

The Silence of Azul

PART 1

Chapter 1: The Dust Queen

Sofia

I loved that place. In the centre of the sprawling compound, sitting there like a spider in its web, connected to all the goings-on of camp life as it swirled around me. In the world I had created, I was in fact the Dust Queen and everyone who walked by was merely paying their respects to their beloved ruler. It was true in a sense. There were always smiles from our neighbours. Why wouldn't there be smiles of respect for a benevolent, albeit youthful leader who had tragically lost her father at so young an age. They took him. I summoned my father back to the camp every single morning. He never came, but he was not lost. Yet. I would not believe it. I would not allow it to be true and I lived in a world where I controlled such things. This world was still a mystery, full of promise and I knew my place in the sand. My family drifted in and out of my view, as did the other citizens of my camp. It was a simple, beautiful, dusty existence. I would have never wanted it to change, if only my father were home. Then, I would accept this as my life and be content. Even benevolent rulers, however, had their personal worries. My little Princess Azul still wouldn't speak. It had been four years since we fled our home beneath the bombs to this new kingdom. Why wouldn't she speak to me? I could

understand if she didn't want to speak to other people, but to me, her sister, her Queen?

Time passed, waiting for my sister's words, waiting for my father's figure to appear. Waiting for a miracle while I watched my people from a throne of dust, watched their footprints disappear beneath the sand. My mother once told me that each footstep a person made sank beneath the sand. It did not disappear, but stayed as a record of their passing. And there were people, not many, but some, who could see into the sand and know the secrets of all who had gone before. Sometimes, if they looked and listened very carefully, the secrets of those who were still to come would also glimmer under the surface. I looked and looked at the sand until my eyes burned and every now and then I thought I caught a glimpse of his footsteps outlined in the tiny grains hidden just below, yet there was something else. Yes, he would return but something dark would follow. It was always the same. I could tell no one but Azul. She would nod, silent. I think she saw it, too, as she held all our grief inside her little self.

Refugee Camp

Sofia sat in the red dust, invisible, focused, watching the endless bustle of the camp revolving around her, moving past her, flowing through her. She sat in the dust, content with her wealth, for she knew her own story. Not costing a single coin, but possessing great value. Each person's story, a great treasure. Sofia's father had taught her this. He had taught her a great many useful things: to read and

write, to cook, to climb and how to kill a man, but it was an understanding of the value of her own story that was his greatest gift. Sofia's story began in the red dust of their cramped camp perched on the edge of a merciless desert, a desert that cared for neither story nor the life that held it; the desert that had swallowed her father and threatened to consume them all.

'Sofia!' A shout from her mother, 'Get out of the dirt and come do your chores! Why do you sit there staring at the fence all day?'

Yet, her mother knew. The family all stared at the fence. Beside the fact that there was nothing inside the fence that interested them, a faint hope lingered that they would see his familiar form walking across the rocky expanse stretching to the horizon. The familiar smile would be on his lips, the familiar kindness in his eyes. Her mother knew very well why Sofia stared at the sea of stone and sand. Her tone softening, 'Come here, Little Dove, let me wipe away some of that dirt. It's time for dinner. I'll need your help with the water.'

Tears were now turning the young girl's cheeks to mud. The mother's heart ached for her daughter, but life in the camp was harsh and she could not afford the luxury of tears herself. Sofia shed tears for them all. It had been two years since Sofia's father, Jamil, had been forced into the back of a truck at gunpoint. The insurgents needed a medic and his unofficial position of camp doctor had become known to them. It had been only a matter of time.

An individual's wishes were of no importance to people holding guns. This, they all knew.

Sofia picked herself up off the ground, leaving her favourite spot for a short while and walked slowly towards her family's tent. Her sister, Azul, gave a conspiratorial nod, as she also had been staring into the desert trying, by sheer force of will, to silently conjure the image of her returning father. Yet, his footsteps remained under the sand.