



SPARK OF THE EVERFLAME

THE KINDRED'S CURSE SAGA, BOOK ONE

PENN COLE

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P E N N C O L E

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Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Ready for more?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

EMARION



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The Realms of Emarion

LUMNOS, REALM OF LIGHT AND SHADOW

*A light which burns, while shadows bite
Their eyes of blue haunt day and night*

FORTOS, REALM OF FORCE AND VALOR

*With eyes and swords enrobed in red
They'll mend you whole or strike you dead*

FAUNOS, REALM OF BEAST AND BRUTE

*Fur and feathers, beasts that crawl
Their yellow eyes control them all*

ARBOROS, REALM OF ROOT AND THORN

*Eyes of moss bring nature's scorn
The prettiest flowers have poison thorns*

IGNIOS, REALM OF SAND AND FLAME

*Flame in spirit, flame in sight
The desert holds their fiery might*

UMBROS, REALM OF MIND AND SECRET

*Irises black, with hearts to match
A kiss, and soon your mind they'll snatch*

MEROS, REALM OF SEA AND SKY

*A gaze to match the vengeful seas
In water deep, they'll drown your pleas*

SOPHOS, REALM OF THOUGHT AND SPARK

*The cunning spark of wisdom true
Rose eyes will be the death of you*

MONTIOS, REALM OF STONE AND ICE

*Violet stone to match their gaze
Beware their ice at end of days*

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*For anyone who has ever been told
their spark shouldn't burn so bright
and for all the people who loved them
precisely because it did.*



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Prologue

Whether it was a blessing or a curse is, even now, the subject of considerable debate.

If I'd had the courage to step forward into the dark alley that day and hear the words that the handsome, scar-bearing stranger whispered into my mother's ear, perhaps one of us—or all of us—might have died a great deal sooner.

Or, if I'd come just a few minutes earlier, if I'd taken my mother's hand and convinced her to follow me out of town and down the forest path to our little home on the marsh, perhaps her secrets, and the secrets she kept on my behalf, might have stayed buried forever in the Emarion soil, and so many lives might never have had to take their place.

Only one thing is certain: my mother's disappearance on that hot, cursed afternoon set off a chain of reactions so unexpected, so far-reaching, that even the gods themselves could not predict the consequences that would later come to pass.

And so it's there that my story begins.

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Chapter One

Between the dead patient, the drunk men, and the blood sun, my day was not off to an auspicious start.

A stream of inebriated revelers stumbled through the dusty alleys of Mortal City, their catcalls and slurred words an unwelcome refrain on my walk home. Though I gave their roaming hands a wide berth, I couldn't avoid the hooded, red-rimmed eyes that followed me with too much interest.

The blood sun wasn't helping. At dawn, a thick haze had settled across the sky, bathing the city in an eerie scarlet glow. As the sun rose to its midday peak, it seemed to make the early summer heat scorch hotter, thicker, *angrier*.

"I hate days like this," Maura muttered.

I glanced at the short, ruddy-faced older woman at my side. She paused and leaned on her cane as her honey-brown eyes turned skyward, the corners of her lips hooking into a frown.

"Forging Day is bad enough without this infernal heat," she said.

I hummed in agreement. Rising temperatures brought rising tempers, and that meant more fights, more injuries, and more patients.

"The healers' center will be a madhouse this evening," I said. "I can come back with you, if you'd like. I'm sure the apprentice healers would appreciate the extra hands."

"Your mother and I can handle things for the rest of the day. Go on home and rest, you had a rough morning shift."

I flinched at the memory.

Maura set her age-worn hand on my forearm and gave it a squeeze. "It wasn't your fault, Diem."

"I know," I lied.

A patient had died on my watch.

He'd been young—far younger than his weathered features suggested, orphaned and swallowed up by the slums of Mortal City. On the brink of starvation, he'd tried to poach a roast duck from a vendor's cart and received a knife between the ribs in return. By the time I arrived, he'd lost too much blood, his breath raspy and wet from a collapsed lung.

I could do nothing but hold his hand and murmur the sacred Rite of Endings. The life had dimmed from his carob eyes while the merriment continued around us uninterrupted. No one had paused to pay respects, not even as I'd struggled to haul his body to the forest surrounding our village so he could decompose in peace, eternally slumbering under a blanket of whatever fallen leaves I could collect.

The unnecessary cruelty of it had set my temper ablaze. Every patient's death lay heavy on my soul, but this boy had been so young, his death so preventable, that I couldn't help feeling the weight of it on my shoulders. It had lit a spark deep within me, a need for justice, that I was struggling to ignore.

"Strange to have a blood sun on Forging Day," I said, eager to change the subject. I tucked a wisp of white hair behind my ears, its unnatural hue made all the more bold against the dark tan of my sun-drenched skin. My focus rose to the crimson orb glaring down at us. "Feels like a bad omen."

In the old mortal religions, a blood sun was said to be a warning from the gods, a harbinger of great upheaval. An appearance generations ago on the eve of civil war—a conflict we now called the Blood War, in its honor—had reinforced its ominous reputation. Its reoccurrence now, and on Forging Day no less, was sure to ignite speculation.

"Nonsense," Maura said with a swish of her hand. "A silly superstition, nothing more. We had one two decades past, and no harm came of it."

"My darling little brother might disagree with you," I said. "That blood sun was the day of my birth."

Her eyebrows rose. "Was it really?"

I nodded. "His greatest joy is reminding me every chance he gets."

Even the gods knew you would be a pain in the ass, Teller would say with a grin before fleeing out of my reach.

I smiled at the memory, though a growing unease clouded my thoughts. Even Maura, despite her claims of indifference, couldn't hide the deep crease on her brow as she followed my gaze to the sky.

“Are you and Henri going to do anything to celebrate?” she asked.

A flush rose to my cheeks. Henri was my oldest and dearest friend—and lately, he’d become something even more.

“He refuses to celebrate Forging Day on principle,” I said, sighing. “He says it’s the most depressing day of the year.”

“It’s a rare young man who turns down the chance to drown himself in free wine and cavort around town with no consequences.”

“Believe me, Maura, if the wine were mortal-made, Henri would be the first to *cavort*. He would cavort all over Mortal City. He’d cavort in the bushes, in the back alleys, all over his clothes—”

She snorted softly. “He objects to the Descended wine?”

“He objects to the *Descended*.”

“At least that explains why he finds Forging Day depressing.”

“Indeed.”

Though Forging Day was our most raucous holiday, it wasn’t one that most mortals looked on with fondness. On this day many millennia ago, nine immortal siblings known as the Kindred crafted a magical pact—the Forging—after seeking refuge in our world following the violent destruction of their own. Each of the Kindred fell in love with a citizen of our nation of Emarion. Rather than watch their beloveds wither to old age and die, the Kindred agreed to abandon their eternal youth and bind their lives to their mortal lovers.

Through the Forging spell, Emarion was broken up into nine realms, each named for one of the Kindred and infused with its patron god’s or goddess’s respective magic.

The Kindred had intended for the offspring of their unions, the race of beings we now called the Descended, to rule over those realms and usher in an era of peace and prosperity, with both races living together in harmony. Forging Day was meant to remind us, mortal and Descended alike, of that lofty goal.

As so often happens with a parent’s hope-filled dreams for their children, things did not go exactly to plan.

“I wonder what the Descended do to celebrate,” I mused, gazing out beyond the rooftops. Far in the distance, I could just make out the faint, shimmering outline of the royal palace’s imposing spires.

“My cousin works in one of the grand homes there, and she says it’s a thing to behold. Daytime spent twirling streamers and nibbling fruit in the

wildflower fields, evening spent dancing in gowns and jewels at the Forging Ball. Buffets as far as the eye can see and musicians playing from dusk to dawn.”

“Sounds about right,” I drawled. “It is their day, after all.”

The day that control of our world passed to them by way of inheritance, one of many gifts bequeathed by their divine ancestors. Our mortal ancestors hadn’t been quite so generous to us.

“It’s shameful, if you ask me,” Maura huffed. “Today is meant to be about the Descended and mortals coming together, yet they go out of their way to shut us out.”

“It’s a real shock,” I deadpanned. “They’re normally so kind and welcoming.”

For all my sarcasm, I’d never actually met a Descended myself. Despite growing up a short walk from Lumnos City, the wealthy capital of our realm and home to the elite ruling class, I might as well live a world away. As a child, my mother had forbidden me from any interaction with them: No consuming their food or wine. No venturing into Lumnos City. I wasn’t even permitted to treat Descended patients in my work as a healer.

The only contact she couldn’t protect me from was the occasional brush with the brutish, cold-hearted soldiers of the Royal Guard that patrolled Mortal City’s streets. Today, though, even they were noticeably absent. Having placated us with morning shipments of free wine, the King had pulled his guards and left us to our own devices for the day.

“I’m off to the healers’ center.” Maura stopped as we approached a familiar crossroads. She rubbed at her leg and scanned the crowded streets, brows knitting with concern. “You’ll be alright getting home by yourself?”

“Go on, I’ll be fine.” I patted the twin daggers slung low on my hips. “I can take care of myself. Besides, I doubt many will risk the wrath of the mighty Andrei Bellator by getting handsy with his daughter.”

Her face warmed with a smile. “He’s a good man, your father. His retirement was a great loss to the Emarion Army.”

“He tells me so every day,” I said, winking.

She laughed and turned away with a quick wave. “Blessed Forging, Diem!”

I returned her wave and spun on the heel of my boot toward the dodgier southern part of the city. Without the distraction of Maura’s

presence, I was now keenly aware of how tense the atmosphere had become.

Despite the muggy heat, I clutched my cape tighter around my shoulders. It was as much a defense mechanism as the unfriendly scowl that twisted my lips.

I longed to get back to the safety of my family's home. Aggressive boozehounds roaming the streets were nothing new, but today felt... different. Mortal City felt like a tinderbox, one spark away from exploding.

The Descended wine that the Royal Guard had carted in was laced with magic to keep a drinker's spirits high for hours as they rode wave after wave of bliss. The impact was even more potent on a mortal. Unluckily for the peace and quiet of Mortal City's women, some of these men wouldn't be sobering up for days to come.

And there were many of them—too many. Enough that I had to weave through crowds congregating at every juncture, their mutters ranging from flirty to lecherous to outright violent.

Though I ignored them, my hands sat casually on the hilts of my blades, rising and falling with each sway of my hips. A silent warning.

Behind shuttered windows and drawn curtains, I spied the nervous stares of women who had wisely elected to spend the day locked indoors.

"Well aren't you a pretty thing," a voice jeered from over my shoulder.

Two men stumbled my direction, close enough for me to catch the pungent reek of alcohol on their breath. Amber liquid sloshed from the tankards they carried.

I swore under my breath. I'd been too lost in my own thoughts to notice their approach. My father would be disappointed—he'd trained me better than to let my guard down, especially in these crime-ridden alleyways.

It's never the enemy who attacks outright who will strike your killing blow, he'd taught me. It's the one who hides in the shadows and waits. The one who strikes when you've finally looked away. Those are the true predators to fear.

I was fairly sure these sleazebags were more nuisance than predator, but I flexed my hands on my daggers nonetheless.

"I think we found a feisty one," the taller one said, jerking his chin toward my blades.

“I do like it when they fight back,” the shorter one taunted. He took a swig of wine and ran a tongue across his grimy teeth, and I nearly lost my lunch.

The tall one pulled a fighting knife and twirled it in his palm. “Those are some heavy blades you got there. Too heavy for a little lady like you to handle. I think you should hand those over to us.”

“Along with any coins you got on you,” the shorter one added. He broke off from his friend to circle around my back.

I side-stepped to cut off his path, though the movement put my back to a shadowed alley that raised my hackles. “Don’t you boys have something better to do than harass women on their way home?”

