. But it's much more important to know what else Gray the Glassblower's son has seen. I break my ban against frivolous conversation and say, "What are you doing here?"

The grin widens. "Nadia speaks. I'm impressed. What else have you learned to do since school?"

Zopa, I think. He seems to think this is funny. I don't. I notice he hasn't answered my question. I decide not to answer his.

"So," he says, "come up to Jin's often?"

I can't tell if he's teasing me or threatening me. The quiet stretches out long, waiting for my explanation, until I say, "I've come to request from Jin, that's all. We need signs."

"True. The Forgetting is coming. We could all use a few more labels, I guess. Probably worth a flogging to get them an hour before the leaving bell, ten weeks ahead of time. No, I agree with you, Nadia. Plan ahead. Avoid that last-minute rush."

Sarcasm. Perfect. I think of the only other time I've spoken actual words to the glassblower's son. He was at least a third of a meter shorter then, in the learning room, and we were meant to be self-exploring the seeds for planting. Gray was self-exploring the art of teasing me. I ignored him through two bells, the same way I ignored everyone, until finally he tugged

on the cord of my book, worn hanging from my belt in those days. I looked him in the eye and said one word: “Stop.” And then he grabbed my book and opened it. My book. I’d have rather found him peeking through the door of the latrine. I slapped his face, hard, and then I slapped it again. Gray left me alone after that, and I’ve carried my book in a pack ever since. I doubt the same strategy is going to work here. But the memory has done me good; it’s reminded me of my temper, which always helps me speak. And I need to know what he’s seen. This time I look him in the face.

“You must have an urgent need for signs yourself,” I observe, “since you seem to be taking the same risk.”

“Well spotted, Dyer’s daughter.” He moves across the garden to sit on the low stone wall that runs along the edge, crosses one ankle over the other, and leans back, relaxed. There’s a two-story drop behind him. “But I came straight here. You took the long way around to Jin’s, didn’t you? The really long way.”

Question answered. He’s seen everything. Whatever this game is, I’m done playing. “I’ll be long gone before you can get Jonathan here,” I say. Jonathan might not be easily found, since he was just wandering the streets.

“I’m sure I can find someone who would be interested.”

“I’ll deny it. It will be your word against mine.”

“And you don’t have one thing in that pack, or in your house, that has come from over the wall?”

The apples. I can feel the weight of them alongside my book. And there are the plant cuttings. They’ll have to be gotten rid of. Quick. Plus the crystals in my resting room. I won’t be able to do it. Not in time. Something inside me tightens,

and I realize just how much I did not want today to be my day. Gray gets up and crosses the garden grasses, his trademark smirk for once not present. He stands right over me.

“Tell me how many times you’ve been over the wall.”

I watch the empty sky beyond his shoulder.

“Tell me, or I bring them.”

I put my gaze on his. “Once.”

“Liar.”

The word feels like he’s finally slapped me back. One clear bell rings out over the city. The first of the day, for waking. Mother will check my bed soon. I have to go. We both have to go. “What do you want?”

“I’m glad you asked. I want you to take me with you.”

Where? I think. But that smile is back, and I realize he means over the wall. He wants me, Nadia, to take him, Gray, over the wall. This strikes me as the single most stupid thing I’ve heard in a lifetime of stupid things. “No.”

“Yes.”

I glare at him.

“I go with you, or I bring the Council,” he says. “Take it or leave it.”

I’m more than mad now. I’m afraid. Would he turn me in, watch my back being laid open like Hedda’s? I don’t know the answer, and that means I’m cornered. He’s intent, watching me think. His eyelashes are startlingly long. I drop my gaze and nod once.

“When?” he asks.

“Three days.”

“The sun will be setting by then.”

I look him again in the eye. “Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it, then.” And here comes the smirk. “I’ll meet you here. First bell of the resting.”

“Fourth bell.”

“Oh, no. You’ll come at the first. Like you always do. Three days, Nadia the Dyer’s daughter.” He moves backward into the shadows, still grinning at me. And right before he disappears down the stairs, he says, “Don’t forget.”

I stay exactly where I am until his footsteps have faded, then dart to the edge of the roof to see how he manages the streets before the leaving bell. I don’t see him. He’s gone another way. I move out of the sun and sink down into the dark corner where Gray must have been, watching me lie on top of the wall, jump into Jin’s garden, get rid of the ladder. Braid my hair. And now that I’m alone and out of the heat, I’m shaking inside. I’m not going to be flogged. Not today. But I have been caught. *Don’t forget*, he said.

I measure my breaths, take my book out of my pack and run a hand over its thick cover, feel the long, connected tether that keeps it tied to my belt. I’ve been taught to write truth in my book since I was old enough to hold a pen. Our books are our sole identity after the Forgetting, the string that connects us to who we were before. The one thing we should never, ever be separated from. *Don’t forget*. I hear the words again in my head, this time in the voice of a child. Gray doesn’t know it, but he’s said that to me before.

And then the shaking in my middle shoots outward—legs, arms, fingers, scalp—the panic I managed to fend off on the wall slamming hard into my chest, squeezing out the air. I hear my mother’s screams, her fists banging on the barred door of her resting room, my older sister with her, pleading with my

father. The baby cries in her cradle seat, and I flatten myself against the wall beneath the window, where pots of seedlings make a line across the sill above my head. I was Nadia the Planter's daughter then, in my sixth year, and my father had let me plant those seeds, touch the tiny shoots of green and orange springing up to meet the light. I'd been so sure that he loved me.

