

PHOENIX

I was floating; cocooned in warm water that never seemed to end. The only thing I could hear was the thundering of my heart, and the blood rushing through my veins. Then, slowly, muffled voices started to break through my bubble. They felt a million miles away. Screams of anguish, broken moans of pain and despair, frantic shouting with words I couldn't even make out. I stood there, dazed, until suddenly a bolt of searing pain struck my shoulder. I cried out, and the desperate sound of my own voice dragged me back to my senses. The burning log that had hit me was lying at my feet, the crackling flames threatening to catch hold of my skirt. I was suffocating, both from the thick ash billowing through the air and from the painful lump in my own throat. I began to sprint. Along the blazing streets, past the crowds of screaming people, through the annihilated marketplace, where only a few days ago I had seen young girls dancing, boys playing and laughing, and mothers watching with fond expressions as they rested gurgling babies on their hips. The square was almost unrecognisable now. My eyes latched onto a small straw doll abandoned under a burning cart. With a heaving groan, the cart collapsed and the doll went up in flames before I could look away. Blinking back tears, I kept running. That was the only thing I could do. I did not know where I was going. I had nowhere to go; my home was here, transforming into choking ash before my eyes.

Blinking desperately, I scanned the crowds and caught sight of a small band of survivors scrambling through a hole in the stone walls surrounded by crackling flames. I tried hopelessly to cry out to those around me, to draw their attention to the small gap that was our only chance of escaping the burning city, but my trembling voice was drowned out by the shouts and cries of everyone else. I started shoving, pulling, forcing people along with me, ignoring their initial resistance. Slowly, others noticed the escape route and soon there was a steady line of stumbling refugees dragging themselves through the hole and into the misty forest outside the city.

Through the gap in the crumbling wall, I stared unblinkingly at the piles of steaming ash that had once been my home. A small yellow flower peeped out from between the blackened stones, and reminded me of something my father had once told me. "The ash from a fire brings forth greater life and richness than before. No matter how many times we burst into flames, we can always rise from the ashes." I turned back to look at the people who had escaped from the city and knew that we would rebuild. No matter what, we would keep going and bring our city back to greatness. The fire may have destroyed my home, but it had not destroyed my people. We would recover.