“Harassing?” The short one clutched his chest with feigned hurt. “We’re simply celebrating this fine Forging Day.”

I arched an eyebrow. “I doubt Blessed Mother Lumnos would approve of this kind of celebration.”

His expression soured. “Then *Blessed Mother Lumnos* can go freeze in the glaciers of hell with the rest of her kin.”

Hair rose on the back of my neck. Blasphemy against the Kindred was punishable by death, and the Descended paid handsomely for mortals who were willing to turn on their own and report heretics. If this man would so brazenly insult the goddess Lumnos to my face, he had no intention of me walking away.

Which meant I needed to get the hell out of here.

I took a few more steps back and dared a brief glance over my shoulder. I realized too late that the street I’d backed myself into ended in a tall brick wall.

The tall one frowned and leaned forward. “What’s wrong with your eyes, girl?”

I squinted in a feeble attempt to conceal them, but the damage was done.

“Fortos’s balls, she’s one of *them*.”

“You’re a Descended?” the short one hissed. He fumbled to pull his knife, then froze in place, thinking better of it.

I rolled my eyes. “If I was, do you think I’d live in this shithole?”

The tall one took another step closer. “Then why aren’t they brown?”

Mortals could only bear brown eyes, another consequence of the Forging spell. Naturally, the Descended hoarded the more fanciful shades of

the rainbow for themselves, just as they had with so many other beautiful things in Emarion. Each realm's Descended had their own distinct eye color, with Lumnos Descended all sporting various shades of blue—although, with their strength and flawless beauty, I couldn't imagine anyone confusing a Descended for a mortal, regardless of eye color.

That had been my own saving grace. When the brown eyes and auburn hair I was born with unexpectedly turned colorless at the onset of puberty, it was my plain face, gangly body, and general mediocrity that eventually convinced everyone I had not been a Descended child in disguise.

"Lost my eye color in a childhood illness," I said quickly. "Now if you'll excuse me..." I feinted toward them, but they remained rooted in my path.

"If you're not a Descended, prove it." The short one unsheathed his knife and held it out at me, blade first. "Show us you can bleed."

It was, to my irritation, a clever challenge. Adult Descended had steel-strong skin, impervious to mortal weapons. If I was one of them, his blade would do me no harm. But if I was mortal...

He inched toward me and jabbed its sharp point in the air. The metal was close enough to see the dried blood crusting its edge.

"Come on, girl. Just put out your hands." He smirked. "I won't hurt you too bad."

My fingers twitched with the urge to pull my daggers. I could channel my father's training, use it to slice open their hands, their cheeks, their groins. It would make for an easy escape without anyone ending up dead.

But if I did, they would inevitably end up at the healers' center. *My* healers' center.

My stomach turned at the thought of subjecting our young apprentices to these brutes. I'd spent too many of my own Forging Days dodging swinging fists and groping hands as a trainee.

A cold kind of numbness lurked at the edge of my thoughts. I could slice them a little deeper, aim for just the right vein. I could ensure they never stumbled out of this dark alley, or any other, ever again. Maybe the world would be better off.

I'd never taken a life before. As a healer, I'd sworn a vow to help, not harm. And I didn't want to be like the cruel Descended, playing god as I dealt out death like a deck of cards.

But if my own life was on the line...

Survive, my father's words echoed in my ears. *At whatever cost, to whatever end. Survive first, mind the consequences later.*

It happened almost too quickly to see. One moment, the man was lunging toward me, a brush of cool air skimming my ribs as the tip of his dagger snagged my tunic and ripped a hole in the fabric. The next moment, my limbs were flying in a choreographed war hymn my body could sing in its sleep.

It was all too easy to dodge their flailing, booze-affected swipes and lay blow after blow of my own. A knee to the groin. The heel of a hand to the throat. A handful of dirt flung into their eyes. Each attack targeted to incapacitate them *just enough*.

The tall one screeched and buckled to his knees. Tears streamed down his cheeks as his eyes fought to clear the gritty debris.

Beside him, his friend lay on his back, clutching at his throat and gasping for air. "You're dead! *Dead!*"

"You said you wanted me to fight back." I stepped over their writhing bodies, swiping up their fallen knives and the broadswords at their hips. I might not have had the guts to kill them, but I could at least keep them from taking out their rage on the next woman they came across.

I kicked another cloud of dirt into their eyes, provoking a fresh round of howls. "Remember this the next time you think about attacking a random woman."

"You're gonna pay!"

"When I find you—"

"Blessed Forging!" I said sweetly. A long string of crude slurs trailed me as I dashed out of the alley and back onto the wider main road.

The commotion had begun to draw eyes in my direction. Heads craned to see who I was, what I had been doing. A gathering of four armed men started walking my direction.

"You, woman," one of them called out. "What's going on?"

Wonderful. If there was anything I needed less than two angry men with knives questioning me, it was *six* angry men with knives questioning me.

Nearby, I spotted a passage that led to an all-too-familiar set of alleyways. I crept toward it as I tugged my hood up over my head.

"You there," the man called again. His steps quickened. "Stop where you are."

“That bitch attacked me and stole my weapons!”

I winced. *Well, shit.*

The tall one staggered from the alley, finger extended my way. White-hot fury blazed in his eyes. “Stop her!”

I bolted for the alley as fiery adrenaline scorched through my veins.

I knew these paths well. This wasn’t the poorest area of Mortal City, but it was the seediest, the kind of place where you could chase any manner of sin. They called it Paradise Row—ironic or fitting, depending on what you sought.

As a healer, I’d always been drawn to the most vulnerable of patients: an escort beaten bloody by her client, a desperate addict overdosing on magic-laced drugs, a starving pickpocket who’d lost a hand stealing from the wrong mark. My willingness to take on any call, no matter how dangerous or unsavory, made me a frequent visitor to Paradise Row’s shadowy labyrinth.

Shouts echoed behind me, distant but gaining. I was too slow, hampered by the stolen blades. I plunged down side paths at random—left, then right, then left again—and spotted a woman lounging against an open door, skirts hiked up and neckline hiked down.

“Free weapons,” I said, panting as I rushed up to her. “Want them?”

Her eyes glazed over me with suspicion. “Nothing’s free ‘round here.”

The crowd of voices grew louder.

“Fine.” I jerked my chin over my shoulder. “Payment is not telling them you saw me.”

With a quick shrug, she scooped the blades from my arms and tossed them into a wooden chest inside her door.

“Don’t show them the blades either,” I warned. “Apparently drunk men don’t like being disarmed by a woman.”

She smirked knowingly, then nodded at an alley to the left. “Go that way.”

I shot her a grateful smile and sprinted in the direction she’d pointed. At my back, a woman’s voice cried out, “*That little brat took my knives, too! She went right—catch her and bring her back here, and I’ll make it worth your while, boys.*”

Say what you want about the women of Paradise Row, but they certainly were loyal.

The darkness closed in around me as I scurried deeper into the pathways and the scarlet-hued sunlight disappeared behind a canopy of tattered awnings. I could feel the weight of curious eyes peering out from shadowed doorways—watching me, assessing me. Some of the dilapidated buildings triggered memories of past visits, but I didn't dare show a hint of recognition.

More voices drifted from down the path. I pushed my body against the wall to evade the few rays of speckled light. As a child, I'd once imagined the shadows were a tangible thing, a great blanket I could wrap around myself to hide from the world. I found myself doing the same now, silently begging my old friend the darkness to keep me veiled.

A flash of red caught my eye. A red I knew—bright, coppery, fluid like poured silk. Tied, as it always was, into a knot at her nape.

I could have spotted my mother's distinctive hair in a crowd of thousands, but in this alley, it was especially hard to miss such a vibrant splash in a murky sea of browns and greys.

Her back was to me, her face hidden, a familiar cloak hung on her slender shoulders. Its rips and stains were the storybook of my childhood—tiny burns from our family hearth, a smear from young Teller's berry-stained hands, a mended tear from when a spooked horse had bucked her right into Father's protective arms.

I froze in place, a surprised cry catching in my throat.

Seeing her here wasn't such a shock, as she also treated patients from Paradise Row. It was the man across from her that rendered me still.

He was everything she wasn't. Where my mother was petite, unassuming, and draped in simple fabrics, this man was a demigod on proud display.

Even from a distance, it was obvious his clothes were of the finest materials. The black brocade of his floor-length overcoat, edged with intricate embroidery and gold-threaded roping, shimmered despite the murky light. Its sleek lines were perfectly tailored to fit every swell of his muscles—which he had in abundance. His boots were polished to a mirror shine, somehow immune to the Mortal City grime that clung to everything I owned.

He towered above her by more than a foot, a feature he wielded over her like a weapon, drawn and waiting to strike. He appeared a few years older than me in age, and his face was strikingly handsome, though angular

and severe, made even more so by raven-black hair, pulled back low and tight, and the scar that slashed across his olive skin. Its pale, jagged lines splintered like lightning, up from his collar and across his full lips and narrowed eyes.

Cold, emotionless eyes. Blue-grey eyes.

Descended eyes.

Why was she here with *him*? She treated Descended patients, but never in Mortal City. Other than the Royal Guard, their kind wouldn't be caught dead in these parts—not unless they'd come looking for trouble. Had he hunted her down? Had she seen something she shouldn't have?

Was she in trouble?

My father's training kicked in once more. I scanned the man for potential threats. His features were tense—solemn, but not angry—his thick, corded arms crossed over an impossibly broad chest. No guards or companions in sight. His only weapon was a sword strapped rather impractically to his back, its jeweled handle peeking out from above his shoulder. Only the Descended would wear something so garish, something better suited as jewelry than a blade fated to slice its way through muscle and bone.

The tightness in my chest eased. Perhaps he wasn't a threat—except for his magic. With the Descended, you never knew. Some could barely summon a spark. Others could drown the entire realm in darkness.

The two of them were arguing. I couldn't make out the words, but I knew my mother's body language well enough. I'd been on the wrong side of that pointed finger too many times. She and I shared something that the men of our family didn't—a hot temper that could ignite if provoked.

I flattened myself against the wall and tiptoed as close as I dared, then ducked behind a pile of empty wooden crates. As their argument intensified, their voices rose and carried across the alley.

“Out of the question,” the man's voice rumbled, low and deep. Something inside me stirred at the sound of it, like a yawning dragon emerging from slumber.

“It wasn't a request,” my mother answered.

“*You* don't give *me* orders, Auralie.”

“Need I remind you that one word from me and the entire realm will know that you—”

“No,” he snapped. “I've already paid your extortion ten times over.”

“And you’ll keep paying it until lives are no longer in danger.”

Extortion? What could my mother possibly have on a Descended to make them bend to her will? She’d been treating them for years, but the confidentiality between healer and patient was sacrosanct, and she was the model by which all healers in Lumnos were held. Surely she would never...

I leaned as far forward as I dared, squinting through the cracks in the crates. The man uncrossed his arms and leaned his face down to hers.

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t kill you where you stand to be done with all of this.”

My heart dropped to my stomach, but my mother was unbothered. She raised her chin in open defiance. “If I die, everyone will find out your secret. I’ve made sure of it.”

The man’s face remained a mask of composure, but his pale irises—slate blue, with a touch of steel—glowed with icy fury. I shivered, gripping my dagger in reflex.

My mother spoke again, her voice gentler. “And because you know as well as I do that, things are getting worse. And you know that helping me might be the only way to stop it.”

They fell silent for a long moment. The scar-torn corner of his lip twitched into a frown. “If I do this, it must be tonight. There won’t be another chance before...” He glanced around, then dropped his voice to a whisper.

I craned my neck, straining to pick up their hushed words. If I could only get a little closer...

“Eavesdropping will get you killed, child.”