My father takes my hand, leads me away from the window, and sits me in my chair, feet dangling, the light of sun-rising painting our walls with blotches of pink and gold. Then he picks up our knife and cuts the tether of my book. I see the book leave my body, watch it cross the room without me in my father's hands.

"Don't cry, Nadia," he says while he cries, "it's almost time to forget."

He is a stranger. My father has become a stranger who did what he said I should never do, who cut off a piece of me and took it away. And so I run. As fast as I can, out the door, losing the sound of his voice as he calls, and it's as if the pain and confusion inside me have somehow bled into the streets. Everything is noise and stinging smoke, breaking glass and laughter—laughter that is more frightening than my mother's screams. I don't know where I am. Ribbons hang from the trees. Nothing looks the same. My book doesn't bump against my leg. The stone walk is slippery and I fall and someone tries to grab me and then I run and I run more and that is when I see the brown-headed boy in the place where they make the glass.

The furnace is glowing, and the boy is squirming and kicking. A man has him by the arm, and the man has taken the boy's book. The glassblower shouts at the man, shakes his

head no, and I am angry, so angry that someone else's book has been cut, and then I see the man throw the boy's book, watch it land near the bright orange opening of the furnace.

I run into the workshop and I hit the man. I hit and hit him and then someone hits me and I land hard on the ground, heavy tools clattering down onto my legs. The man and the glassblower are fighting, the heat of the furnace pushing on my face. The cover of the boy's book has caught fire, flames eating his pages, and the boy reaches through the heat and grabs it. He drops his book to the floor, smothering the fire with his hands and chest, yelling because he is burned. The men hit each other, and when the fire is gone the boy holds his smoking book with red hands, and he looks at me and says, "Don't forget."

I find my feet and run, down the white stone streets, between the white houses. Light is peeking over the edge of the mountains, from beyond the walls, and the sun comes in a sliver of gold. Then the sky bursts. A broken-glass sky like in the boy's shop—sharp, bright light that pierces the gold with dazzling shards. The trees bloom, just like Father said they would, all the white flowers opening one by one while the ribbons flutter, as far as I can see on either side of the street. The air is sweet. Stone, light, flowers—it's too bright. I crouch and cover my eyes.

When I can open them again I see a man leaning against a locked door. His hand falls down to the book at his side, and I watch his face empty, like when Mother pours water from a pitcher. When there is nothing left in the man's face he wanders away, past a baby lying in its blanket in the middle of the street. I can't see whether the baby has a book or not, and then

I hear a woman cry. And even though I can't make sense of my world I do understand that this noise is different. The woman isn't crying because she's afraid she might die; she cries because she has lost her life. She has forgotten. Everyone has forgotten, and the sound of it hurts my ears.

I push myself up and go home, slipping on the stones. I don't know where else to go. I'm bruised and tired and I hurt. I want my mother. My father isn't there when I open the door, and even this room looks unfamiliar in the cracked white light. The baby has cried herself to sleep in the cradle seat. There are no seedlings in the window, but on the table is a book, open to the first page. It says *Nadia the Dyer's daughter*. But that is not my book. I push until I lift the bar across the door to my mother's resting room.

"Mother?" I call.

And there she is, just as she's always been, my sister huddling in the corner. Mother blinks once, twice, and when her eyes find me she jumps back. Scrambles away.

"Who are you?" my mother yells. "Get away from me! Get away!"

I go away and sit on the floor beneath our table. I hug my knees and I rock and rock. And then I know what has made me slip and fall in the streets. I'm sticky with blood.

I rock now, hugging my shaking knees in the shade of Jin's garden, beneath his beautiful arches, my book tight against my chest. A book must contain the truth. We are supposed to write the truth, for no one to see but ourselves. But how easily that truth can be twisted. Bend a little here, omit a little there, make yourself into the person you wish you were instead of the person you are. How easy to cut the truth away, to throw

it in a fire, open your eyes, and have the whole world remember nothing of who you are. Nothing of what you've done. When you will not remember who you are or what you've done. My father lives on the other side of Canaan now, with Lydia the Weaver. He has two children, girls, and passes me in the street without a second glance. He got what he wanted and got rid of what he didn't. What a victimless crime. Like everything before the Forgetting. Guiltless. Forgotten. Unless you can remember.

Don't forget, Gray the Glassblower's son has said to me. Twice.

And he's said it to the only person in Canaan who never has.

Two days ago I went to Arthur of the Metals to have my mother's knife sharpened, even though we'll hide it from her as soon as I get home. I didn't write it down because it wasn't worth remembering, but while Arthur was talking scythes I looked at his whetstone. It had a smooth, shallow groove where knife blades had been run over and over across the surface. When you sharpen a knife, tiny pieces of metal are filed away to make a new edge, and now I see that tiny bits of the rock go as well.

Today I walked through Canaan, running my hands over the stone of the old buildings, the ones we've forgotten how to make. Sharp corners, no blunted edges. No ruts in the flagstones of the street, where the metal-banded wheels of the harvest carts pass back and forth. Even the leaf edges on the columns and arches are crisp, not worn. Nothing like Arthur's whetstone.

There is only one answer I can think of. We have not been in Canaan long enough to wear down the stone. And if we have not been here that long, then we must have come from somewhere else. And somewhere else can only be one place. Outside the walls . . .

NADIA THE DYER'S DAUGHTER

BOOK II, PAGE 14, 10 YEARS AFTER THE FORGETTING