I jolted at the unexpected voice. I spun to find myself staring at the wrinkled, smirking visage of an elderly woman. She leaned casually against the frame of a nearby doorway, eyes so dark they appeared black, shoulders stooped with age. She was swathed in jewel-toned rags, threadbare strips of emerald and garnet dangling as she gestured over my shoulder.

“If you’re going to listen in, at least make sure no one’s watching your other side.” Her voice rose and fell in a casual lilt, a smooth accent I couldn’t place.

My mouth started moving before my mind could catch up. “I wasn’t—I mean, I didn’t—”

“No use lying to me.” The creases around her eyes bunched as she winked. “If your reasons for spying are worth knowing, then I know them

already.”

“I thought people in Paradise Row didn’t ask questions.”

She shrugged. “Nothing wrong with asking. It’s the answers that’ll get you.” Her dry, papery laughter ricocheted off the walls, filling every darkened corner.

I cringed, knowing the sound would carry to my mother and the mysterious stranger. A stolen glance confirmed it—they had disappeared from sight.

“There go my answers,” I muttered.

A gleam twinkled in the inky depths of her eyes. “Those aren’t the answers you need. Not yet, anyway. But I’ve got other answers for you. Answers you won’t find from any mortal or Descended.”

“For a price, I’m sure.” It was an effort not to roll my eyes. I’d seen hustlers of her kind at the market, promising a grand fortune foretold for a small fortune paid now. I’d also heard them laughing about their gullible marks over an evening pint in the tavern. “Let me guess—I’ve already met my true love, I’m going to have a stable full of children, and I’m going to live a long, blissfully happy life before I die.”

“No, child. None of that for you, I’m afraid.” There was a sorrow in her tone, a sympathy fluttering across her features that planted a seed of unease.

I silently scolded myself. *Don’t be foolish. It’s a ruse, and you’re falling right into it.*

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I gave a tight smile as I turned to leave. “Blessed Forging.”

“Those eyes—a gift from your father, aren’t they? Your *real* father.”

I froze.

“And that’s not the only thing he gave you, is it?”

My head whipped back to her. “What are you talking about?”

“That mother of yours thought she could hide it from the world. Thought she could hide it from *you* with that little powder of hers. But secrets like that can’t stay kept forever.” Her focus turned skyward, taking in the scattered beams of bloody sunlight around us. “And it appears the Kindred are done waiting.”

A chorus of alarm bells erupted in my head. There was no way she could know about the powder and the reason I took it. No one outside my family knew—and no one inside my family would dare share it. Unless...

Unless this woman knew the man who had sired me.

But that was equally impossible. My mother said he'd died before my birth, before he'd even known she was pregnant. Even the man I now called my father didn't know his name.

As a child, I'd begged for more answers, feeling pitiful and insignificant and imagining myself the long-lost heir of some faraway kingdom, but when my mother made up her mind to keep a secret, her resolve was a wall of Fortosian steel.

As if she'd read my thoughts, the old crone gave me an amused look. "He knows about you, your father. He's waiting for you."

"My *sire*, not my father," I corrected between clenched teeth. "And he's dead."

"Should be. But he's a survivor." She chuckled. "Another trait you inherited, I'm guessing."

My dagger slid from its sheath with a soft hiss. I pointed it toward her and willed my hand not to tremble as I closed the distance between us. "Who are you?"

She clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

"So easy to read you are, in this sad state. So easy to control, too. I could take you now—make you my own." The corners of her bloodless lips curved up, and her head tilted slightly. "How would you like to be one of mine, child? We could do such terrible things together, you and I. Might even be worth risking the wrath of the Blessed Kindred." Her knobby finger rose to stroke my cheekbone. "Oh, Diem Bellator, the things I could do with you."

I tried to protest, tried to slap her hand away, tried to recoil from her frigid touch. But I could only stare in wide-eyed horror.

My body was no longer mine to control.

Not so brave now, are you? Her voice echoed in my head—only it was different somehow, more refined. Smooth like molten platinum, radiating with power.

In my mind, I roared against her grip, writhing and clawing, but my struggle was to no avail. I was completely at her mercy, caged in my own head by her dark command.

Her sharp-pointed nail drifted down my jaw and along the column of my neck, following the line of my collarbone. *Tempting, so tempting*, she purred.

My back arched involuntarily at her touch. Even my breath remained bound to her, each inhale lingering in wait for her wordless consent.

She glanced again to the visible sliver of crimson sky, then gave a great sigh, rolling her eyes before meeting my gaze. *When we meet again, remember this moment, child. How I could have made you kneel. How I could have made you beg.*

She flicked her bony wrist, and the frigid fingers of her control unwound from my veins, unraveled from my bones. My quivering body returned to me at last.

I jumped back and clutched my throat. “Who are you? How did you do that?”

“Listen to me and listen close, Daughter of the Forgotten.” She leaned forward and poked me in the shoulder. “Stop running from who you are. Stop hiding.”

“I’m not hiding from anyth—”

“And stop taking that cursed flameroot powder.”

Again I locked up. She shouldn’t know this. *Couldn’t* know this. She—

I shook my head to push away the thoughts. It didn’t matter. It was painfully clear my mother had kept more from me than I ever imagined. I needed to get out of here and find her—and put her secrets to an end once and for all.

As I staggered backward and turned to run, the woman’s taunting, sing-song voice chased me down the alley.

“When forgotten blood on heartstone falls, then shall the chains be broke,” she crooned. *“Life for life, old debt requires, or eternal be his yoke.”*

I didn’t dare look back as I fled her unnerving presence.

“Blessed Forging, Diem Bellator!” she cried. “Let’s hope it’s not your last.”



HOURS PASSED, but my mother did not come home.

I said nothing to my father and brother of what had occurred that day. I thought only of my mother, my questions for her multiplying with every heartbeat. I sat on the front stoop of our cottage and waited to see her face

emerge from the forest path, waited to pounce on her with my now-ravenous curiosity.

But still she did not come home.

We ate a quiet dinner by the fireplace, forcing smiles as we debated what innocent thing might have detained her, our heads snapping to the door at every creak.

As night fell, we wandered the woods outside our house and called her name. My brother scoured the path to the healers' center, there and back, again and again, while my father searched the wilder areas of the forest. I skimmed the shoreline, pausing along the areas where she and I often gathered flowers for medicinal concoctions.

In the distance, my gaze snagged on the twinkle of a lantern hanging from a boat. The light grew brighter as it neared, evidently returning to Lumnos's shores. An odd thing, considering passage across the Sacred Sea was banned on Forging Day, but with the Royal Guard currently gorging themselves in the palace, all kinds of unsavory characters might be taking advantage of today's lax enforcement of the laws.

That thought stayed with me, heavy in my stomach, as I returned to an empty house. Eventually, my father and brother joined me, their faces falling when only I rose to greet them.

And still she did not come home.

The next day, we called on all our friends and neighbors, hoping one of them had taken her in for the night. We revisited the patients she'd treated, none of whom had noticed anything amiss. We ransacked her belongings, searching in vain for clues that she'd planned a trip away. We canvassed the streets of Mortal City and squeezed each other's hands as we looked for any sign of her—dead or alive.

More days passed with no answers.

Then weeks.

Then months.

And still... she did not come home.

Chapter
Two

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SIX MONTHS LATER

“D iem.”

It was less a name than a command—a hawkish summons that left room for nothing short of perfect obedience.

My shoulders pulled taut. This was not the voice of the gentle man I knew, whose kind eyes and calloused hands would wrap me up in a chest-crushing embrace after a rough day. The man who, though we shared no blood, had been the best father I could have ever hoped for.

This was the voice of the man that came before.

The soldier who fought his way up the ranks of the Emarion Army, earning the highest rank ever given to a mortal, both for bravery on the battlefield and leadership off of it. The warrior whose name might have gone down in legend, had he not walked away from it all for a quiet life with a penniless young mother and her wild-spirited infant.

This was the voice of the Commander—and it never meant anything good.

Teller lifted his head from his book and grinned in that infuriating younger sibling way. “What did you do now?”

I rolled my eyes as I finished lacing my boots. “Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s your fault somehow.”

His smile only widened. He knew I was full of it. My brother was our father’s most obedient soldier. If Teller ever found himself scolded by the Commander, it was only because he’d taken the fall for me out of pity to spare me yet another lecture.

“Di-em,” the voice boomed again, the two syllables stretching into a menacing dirge. “Get out here, *now*.”

“Dead girl walking,” Teller teased.

“Try to sound a little less thrilled about it, will you?” I threw my white, waist-length waves into a sloppy braid, then slung my weapons belt around my hips. The leather sheaths of my daggers thumped softly against my legs as I secured them with a clink of the brass buckle. “Hurry up, I’m supposed to meet Maura early this morning.”

I bounded down the short hallway to the hearth-warmed, wood-wrapped chamber that served as the common room of our small home. As I

sidestepped the teetering piles of books that seemed to fill every corner, my thoughts rummaged through the past few days, trying and failing to anticipate what had earned this particular reprimand.

Frankly, there were too many possibilities to count.

I skidded to a stop in front of my father and beamed my most believably innocent smile. My fist thumped to my chest in mock salute. “Present, Commander.”

His eyes narrowed at my use of his former title. It was always a coinflip whether the term of endearment would soothe or stoke his anger. Today, my odds were not looking good.

“Have you been taking your flameroot powder?”

I fought the urge to cringe.

“Yes,” I said, slowly and carefully.

“Every day?”

I shifted my weight. This was going to be ugly.

“I... may have missed a few days.”

“How many days?”

“Things have been so busy. I’ve had a lot to do around here, the center is a mess and—”

“How many days, Diem.” An order, not a question.

I sighed, then shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

He crossed his arms with a deep-cut frown. Despite the wrinkles mapping their way across his features, he still looked the part of the fearsome warrior—tanned skin leathery from years under the Emarion sun, shoulders thick with muscle. “Well, I’m very sure. Do you know how I’m so sure?”

I swallowed a teasing response, managing instead to hold his gaze while shaking my head.

“Because I found this.” He held up a small, crescent-shaped jar containing a powder the color of warm blood on fresh snow. “It was inside my fishing box. The one that hasn’t been opened since I went out on the water *ten days ago*.”

For a brief moment, the argument played itself out in the theater of my head. I would complain that I was sick of taking the powder, that it made my brain fuzzy and my emotions dull. He would say those were necessary side effects, that the hallucinations the flameroot prevented—symptoms of a disease I’d inherited from my birth father, the same illness that turned my

eyes grey and my hair white at age ten—would be far more severe than a clouded mind. I would let it slip that I had actually stopped taking the flameroot weeks ago, yet the visions hadn't returned. He would tell me that I was being reckless and immature, that my mother would be disappointed.

My mother.

That was a spiderweb I did not feel like getting snagged in.

Experience told me to cut my losses and give in. But even as I hung my head, working my expression into penitence, a persistent *voice* cried out from deep inside of me—the call of my burning temper.

Fight.

"Thank you," I said with as apologetic a tone as I could muster. "I've been looking everywhere for that." I reached to pluck it from his grasp, but his other hand closed around my wrist.

"Diem, I need to be able to trust you."

Dueling waves of shame and irritation battled for release. I looked away, shoving them both down.

"I know things have been difficult since your mother..." He trailed off, and I knew he was struggling to choose the right word. *Disappeared? Left? Was taken?*

We'd never had a funeral service for her. Never even admitted she might be dead.

Out of denial, naivete, or just dumb, blind hope, we'd convinced ourselves that she was just *away*. Left on a trip she'd forgotten to mention. Visiting a distant patient who perhaps needed more help than she'd expected. Any day now, we'd get a letter from her, apologizing profusely and explaining. Any day, she'd walk back through the door.

For the first few weeks, I'd almost believed it. But now, after so long...

Now, we didn't talk about it. Swollen by months of silence, the truth had become too painful to touch.

"It's been hard for all of us, with her absent," he said.

Fight.

There it was again, that *voice* that plagued me. A harsh retort took form in my chest, and my teeth clenched to keep it in.

My father's expression softened. "You've done so much to help here at home, and Maura told me how invaluable you've been at the center. I see the effort you're making, and I appreciate it."

This was the Commander in action. The man who could see a soldier about to snap and reel them back in with kind words and an acknowledgement.

Normally, the ease with which he managed egos was inspiring. Now, watching him turn it on me so seamlessly only further rankled my nerves.

“I only worry for your health, sweetheart. If the illness comes back—”

“I’m fine,” I cut in tersely. “I’m sorry. I’ll take a dose today.”

“Is there a reason you haven’t been taking it?”

My thoughts flickered to a black-eyed woman in a darkened alley.

“I just... I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

“How did that jar even get in my fishing box?”

Because I’m planning to take our rowboat out and leave it at the bottom of the Sacred Sea once I work up the nerve.

“I brought the box in last week. The jar must have fallen in then.” I marshaled a casual smile. “I really need to get going or Teller and I will be late.”

His drawn-out exhale made it clear he was unconvinced by my act, but he released my wrist.

I was almost to the door when his voice rang out again.

“Diem?”

I winced and glanced over my shoulder with eyebrows raised.

“I love you.”

My temper dissolved at his gentle words. This generous, thoughtful man who had given up everything all those years ago for me and my mother—he was not the real reason for my anger. I tried desperately to remember that.

“Love you, too.” I paused, then added with a wink, “Sir.”

He gave a rumbling laugh and shooed me off. I grabbed my satchel and bounded out the front door before he could change his mind.

Our house was a simple little thing, tucked away on a marshy inlet that meandered west from the sea at the center of the atoll of Emarion. My father had built it entirely from scratch, wanting a quiet home far enough away from the prying eyes of town. Clearing the swampy vegetation had taken months, but over time, he and my mother had shaped it into the tranquil oasis it was now, a glimmering diamond in a puddle of mud.

This house had always been my safe harbor, filled with memories of sitting on the front porch creating tinctures with my mother, fishing on the

water with my father, and chasing Teller through the woods that wreathed the home like a protective shield.

But over the past few months, these walls had begun to feel hollow. Lacking.

“So he finally figured out you stopped taking the powder. What’s it been, a month?”

I shushed my brother, nervously confirming Father was out of earshot. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Teller rolled his eyes and joined me on the forest trail.

I eyed him warily. “You knew?”

“Of course I knew. You’ve been a different person since you stopped.”

“I have?”

“Yes,” he said, his tone suggesting the word was a gross understatement. “I’m surprised it took him this long to notice.”

We walked in silence for a few minutes, listening to the crunch of fallen twigs and dead autumn leaves under our boots, before I spoke again.

“Different how?”

“If I tell you, will you promise not to get mad at me for it?”

“No.”

He snorted. “There’s a perfect example.”

I stopped and turned toward him with a glare. “Explain.”

“You’re angry. Moody. Stomping around, snapping at simple questions, treating everyone like an enemy.”

He wasn’t wrong. Lately, I’d felt a growing outrage prodding me like a hot iron, the fuse of my temper trimmed alarmingly short.

At first, I’d attributed it to my mother’s absence, but she had been gone for months.

It was in the weeks since swearing off the flameroot that things had really changed. With my mind now clear and my emotions no longer blunted to a dull edge, the injustices of the world grated on me in a way I found more and more impossible to ignore.

The snide comments from Teller’s classmates. The whispered gossip of the townsfolk. The violence and cold callousness of the Descended guards.

My whole life, I’d tried to convince myself I didn’t care what others thought or did, but with the lifting of the fog, I was beginning to realize that I very much did care. And I was sick of pretending otherwise.

I frowned as we fell back into step on the well-worn path. “Are you going to lecture me about it now, too? You want me to go back to being quiet, obedient Diem?”

“You haven’t been quiet or obedient for a day in your life.” He nudged my side with his shoulder. “And I trust your judgment. You’re one of the best healers in the realm. Mother made sure of that. If you don’t think you need the flameroot, you know what you’re doing.”

I grumbled, though my chest warmed. “At least one member of my family trusts me.”

“Father trusts you. He’s just worried about you. We both are.”

“I’m fine, I swear. If the symptoms come back, I’ll start taking it again.” I sighed and hooked an arm through his, tugging him close. “And you’re right. I have been angrier lately. Though I’m not sure if it’s the flameroot or...” I waved a hand vaguely around me, motioning to the world beyond. “Everything.”

“I know.” His voice grew quiet. “Do you think we’ll ever see her again?”

I wanted to say yes. I wanted to assure him that all would be well and this was only a brief hiccup in our otherwise boring lives.

More than that, I wanted to believe it myself.

But Teller had always been the one person I could never lie to, even when the truth was too painful to bear.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “I thought I would sense in my heart somehow if she were really gone. And Father seems convinced she’s still out there. But for her to vanish without even saying goodbye or sending a letter...” I squeezed my eyes shut to fight off the dread seeping into my thoughts. “She’s always had her secrets, but this is unusual, even for her.”

“And your investigation turned up nothing?”

I stiffened. “It’s not *nothing*. I found out she’d been going to the palace more frequently the week before she disappeared. One of the royals was unwell, and they’d called on her almost every day. Maura’s been going in her place since then, but she swears she hasn’t seen or heard anything unusual.”

“What about that Descended man you saw her talking to?”

A memory flashed through my mind—dark features cut with a scar, piercing eyes, that enthralling voice. I saw his face every time I closed my eyes, heard his low timbre whispering in my ears when my mind wandered.

In the months since, I'd searched for some sign of him, hoping he might know something, anything, that could help me find her.

I'd made the mistake of asking a few of the townsfolk, but I saw the scorn in their eyes when I described my mother following a handsome Descended man into Paradise Row. Rumors that she had fallen pregnant out of wedlock and fled for shame spread like wildfire soon after.

The reminder of it brought my anger roaring back to the surface. In Mortal City, many naive mortal women got caught in the spell of charming Descended men, only to find themselves heartbroken and disgraced. But that would never, ever be my mother—not for a thousand reasons.

"I'm still looking for him," I responded tightly. "But I'm not giving up. I'll find her, Teller."

"I believe you. If anyone can, it's you."

Again we walked again in silence, the crushing weight of her absence making the air around us heavy and hard to breathe.

"You don't have to walk me to school, you know." Sharpness edged into Teller's normally mild voice, and I wondered if my newfound irritability had been rubbing off on him. "I'm not a child. If I were with the other mortals, I wouldn't even be in school anymore."

"What kind of sister would I be if I sent my favorite sibling—"

"Your only sibling."

"—my *smartest* sibling into the lion's den on his own? It's bad enough you're the only mortal at a Descended school, but you're also ten times more clever than any of those blue-eyed brats. And they know it. If they have half a brain, they'll sweep you up after you finish next year and send you across the sea to those fancy research institutes in Sophos."

"If they even let me finish," he mumbled.

"Why wouldn't they?"

He looked away, avoiding my gaze.

I grabbed his arm and forced him to face me. "Teller, what's going on?"

"Come on, D," he huffed. "You know the arrangement. Mother serves the Crown as the palace healer, and I get to attend the Descended school."

"And?"

"And she's no longer serving the Crown."

"Maura took her place. They've still got their healer, why would they care who it is?"

He shrugged, his dark brown eyes fixed on the horizon. “Maybe they don’t. But is Maura fine serving the palace without payment? She has her own wife and family to care for, Diem. I can’t keep asking her to do that for me.”

My shoulders sagged. I’d been so wrapped up in my own temper and self-pity, I hadn’t even thought about the ripple effect of Maura’s generosity.

Teller finally returned my stare, his features steeled with resolve. “Maybe this is for the best. I hate that place anyway, and with Mother gone, I should be working so I can—”

“No,” I interrupted. “If—*when*—she returns, she’ll have my head if I let you quit now.”

“But—”

“You only have one year left. Let me worry about it until then.”

“Diem—”

“I’m not letting you walk away from your chance to get out of this cesspool, Tel.”

“Diem, *listen*—”

A lighthearted voice interrupted our spat. “Haven’t you learned by now there’s no winning an argument against the great Diem Bellator?”

I smirked. Teller groaned.

“Thank you Henri, I’ve been telling him that for *years*,” I said to the shaggy-haired man swaggering toward us.

Henri flung an arm around my shoulders and grinned down at Teller. “Whatever it is, take my advice and accept defeat. She’s relentless—especially when it comes to you, kid.”

Teller bristled. “I’m not a kid. And this is none of your concern.”

I snaked my arm around Henri’s waist and squeezed his side in a silent plea to back off.

Teller was straddling the cusp of boyhood and manhood, and it had become a growing sore spot. Mortals finished school at fourteen and carved out paths for themselves shortly thereafter. I myself had done the same, beginning work with my mother as a healer six years prior. However, the prestigious Descended academy that Teller attended finished at eighteen, and the particularly bright would be invited to Sophos, Realm of Thought and Spark, to continue their learning well into their twenties.

At seventeen, Teller's mortal peers were already years into their adult lives, but his Descended classmates had yet to begin theirs. With a foot in both worlds, he was not a boy but not yet a man, and I knew he'd been struggling to find his place.

Henri's constant teasing didn't help. With no siblings of his own, Henri fancied himself an adopted big brother, an offer Teller had never quite warmed to.

Henri held his free hand up in mock surrender. "Sorry. Family business. I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Unlikely," I joked, though I shot him an appreciative look as we turned onto the main road leading into Mortal City.

"How's school?" he asked Teller. "Are our magical overlords treating you with kindness and respect?"

Teller wrinkled his nose at Henri's dripping sarcasm. "All they talk about is who will take over once the King dies. They're even taking bets on it. The man's on his deathbed, and they're circling like vultures."

"Deathbed?" I frowned. "The King is dying?"

"You haven't heard?" Teller's lips parted in an incredulous stare. "Diem, he's been sick for months. They say he's nearly gone now. He lays in bed and stares at the ceiling, waiting for the end."

"How sad," I murmured as I thought of the many patients I'd treated in similar states. Teller was still staring at me with a strange look, and I arched an eyebrow. "What?"

"You really didn't know?"

"How would I have known?"

"Because Mother was treating him."

"*Our* mother?" I blinked. "She was treating King Ulther?"

Henri matched my brother's odd expression. "What did you think she was doing up at the palace every day?"

I shook my head. "This doesn't make sense. If his condition is that serious, why not call in a Descended from Fortos? With their healing magic, they could do far more than a mortal healer could."

"You know Descended can't use their magic while they're outside of their home realm," Teller said.

"And you know as well as I do that the Crowns can get around any rule they want," I shot back, earning a loud grunt of agreement from Henri.

Teller shrugged. “Maybe it’s not something a magical healer can fix. My Law of the Crown professor says sometimes the Forging magic itself will decide it’s time for the Crown to change hands, even if they’re young and healthy.”

“If that’s the case, why not simply strike him dead?” I asked. “Letting the man waste away slowly for months seems needlessly cruel.”

“Maybe the magic is as corrupt and soulless as the people who wield it,” Henri muttered. I shivered at the coldness in his voice. He pulled me in tighter, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

Henri didn’t just dislike the Descended—he *despised* them. Some nights we would lay out by the water, staring at the stars, and he would tell me of his dream that one day Emarion would be free of the Descended and their magic, united into a single nation, as it had been so long ago. I had always dismissed it as a fantasy, but lately there had been a spark in his eyes when he spoke of it—a sense of certainty that day was coming, and that we would be alive to see it.

“Do the Descended really have no idea who the next Crown will be?” I asked.

“None,” Teller answered. “In theory, the magic chooses the most powerful Descended, but measuring their power is more art than science. Some of them can do flashy tricks, but their power drains quickly. Others can only do small things, but they can sustain it forever, even while they sleep.”

“Who’s the betting pool favorite?”

“Prince Luther, the King’s nephew. He’s incredibly powerful, no matter how you measure it. He’s one of the only Lumnos Descended that can wield both light magic and shadow magic.”

I felt Henri tense beside me, his gait faltering, though he said nothing. I shot him a questioning look. “Have you met him?”

His lips formed a tight line. “He comes into town on occasion. He likes to skulk around and gather information. No better than an Umbros spy, if you ask me.”

I looked to my brother. “Have *you* met him?”

“No, but his sister Lily is in my class. Princess Lilian, I mean. She’s... really nice.” If his splotchy, blushing cheeks hadn’t betrayed him, his casual use of her nickname would have.

“Really nice, huh?” I teased. “Is Lily also really... pretty?” My accusatory grin stretched from ear to ear.

He glared. “She’s Descended. They’re *all* really pretty.”

“Let me rephrase. Do I need to hunt Lily down and threaten to slip rosebane into her morning tea if she breaks my little brother’s heart?”

“By the Flames,” Teller hissed, his head whipping around to look for eavesdroppers. “Do you have a death wish? You can’t walk around threatening to murder members of the royal family.”

“I didn’t say I’d kill her.” I shrugged irreverently. “In the right dose, rosebane just makes you a very teeny tiny bit temporarily insane.”

“That’s not any better, Diem!”

“What? They used to call it *gods’ horn* because those who survived it claimed they could talk directly to the gods.” I couldn’t help my grin at my brother’s exasperated groan. “Just imagine, pretty Lily could have a nice chat with great grandmother Lumnos herself.”

“I need to leave before you two get me executed.” Teller broke off and headed for the ornate wrought-iron gate of the Descended academy. “Try not to plot any more royal assassinations in public, please.”

“We’ll take it under consideration,” I said cheerfully, waving goodbye.

Henri grinned. “No promises.”

Chapter Three

My insides twisted as I watched my brother chat with the guards, then disappear behind the ivy-laden walls.

His admission to the Descended academy had been bittersweet. His mind was far too exceptional to wither away on the hard life of manual labor that most mortal men in Lumnos were forced to endure. But his spending so much time around the Descended, forming so many relationships with them, seemed doomed to end badly.

Although our homeland of Lumnos, Realm of Light and Shadow, was one of the more mortal-friendly of the nine realms of Emarion, even here Teller's options would always be limited. The Descended school had told my brother as much, cautioning him that a superior education would be unlikely to change his fate in any meaningful way.

And gods forbid he fall in love. Though such dalliances weren't strictly outlawed, mortals and Lumnos Descended were forbidden from intermarrying, and any pregnancies between the two races were forcibly terminated and the mortal parent banned permanently from the realm. The harsh policy was put into place centuries ago to stem the dilution of Lumnos magic caused by breeding into new mortal bloodlines. Several of the realms enacted similar progeny laws after the deadly Blood War left the Descended acutely aware of the consequences of allowing their magic to weaken into embers.

Even if a Descended agreed to such a relationship, their prolonged lifespan often stretched for centuries, some for a millennium or more, while their mortal partner aged and died in the blink of an eye. If the object of Teller's affection was a member of the royal family, even a brief, childless fling would be out of the question.

Henri's thoughts must have mirrored my own, because his eyes were stormy as they lingered on the academy gates.

"If he gets caught up with a princess..."

“I know,” I said, sighing. “But Teller’s smart. He knows the consequences.”

Henri’s arm slid from my shoulders to my waist and dragged me up against him. “When it comes to matters of the heart, even smart men can make reckless decisions. Dangerous decisions.” His words were serious, but his caramel eyes glittered with something else as they dropped to my lips.

His warmth seeped through his lightweight clothing, heating my blood and quickening my pulse. “I thought you knew by now,” I purred as I leaned in closer, our noses grazing. “Reckless and dangerous is the Bellator family motto.”

His grip tightened around me. “Speaking of dangerous decisions...” He paused, the tip of his thumb tracing my jaw and burning a line down my flesh. “I have to make a delivery to Fortos tomorrow. Maybe you could join me?”

I stilled and looked down. “You know I can’t be away for that long. Maura needs me. Father needs me.”

He nudged my chin up until my eyes again met his. “Your father is an army commander who hunts wild beasts in his spare time. He does not need his adult daughter to play nursemaid. And Maura...” He shrugged, his smile going adorably crooked. “Fine, she probably does need you.”

I huffed a laugh, moving to pull away, but his arms held me tight.

“But so do I,” he continued, both hands moving to cup my face. “You’ve been working yourself to the bone for months, you deserve a break. We’ll only be gone two nights—surely Maura can spare you for that long.”

My better judgment warned me to say no. Maura already had more work than she could handle, and I knew exactly what would happen if Henri and I found ourselves alone on the road, free from the prying eyes of family and town gossips. As much as my body desired Henri’s touch, I wasn’t sure my grieving heart was ready to open itself back up again.

Although... going to Fortos could be a chance to look deeper into my mother’s disappearance. She had spent most of her life serving as a healer in the Emarion Army, and she was still close with some of her former colleagues there. If anyone outside of Lumnos had information on my mother’s plans, it would be them.

“Just talk to Maura,” Henri insisted. His mouth lightly brushed mine, our breaths mingling on each other’s lips. “Can’t hurt to ask, right?”

I drew a deep inhale, willing my blood to cool. My palms slid up his chest and slowly pushed him away until the brisk morning air washed away the feel of his warmth. “I’ll try.”

He beamed at me, and the carnal promise in his eyes had my core burning in response.

We continued walking together, Henri chattering away about the latest news from his work as a deliveryman. He, too, had followed in his parent’s footsteps, as his father handled mail for both the capital and Mortal City.

Henri’s father even had the honor of serving as the palace courier. Rarely were mortals given access to the inner workings of the royal family, but the Descended so deeply feared the temporary loss of magic they experienced when venturing outside of their home realm that they relied on mortals to deliver all but the most sensitive inter-realm messages.

Henri always returned from these trips with fascinating stories of life outside our insular village that filled me with no small amount of jealousy. Aside from the occasional trip with my parents, my own life kept me firmly rooted in Mortal City, the path laid out for me unlikely to ever lead anywhere more exciting.

Eventually, the red and gold canopy of the autumnal trees gave way to buildings, and the sprawling expanse of town opened up in front of us.

Mortal City. I smirked to myself at the absurdity of the name. There was nothing urban about our poor, forest-ensconced village. The collection of crumbling brick buildings and tin-roofed shacks could more accurately be called a slum.

It was the Descended who insisted that all mortal settlements use the same label, regardless of size or character. It mattered little to them that our communities once bore proud, meaningful names of their own. Names of great chieftains and monarchs, mighty clans or beloved figures, the Old Gods we’d once turned to for salvation—these names had all been stripped away with the rest of our mortal culture, our collective skin scraped bloody and raw.

As usual, the Descended claimed the erasure was in our best interests, a “symbolic unification” to assimilate our two races. I suspected it was really meant to serve as an ongoing threat that we mortals could be wiped away with the same ruthless efficiency our culture had been.

Henri said his goodbyes, and I headed for the modest stone building that served as the healers’ center. Maura was already inside, humming over

the clink of glass vials and stone tools as she sorted through our supply closet.

“Morning, Maura,” I chirped, slinging my pack onto a nearby table. “What adventures are we in for today?”

“Morning, dearie.” Maura waved in greeting without turning away from her work. “We need to check in on the Barnes family’s little one. Perhaps later you can show the trainees how to whip up a balm of cloudsbreath?”

“Of course.” I wrapped a rumpled linen apron around my hips and set to work on the usual morning tasks.

This building was as much a home to me as the cottage on the marsh. I’d grown up clinging to my mother’s hip here like a persistent shadow. By age ten, I could already create most of the tinctures that lined the shelves. Most trainees spent years apprenticing before they treated patients alone, but I obtained full healer status soon after finishing school. Under the tutelage of Maura and my mother, I’d become as skilled as any healer in the realm, despite my age.

There was one small, but crucial, gap in my competence—healing the Descended.

All Descended were gifted with quick-healing abilities that rendered them immune to most illnesses and injuries. For grave conditions, they could travel to Fortos, Realm of Force and Valor, for a visit to the powerful magical healers that served in the Emarion Army. As a result, the Descended rarely sought the aid of mortal healers.

There were, however, a few exceptions—children, whose healing powers developed at puberty with the rest of their magic, and a handful of rare poisons, the details of which I’d been forbidden from learning. My mother had even gone so far as to lock away the notes of her patient visits so I couldn’t study them later.

I’d learned early on that no amount of protesting would sway her decision to wall me off from the Descended world, in curious contradiction to how shrewdly she had negotiated to get Teller into the academy. I’d called out the double standard with great enthusiasm, but all my tears, screams, and slammed doors hadn’t made a dent.

You’re just going to have to trust me, my little warrior, Mother had assured me. *I know what I’m doing.*

My heart cracked at the memory. Six months—six long, lonely months since I'd last heard her voice.

Maura had taken on the Descended patients in her absence, but whatever my mother's concerns had been, it was clear Maura didn't share them. Whereas Mother had been steadfastly tight-lipped, Maura would return from calls to the palace or the sprawling mansions of Lumnos City breathlessly recounting every fantastical detail, which I'd gobbled up like a starving woman scrabbling for crumbs.

"Henri's making a visit to Fortos tomorrow," I said lightly as I swept a haybrush broom over the stone tile. "He's asked if I might come along."

"Oh, did he now?" Maura saw right through my feigned indifference. Her eyebrows wiggled as a wicked grin rose on her freckle-splattered face. "Will there be any chaperones on this trip?"

"Don't give me that look, Maura."

"Do there *need* to be any chaperones on this trip?"

"Maura!"

She poked at my hip and cackled. "You lovebirds looking to have some time alone?"

A rosy blush spread along my cheekbones. "We'll see."

"Don't be coy with me. I've known you since you were just a babe, tottering around this place in your knickers. You and that boy have been thick as molasses for nearly as long. Only an act of the gods could keep you two from falling in love."

My throat turned dry. "Love is a big word. We're taking it slow for now."

"Tell that to the besotted fool who hovers outside every afternoon staring at you with moons in his eyes until your shift ends."

"Oh, that's not love, he's just imagining me tottering around in my knickers."

I finally cracked a grin. I was long used to her teasing about my disastrous love life. I'd never been one to yearn for commitment—every time a boy had begun to look at me with something deeper than lust, I'd run as far and as fast as I could.

"If you're asking me if I can spare you for a few days, the answer is yes. You two go have your fun." Maura leaned into the storage cabinet and pulled out a small vial fill with a greenish liquid, then pressed it into my palm. "Just make sure he takes the contraceptive tonic first."

My face turned hot, and I swung the broom at her legs. She leapt away with a hoot of laughter that I returned with a glare—but I quietly pocketed the tonic nevertheless.

A few of the apprentice healers soon arrived for the morning shift. I was prattling away with them when the door to the center slammed open with a foreboding crack.

A tall young man burst into the room. He wore a surcoat of deep purple velvet embroidered with delicate silver swirls, and jeweled rings glittered along his knuckles. His boyish face was pale, his features strained as he scanned the room with fear-struck eyes.

Blue eyes.

A Descended.

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Chapter
Four

“A uralie—I’m looking for Auralie Bellator,” he wheezed, chest heaving for breath. “Where is she?”

The sound of my mother’s name sent a sharp swell of grief surging through me. “She... unavailable.”

“I was told to get Auralie Bellator. It’s urgent—you have to hurry!”

His hands trembled, eyes bulging so wide I could see the whites surrounding his bright cobalt irises.

“She isn’t here, but I’m sure we can help. Can you tell me what’s happened?”

“The palace... there’s been an accident—children are hurt. Several. Please—please come with me.”

Calm settled over my bones as my training kicked in. “How many children?” I fired off. “Ages? Type of injuries? How severe?”

“Th-three children. Two are young—under ten, I think. The other is older, maybe sixteen. A stone roof collapsed. Please, *hurry!*”

Immediately, my eyes found Maura. An unspoken understanding passed between us, honed from years of working side by side. We nodded silently and each reached for a satchel, packing them with gauze, splints, and jars of various concoctions.

“You stay,” she said. “I’ll take some trainees with me.”

“I’m coming with you,” I cut in. “You can’t treat three injured children on your own.”

“Diem, it’s the palace.”

“They’re *children*, Maura.”

She hesitated, eying me nervously. “But your mother...”

“Isn’t here.” The words came out more bitter than I’d intended. “You can take it up with her when she comes back.”

Maura pursed her lips, but said nothing more.

“What’s your name?” I asked, turning back to the Descended boy, who looked as if he might empty the contents of his stomach at any moment. He seemed barely more than a child himself.

“El... Elric.”

“Elric, I’m Diem. This is Maura. Lana will be coming, as well.” I paused and motioned to one of the more experienced trainees, a petite blonde who was near me in age but had not yet advanced to full healer status. I walked over and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

I realized with a start that this was the first time I’d ever touched a Descended—certainly the closest I’d ever been to one. To feel his body heat under my hand, feel the thump of his racing pulse...

I’d been so sheltered from them, my perceptions fed on a strict diet of myth and gossip, that I had imagined them to be something monstrous. Cold-blooded, soulless, hypnotic. Ethereal beauty and wicked to the core.

But this boy, pale and shaking with terror, seemed utterly... *normal*.

“Thank you,” he breathed. Some of the tension in his features relaxed at my touch.

We finished gathering the supplies, and the four of us scurried outside and onto the long dirt path that led to the royal palace. Elric’s muscles twitched as we walked, and I could tell it was taking all of his self-control to keep from dragging us into a dead sprint. His eyes kept darting to Maura’s cane—his face twisting into a wince with each of her slow, limping steps.

“It was my fault,” he said in a shaky whisper, too low for anyone but me to hear. “I was showing off my magic to the children, and it hit the ceiling, and it...” His voice broke.

I grabbed his hand and gave it a light squeeze. “Accidents happen, Elric.”

He nodded, but despair was stark on his face.

“When my brother and I were little,” I said, “I stuck some carrion in his bag. I only meant to tease him with the smell, but on our way to school a wild boar caught the scent and attacked him. Put a tusk right through his thigh. We were all alone, and I thought he was going to die right in front of me, all for a foolish joke.” My gut clenched at the memory of my brother’s bleeding body in my arms as I screamed for help. “Then I was scared that,

even if he did survive, he'd hate me forever. And I was convinced my parents would never forgive me either way."

Elric's anguish dimmed at the momentary distraction. "Did he survive?"

"He did."

"Did he forgive you?"

I groaned. "He got to stay home from school for weeks and eat all the sweets he wanted. It was the greatest time of his life. He *thanked* me."

A smile tugged at his lips. "And your parents?"

"They weren't happy. But they knew my heart. They knew I'd never hurt my brother on purpose." I squeezed his hand again. "That's what family is all about. Standing by each other's side, even when you make the worst mistakes."

He said nothing, but the storm broke on his expression, a tentative hope cutting through the dark clouds of guilt.

Eventually we reached an unmarked curve on the road. Elric peered into the trees nervously, then turned and studied the three of us, biting his lip as he appeared to process some unspoken dilemma. "Healers can't say anything about what they see, right? Isn't that the rule?"

Maura nodded. "That's right, dearie. It's all confidential."

He exhaled deep. "I know a shortcut that will get us there faster. But you can't tell anyone about this—ever."

Without awaiting our response, he bolted off the path and into the forest. Maura, Lana, and I shared a confused look before hurrying to follow behind him.

After a few minutes of clambering over snarled roots and ducking under low-hanging branches, an enormous wall covered in a thick spread of leafy vines came into view. The wall was camouflaged so seamlessly into the surrounding vegetation that, had it been nighttime, I might have crashed right into it.

Elric felt around on the wall, mumbling quietly to himself as he searched, before yelping with success. "Here! Follow me—quickly."

He pulled back on the foliage to reveal a hole barely large enough to pass through. He peered through the opening and glanced around before motioning for us to go on.

Elric offered out his arms to carry Maura, and I had to bite back a smile as she smacked him away with a stern scowl. Born with one severely

bowed leg, Maura had never let it hold her back, and after all these years, she certainly wouldn't start now.

One by one we crawled through, our satchels clinking as they dragged along the ground. Another interior wall of fluffy boxwood hedges blocked our view, but as I breathed in the sweet fragrance of florals and fresh herbs, I realized we'd entered a large garden.

A giant mass of granite lay tossed to the side. As if it weighed barely more than air, Elric lifted the stone block with a single hand, drawing the curtain of ropey vines and slipping it back into place.

I nearly choked. The stone had to weigh twice as much as I did. I knew Descended outmatched mortals on strength and speed, but I'd never seen a display like that.

Elric beckoned us forward. He crept along the wall, staying close to the hedges, occasionally peeking above to see if we'd been spotted. We turned a corner, and my breath caught in my throat.

From Mortal City, I'd only ever seen faint glimpses of the royal palace, a crown of spires peeking over the trees to keep watch on us from afar. I'd always imagined it to be some imposing stone fortress, a stronghold as fearsome and impenetrable as the Descended themselves.

What stood before me was something else entirely.

It seemed to be made not of stone or wood, but of light itself. Its structure rose and fell in sharp, delicate waves, the walls radiating an ethereal shimmer, like starlight given physical form. A mass of towering steeples disappeared into the sky, visible only by the faint sheen of reflected blue that made it difficult to comprehend the full sprawl of the building's massive footprint. As clouds passed over the morning sun, the glistening facade gently wavered like a reflection off the Sacred Sea. Far from frightening or imposing—it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

"Diem!" Maura's voice drifted from a distance.

I tore my eyes away, only to realize I'd been left abandoned in my stupor. Up ahead, Lana and Maura had followed Elric out of the garden and up marble steps to a set of giant arched doors.

"Stay close," Maura hissed and snatched me by the arm as I jogged to join them. "They're jumpy whenever mortals are around. Don't go wandering off, understand?"

I could only nod, still dumbstruck by the grandeur surrounding me.

The splendor didn't end when I stepped past the threshold.

If Mortal City was a gloomy array of stone and dirt, this place was an artist's palette. Buttery yellows, flaming reds and oranges, watery blues, mossy greens—every hue imaginable painted the interior, woven into plush, tassel-edged rugs and tapestries that loomed larger than my house. Lifelike paintings in gilded frames adorned the walls, each one lit by a hovering orb of pale blue light.

Maura yanked me alongside her as we followed Elric down a long corridor lined with vaulted, hand-carved wooden trusses.

The cries of pained young voices echoed through the rafters. A group of Descended, dressed in an eye-popping kaleidoscope of colorful silks, had gathered at the end of the hallway. A few turned their attention to us, their expressions guarded.

"I brought the healers," Elric shouted, pushing his way through the throng. "Move! *Move!*"

The crowd parted and a pathway formed, revealing an airy, glass-walled sunroom filled with rubble, the air still cloudy with particles of fallen stone.

Several long tables overflowed with fruits, pastries, and steaming dishes whose aromas wafted through the chamber. A table in the center lay in disarray, its edges jutting with splintered wood where it had been snapped in half by falling debris, while a hole in the ceiling opened up to the level above.

By the Flames. It was a miracle no one had died.

"Which child is the most critical?" Maura asked.

Elric waved over a pretty, golden-haired woman whose face was splotted with dried tears. After an exchange of words, he turned back to us.

"The youngest." With a trembling hand, he gestured to a small boy lying motionless nearby. Not missing a beat, Maura broke off toward the child, leaving me and Lana behind. "The oldest, she's hurt badly as well."

I turned to Lana. "I'll tend to her. You check the other, then help Maura." She nodded and hurried off.

As Elric led me away, something hit me about the air in the room—something I couldn't quite put my finger on. It felt heavy in an oddly sentient way, like the heft of it pressed against my skin, exploring me, *assessing* me.

"Do you feel that?" I asked Elric.

My words fell on unhearing ears, his attention consumed by the whimpering girl at his feet.

She was cradled in the arms of a man kneeling among the wreckage, his long, ebony hair fallen free from its binding and obscuring his features. He gently stroked the girl's cheek as he murmured to her in a hushed, soothing tone.

She stared up at him, her expression twisted in pain. Blood caked her temple, and her arm lay against her chest at an unnatural angle. Her brunette hair was woven into a labyrinth of tiny braids across the crown of her head, now matted with blood and dusted with shattered stone.

I kneeled at her side. She flinched as I gingerly touched her arm, and I felt the scorch of the man's glare snap to my face.

"Hello," I said to her softly, conjuring up my well-practiced calm. "I'm a healer, and I'm here to help you. Can you tell me what hurts?"

"Isn't it obvious?" the man snarled. I ignored him, my gaze locked on my patient.

"My arm," she answered. Her voice was quiet but smooth, her eyes bright, her breathing steady—all good signs.

"Can you move it?" I asked.

"No," the man shot back on her behalf. "It's clearly broken."

The presence I'd felt in the air seemed to engulf him and pulse in time with the flares of his anger. The heady aura sent something flickering beneath my ribs, but I refused to let my focus waver. I had years of experience working around the overbearing family members of my patients. Just because this one happened to be a Descended—a furious, heavily muscled, *royal* Descended—would not keep me from doing my job.

"Can you move it?" I repeated to her.

The girl shook her head weakly, wincing with the effort.

From her age, I guessed that her healing abilities had already developed and would be able to repair the injury soon, but I suspected I'd need to set the bone first to ensure it healed correctly.

I dug in my satchel and retrieved a large stoppered flask. "I'm going to give you something to help with the pain. Can you tell me your name?"

"I—I'm Lily," she stammered.

"You may call her Princess Lilian," the man corrected, still boring a hole through me with his stare.

Realization barreled into me. Lily—*Princess Lilian*. The very same girl my brother had blushed at the mention of.

My head tilted as I assessed her with new eyes.

“Nice to meet you, *Lily*,” I said pointedly. A low growl rumbled from the man’s throat. “My name is Diem. Can you take a big drink of this for me?”

Lily’s brow furrowed as she eyed the vessel. “What is it?”

My lips quirked up. Questioning mystery liquids from strangers—smart girl. No wonder Teller liked her.

“Silverworm. It’s made from a lovely white flower that grows near the shore.” I brought my face close to hers and winked. “Don’t worry, there’s no real worms in it.”

She gave the tiniest of smiles, and the man’s tightly coiled posture eased. As she tilted the flask to her lips, I scanned the rest of her petite body for wounds, spotting only a gash on her head that was already beginning to clot.

I tucked away a stray lock of hair that had fallen over her face. “Soon you’re going to feel much better, Lily. The silverworm needs a few minutes to take effect, but I’ll wait here with you until then, is that alright?”

She nodded again. A tear escaped from her midnight blue eyes, leaving a wet track along her dust-coated cheek. Her lower lip began to tremble. She turned her face to the man whose arms still held her close. “I’m s-sorry. I thought I could get the ch-children out of the way before it fell.”

He cupped a hand to her face, brushing away her tear with his thumb. “You did a brave thing in service of another. Don’t ever apologize for that. I’m very proud of you.”

The man’s gentle, soothing voice was a far cry from the severe tone he’d used with me. I finally dared to bring my eyes up to study his face.

Instantly, every thought flushed from my head.

Olive skin. Blue-grey eyes. A long, uneven scar.

Him.

It was *him*.



FOR MONTHS, I'd scoured Mortal City for clues that might lead me to the Descended man I'd seen arguing with my mother the day she disappeared. And now, here he was, inches away—the one person with the answers I sought. The man whose secrets my mother had used against him.

The man who might have killed her to keep them quiet.

My eyes darted to the jeweled hilt rising over his shoulder, the very same one he'd worn that day in the alley. I blinked a few times and shook my head, as if the movement might reveal this was all some vicious illusion.

He was *here*. Real. Close—so close.

He must have noticed my gawking, because his attention flicked up and met my stare.

Perhaps it *was* an illusion, but for a heartbeat, a glimmer of recognition seemed to tear across his face—the slightest widening of his eyes, an abrupt flare of his nostrils.

It was gone in a second, locked behind a stony mask.

I immediately looked away and busied my hands in my bag.

"Have we met?" he asked, his tone turning clipped once more.

"No," I said quickly. Too quickly.

"You said your name was Diem?" Lily asked. "Are you Teller's sister?"

I tensed, then nodded.

"We go to school together. He told me about you."

I debated how badly Teller would murder me for what I said next. "He told me about you, too."

Her cheeks flushed scarlet. "He did?"

"He said you've been very kind to him. I'd hoped to thank you personally for that. Maybe our meeting here today was fate."

"A blessing from the Kindred," she murmured reverently.

My lips pressed tight as I averted my gaze. Mortals did not particularly view anything from the Descended gods as a blessing, but here in the heart of the royal palace, I didn't dare admit that out loud.

"Your brother is the mortal that attends the Descended school?" the man asked, his voice sounding oddly strained.

I nodded without looking at him. His attention lingered on me as I fussed with a jar of salve in feigned distraction.

Mercifully, Lily intervened. “Uncle Ulther gave him special permission to attend. He’s the smartest boy in class. He would be wasted at the mortal school.” She caught herself at the end and cringed in my direction. “That is—I didn’t mean—I’m sure the mortal schools are very good, I only meant—”

I gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s alright. I agree with you completely.”

She let out a deep exhale in relief.

I wondered at the relationship between Lily and the man across from me. He cared for her like a father, though he appeared only a few years older than me. Then again, the Descended matured like humans only until adulthood, at which point their aging slowed to a crawl. He could just as easily be 25 as 250. But his gruff protectiveness seemed something other than parental—a doting older brother, perhaps?

“I’m sorry about your mother,” Lily said. “I hope she’s found soon.”

The man went deathly still. Again I felt the weight of his focus, and this time, it took all my effort not to meet it with a glare of my own.

He knew.

Somehow, I felt certain—he knew what happened to my mother. He *had* to know.

An inferno kindled deep in my chest. Anger and accusation seized my throat and squeezed until I flinched. My muscles trembled with the urge to lunge at him and demand the answers locked inside his head.

Fight.

The *voice*, the same one that had hounded me this morning in the kitchen with my father, clanged through my head like a clocktower bell.

Or perhaps a death knell.

My fingers tightened around the flask, knuckles blanching. “How does your arm feel?” I gritted out.

“I can’t feel anything—does that mean it’s working?”

I applied pressure to her arm, gradually moving closer to where her flesh had begun to redden and swell. She gave no reaction. “Good. Now I’m going to set the bone. It won’t hurt, but you might feel a little discomfort.”

Remnants of my ire still throbbed between my temples. I rolled my shoulders back and tried to settle myself through a few shaky breaths.

Fight.

I clenched my jaw and channeled the energy coursing through my blood into my hands as I gripped her delicate shoulder. “Ready?”

“Wait,” the man interrupted. “Shouldn’t I do this?”

“Are *you* the healer?” I shot back. I refused to look at him for fear that his condescending expression might make me lose the fraying control I had on my temper. How dare he suggest I need his help to do my job? “Lily, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and count to three.”

Lily eyed my hands nervously for a moment, then her eyelids fluttered closed. Her chest rose once, then fell.

“One... two...”

The man held up a hand. “Are you sure I shouldn’t—”

I snapped her arm into place with a sickening crack.

Lily gasped and recoiled away from me. The man tucked her snug against his chest. “You’re safe,” he assured her, his tone once again gentle.

“You did perfectly, Lily,” I said. “That was the only scary part—the rest is easy.” I coaxed her out of his arms and began to tend to her, wrapping her arm into a makeshift sling and cleaning the wound at her temple.

The man continued to assess me with unnerving intensity. His glittering eyes watched my every movement like a hawk on the hunt.

When I finished, I gestured for Lily to stand. I realized with frustration that I had no idea how long her arm would need to stay in place before the girl’s Descended gifts would heal the bone. That was precisely the kind of information my mother had ensured that I never learned—but my pride wouldn’t allow me to admit that in front of this man, especially not after he’d already questioned my skills.

I started to excuse myself to consult with Maura when I noticed Lily swaying on her feet. Her face was drained of color, her eyes now cloudy and glazed.

“Lily?” I asked slowly. “Are you—”

Her eyes rolled back into her head. With a short, rattling breath, she collapsed into the man’s arms, and her body went still.

Chapter
Five

“**L**ily!” the man shouted. His sharp panic carved through me like a scalpel. He gripped the back of her head as her body slumped to the ground. “Something’s wrong. Help her, please!”

I’d missed something—something crucial.

In my mind, the world went quiet. Sounds hushed, lights dimmed, the room faded to black. I saw nothing beyond the girl lying unconscious in front of me.

I dropped to my knees, my hands moving as if by their own free will. Suddenly I was shoving the man away, ripping off his protective grip and checking her pulse, her eyes, her breath. My palms roamed over her clothes in frantic search for signs of injury.

Then I saw it.

A large pool of crimson forming beneath her lower back. It had been hidden by her body, the liquid covertly absorbing into her thick navy gown.

I pulled my dagger from its sheath and sliced at her clothing until it fell away from her skin. Shouts of protest rang out from what felt like miles away, barely audible to my ears.

A twisted metal shard, snapped off from a fallen chandelier, protruded from her back. The pain from her arm must have overwhelmed her for her to not feel an injury this severe.

So much blood—too much blood—had already puddled on the floor. I pulled a jar from my bag and forced a scoop of the mixture under Lily’s tongue, offering a silent prayer to whatever gods were listening that the clotting potion would absorb quickly enough to make a difference.

I took a sharp breath before yanking the hunk of metal from her back. It gave way with a wet, nauseating squelch.

Instantly, a river of scarlet began to ooze. I grabbed gauze from my pack and pressed it to the wound, acutely focused on the quickness with

which the snowy fabric faded to pink, then red, then dark maroon. I packed more gauze as the dressing bled through.

Again. And again. And again.

Too much blood.

I shifted her body to spare a glance at her face. Her lips had gone blue, her skin ashen and clammy.

“Come on, Lily,” I growled beneath my breath.

I should have seen this. I’d missed the signs, too wrapped up in my own thoughts while an innocent girl had been bleeding out right in front of me.

I thought of Teller and the way his eyes lit up when he talked about her. *She’s really nice*, he’d said. So few in this miserable world had ever been *nice* to him. If she died at my hands...

No. I wouldn’t allow it.

I pressed harder on the wound and leaned down until my lips grazed Lily’s ear. I thought of the *voice*, whose silent commands had haunted my thoughts these past weeks.

“Fight,” I demanded, willing every shred of dominance I possessed into the order. “I need you to *fight*, Lily. This is not your time.”

Fight, the *voice* inside me echoed.

Again, a strange feeling stirred in my chest. My hands tingled with a sensation that was at once freezing cold and scorching hot. It was almost painful, but I didn’t dare pull away.

A soft glow spilled from beneath the blood-soaked gauze at my palms. On some instinct I couldn’t understand, I hunched my body over hers to hide it.

Was this Lily’s Descended magic taking effect? It had to be—didn’t it?

“Yes,” I whispered. “Fight, Lily. *Fight*.”

The light beneath my hand flared blindingly bright—silver, like moonlight.

Lily’s eyes flew open.

Her chest swelled with a gasp as she jolted upright. Her lips were miraculously pink, her sapphire eyes sparkling.

We stared at each other for an enduring moment, blinking and wordless. As the world around me materialized back into view, I became acutely aware that every face in the room was turned our direction. I looked down at the injury and carefully peeled back the gauze.

My eyes went wide.

The wound was gone. Not closed—not healing.

Gone.

As if it had never happened.

I pulled off the dressing completely, but there was nothing. Not even a scratch.

Without fully knowing why, I clamped the gauze back down to hide the pristine skin.

“H-how do you feel?” I stammered.

Lily’s dumbstruck expression matched my own. “Good, I think. What... what happened?”

I shook my head, struggling to form words. “You were... bleeding. But you—you’re alright. It’s alright now.”

A crowd of Descended surged around us. Their hands scrambled for Lily, stroking her hair, her arms, cooing words of reassurance and murmuring in disbelief. I fell back, confused and lightheaded.

My gaze dropped to my scarlet-drenched hands. The wound had been real. There had been so much blood—enough of it that I had known, in the pit of my soul, the metal fragment had taken out something vital, something no mortal healer could fix. Was their healing ability that strong?

The Descended’s fussing grew louder, bleating out praises to their ancestral goddess.

I stumbled to my feet, lurching backward until I slammed into a firm body. I whipped around and locked eyes with Elric.

“That was incredible,” he gushed. He looked at me in awe, as if *I* had been the one to save her. “Did you—”

“Is there somewhere I can wash up?” I rasped. My lungs struggled to pull in breath, my body overwhelmed by a tempest of warring emotions.

He recoiled at the sight of my bloody, shaking hands. “Um... yes, of course.” He led me to the hallway and pointed. “Last door on the right.”

I gave a jerky nod in thanks and staggered forward as the palace spun wildly around me. Halfway down the corridor, my knees wobbled, threatening to give. I sagged against a nearby wall and closed my eyes.

I felt weightless in the worst of ways—my stomach falling, tumbling through the air. I could still sense the phantom tingling in my palms, the silvery glow that was somehow cold and hot, ice and fire. The echoes of the *voice* lingered in my thoughts, still goading at my temper.

After a few long, torturous minutes, my weight settled back into my feet. My breath steadied, my pulse no longer a thunderous gallop.

I pushed off the wall and turned for the washroom when an immense energy enveloped me in its weight. A firm hand clasped around my elbow and jerked me back, bringing me face to face with the mystery man who'd been at Lily's side.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

For a moment, I couldn't move. He was so much closer than he'd been before. Close enough to notice the square set of his jaw, the sweeping cliffs of his cheekbones, his nose—straight as a broadsword's blade. Close enough to smell the cedar and leather of his woodsy musk. Close enough to see that his icy eyes, stark against his bronzed skin, weren't just a static blue—they *moved*, illuminated by a churning swirl of light and veins of shadow.

Gods, he's beautiful.

I scowled at the traitorous thought. I looked down to where he gripped me, his skin strikingly hot against my own.

"If you value that hand, you'd best remove it from my arm," I warned.

His gaze dragged over me. I could practically hear his thoughts as he assessed me—my height, my build, my daggers—dismissing the idea that I offered any real threat. The arrogance of it almost made me smile. I had been underestimated by proud men before—always to their downfall.

"Hand," I snapped. "*Off.*" I angled my body to conceal my palm as it inched to the hilt of my blade.

He held my stare for a few tense seconds, eyes sparking with some inscrutable reaction, before finally letting me go.

"How did you do that—with Lily?" he asked, his tone deceptively soft.

"I'm a healer. It's my job."

He stepped forward, and I stepped back.

"Your eyes—"

"I'm not Descended," I interrupted, knowing all too well where this was headed. The rehearsed explanation fell off my tongue like a reflex. "I was born with brown eyes. Lost the color in a childhood illness. There's plenty in town who can vouch for it."

"The light you made back there..."

"That was Lily. I did nothing. I'm a mortal."

He looked unconvinced, scanning my face in search of some answer I couldn't provide.

Here he was, finally standing before me, the man I'd been searching for months to find. My lips parted with the urge to ask him about my mother, but some gut instinct held my tongue.

I couldn't shake the feeling that if I brought this man into my life, it would open a door I could never again close. And judging from the knife-blade edge to his voice and the suffocating intensity of his presence, this was not a man I wanted wrapped up in my world. If he'd been willing to kill my mother to keep her silent, what might he do to the rest of my family if he believed we knew his secrets, too?

He glanced over his shoulder at the empty corridor, then dropped his voice to a whisper. "If you're a half-mortal..."

"I'm not."

A crease formed between his brows. "Your father—he hails from Fortos?"

My thoughts crashed in a jumbled frenzy. *How could he have...? Does he mean the Commander, or does he mean...? Is it possible he knows...?*

My expression seemed enough of an answer for him. He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "Wonderful," he mumbled.

"What—how did you—"

"You shouldn't be here." He jerked his chin toward my daggers. "*Mortals* aren't permitted to carry weapons in the palace." He said the word pointedly, drawing it out like some unpleasant inside joke.

My temper flared anew. The Descended could kill us with a twist of their fingers—but we were the threat?

"What's the problem?" I bit back. "Scared of a little mortal woman?"

"Hardly." His tone was emotionless, matter-of-fact. "Mortal or not, you'd be dead before that dagger left its sheath."

For a foolish heartbeat, I considered putting his claim to the test.

"Why does it matter then? I thought mortal weapons couldn't pierce your skin."

"They can't—except for the children." Immediately his features tightened, as if chastising himself for revealing such a weakness.

"You think I would hurt a *child*?" I hissed.

He opened his mouth to respond but fell silent as I stormed forward, not stopping until my face was so close, the warmth of his breath fell on my lips. I poked my blood-coated finger into the solid wall of his chest, getting a small thrill of satisfaction as his eyes grew large in surprise.

“If I wanted to hurt those children, I would have let your darling Princess Lilian bleed to death. We *mortals* could have stayed home and let all three of those children meet their ends. Instead, we saved them—and this is how you thank us?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but he said nothing.

My lip curled. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to wash up. Seems I made a mess while saving *your* people.” I whipped on my heel and stalked away.

I waited until I was in the washroom and heard the soft click of the lock sliding into place before I slumped to the ground and burst into tears.

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Chapter

Six

I let out a choked laugh at the miserable picture I made, covered in blood and weeping on the floor of the most extravagant room I'd ever set foot in.

The washroom was half the size of my family's home, its domed ceiling hand-painted with the image of a swirling evening sky. Light twinkled through the stars that dotted the expanse of sapphire and obsidian whorls, casting a dappled glow across my body.

In an alcove, a circle of solid gold washbasins surrounded a fountain of the goddess Lumnos emerging from a bubbling pond. Rows of cut crystal jars containing soaps and perfumes lined shelves along the wall. There was even a hearth, still aglow with the embers of a dying fire, warming a pyramid of soft, fluffy towels.

My eyes dropped to the dark marble floor, its white and gold veins swirling around a trail of bloody smears that led directly to me. "Great," I muttered. "Just perfect."

I wiped away a tear with the back of my hand. I wasn't even sure why, exactly, I was crying. Maybe it was the innocent girl I'd almost killed with my incompetence. Maybe it was the way that insufferable Descended man had looked at me like I was merely a bug to be crushed beneath his heel.

Or maybe I was just a daughter who missed her mother.

Seeing him had taken me right back to that cursed afternoon. That was the last day I'd seen the crinkle of her eyes, heard the pealing bell of her laugh, felt the warmth of our linked arms as we walked together into town.

Until now, I hadn't allowed myself to accept she might truly be gone. For my family's sake, I had always played along with the pretense that she was alive somewhere and would eventually come home.

But sitting here, in the royal palace, surrounded by Descended—the very situation my mother had spent a lifetime trying to keep me away from—felt like the turning of a page.

A goodbye.

Life after Auralie Bellator.

Five minutes, I conceded. *You get five minutes to feel sorry for yourself. Then you get up, and you get back to work.*

I tilted my head back against the cold stone wall and closed my eyes. With a shuddering breath, six months of pent-up grief crashed into my shattered heart.



LANA and I returned to the center while Maura stayed behind to check in on the elder royal my mother had been caring for, who I now knew to be the King of Lumnos.

To my relief, all three of the injured children survived and would fully recover. Only Elric had bothered to thank us for ensuring such a happy outcome. The rest of the Descended had slipped away without so much as a glance.

I didn't see the mystery man again after our odd encounter outside the washroom. I was still second-guessing my decision not to ask him about my mother. I wondered now if I'd ever get another chance.

On our way back to town, I caught my first-ever glance of Lumnos City. Though mortals were, in theory, permitted to live there, none could afford to do so. Even the most modest homes were grandiose, sprawling estates adorned with columns and leafy terraces, the light from glittering chandeliers warming oversized windows. We caught the occasional scent of fresh-baked bread, grilled spiced meats, and bouquets of fragrant florals—a far cry from the pungent odors of our mortal village.

How strange, to live my whole life only a brief distance from such breathless excess, and yet be entirely disconnected from it.

That's not to say that I was *completely* unsophisticated. I'd made the occasional visit to the bustling ports of Meros, Realm of Sea and Sky, as well as to Fortos, Realm of Force and Valor, our realm's nearest neighbor to the south. My parents had met there while they were both serving in the Emarion Army. Though led by the Fortos King, the army's ranks included mortals and Descended from every realm, and it could be summoned by any of the Crowns if a conflict went beyond what the realm's own internal Royal Guard could handle. Our family visited the army's headquarters in

Fortos often, Father to catch up with old friends and Mother to meet with the well-trained, well-stocked army healers.

Further south lay Faunos, Realm of Beast and Brute, home of Descended who were rumored to be more animal than human. Mortals were forbidden in Faunos unless passing through on the Ring Road leading to Arboros, Realm of Root and Thorn. With its rich vegetation, Arboros supplied many of the medicinal plants we used at the center. I occasionally accompanied my mother on her annual visit there to restock our more difficult-to-find ingredients.

Our realm's northern neighbor Montios, Realm of Stone and Ice, was technically forbidden to mortals, though Henri and I once covertly slipped across the border to catch a glimpse of its stunning snow-capped lavender mountains. We had even spotted a distant band of Montios's secretive nomadic Descended tucked away in a cave amongst the rocky terrain.

In fact, there were only three realms whose soil I'd never touched.

Sophos, Realm of Thought and Spark, was open to mortals by invitation only. If Teller earned a spot at one of its lauded universities, only then would I have a chance to visit their legendary city of innovation and see its cloud-scraping buildings and infinite libraries.

The sun-scorched southern deserts of Ignios, Realm of Sand and Flame, were completely off-limits to mortals—even travel along the Ring Road meant certain death. Not that I had any interest in visiting that harsh, wretched place.

Finally, there was Umbros, Realm of Mind and Secret. Though Umbros was the only place where mortals and Descended from all realms were welcome without restriction, the career paths they might find were less than savory: assassins, spies, courtesans, opium dealers, and the like. If Meros was the waypoint for the inter-realm trade of legitimate wares, Umbros was its sneaky evil twin.

Umbros was a haven of darkness and sin, tolerated by the other realms only for fear of its ruthless Queen. She was old and, according to rumor, immensely powerful. Following the Blood War, she had ordered the slaughter of all but one hundred of the Umbros Descended in order to keep her own magic undiluted and strong.

Although the mere thought of Umbros sent chills down my spine, some wild, adventurous part of me stirred at the prospect of exploring its wicked secrets.

My afternoon duties took me on a tour of Mortal City as I left to make house calls to a number of poor families. By the time I returned to the healers' center, day had melted into evening and the trainees had departed for the night, leaving Maura and I alone in the empty quiet. Maura scribbled the day's notes into our records while I finished bottling a new batch of willowmoss salve.

"Was everything alright this morning at the palace?" Maura called out. "There seemed to be some excitement with the Princess."

"Nothing I couldn't handle," I answered quickly, shame still gnawing at me for having overlooked the girl's wound. "The Descended were not what I expected."

"What do you mean?"

I paused my work. "They seemed almost... mortal."

"Well they were born of both the Kindred and mortals. Much as they may deny it, mortal blood will forever run in their veins. What did you expect them to be like?"

I shrugged. "Empty. Emotionless."

"They can be, sometimes. But I suppose fear for a wounded child is universal. Even the wildest beasts go mad when their young are in danger."

The panicked voice of the mystery man calling for help as Lily crumpled in his arms played again and again in my ears. To me, he'd been nothing but stiff and condescending. But to this girl, to Lily... I could still vividly picture his gentle caress to wipe away her tears as he'd told her how proud he was.

If you'd asked me yesterday, I would have denied them capable of any kind of love. But what I'd seen today...

"That reminds me," Maura said, "the Prince came by this afternoon while you were out. He asked me to give you his thanks."

I frowned. "You mean Elric? He's a prince?"

"No, not Elric. Prince Luther."

I went still.

"Was Prince Luther at the palace this morning?"

"You really don't know the royals at all, do you?" Maura grinned. "Diem, you were sitting right beside him. He was the one holding his sister, Princess Lilian. They're the King's niece and nephew."

Oh, gods. *Oh, gods.*

The man I'd been searching for all this time was Prince Luther.

Teller's-crush's-older-brother Luther.

Man-whose-hand-I-threatened-to-slice-off Luther.

Soon-to-be-King-of-Lumnos Luther.

I slumped into the nearest chair. This was not good. Very *not good*.

Maura took one look at my distress and howled with laughter. "Oh dearie, not you, too. I already have to put up with the trainees turning into giggling featherbrains every time 'handsome Prince Luther' is around. I can't have you swooning after him as well."

My shock twisted into a glare. "I wouldn't swoon over that insufferable beast if he were the last man in Emarion."

Maura blinked, then doubled over, hooting even harder. "What did he say to earn *that* distinction?"

"Have you ever talked to the man? He's horrid. Nothing but ego." I absently touched my elbow where he'd grabbed me. If I thought about it hard enough, I could still feel the burn of his fingers on my skin. Not that I was thinking about it at all. "He tried to tell me how to do my own work."

"What do you mean?"

"The girl, Lily—her arm was broken, and I needed to set it. He had the nerve to try to stop me. He acted like it was *his* job."

Maura's chuckling abruptly stopped. "And you didn't let him?"

"Do you know how many broken bones I've set, Maura? I could do it in my sleep. Blindfolded."

"Yes, but the girl was a Descended."

"So?"

She gave me a curious look. "So how did you set it?"

"Oh, you know, with a hammer, a rope, a shot of whiskey—"

"I'm serious, Diem." Maura stood and walked over to me. Her face was uncharacteristically solemn. "Did another Descended help you?"

"I didn't need help. I took care of it like any other patient. Silverworm to numb the pain, a little distraction, a sharp tug—and it's done." I smirked. "Just like magic."

Her head cocked. "And you're sure the bone set?"

"I'm trying not to be insulted, Maura."

"It's just..." She trailed off, frowning. "Descended bones are strong. Stronger even than iron. Mortals don't have the strength to move them."

That couldn't be right. I had clearly felt the girl's bone shift under my hands and heard the crunch as it slid into place.

“Perhaps it’s easier with the young ones,” I guessed.

Maura shook her head. “The toddler had several that needed to be set, and the first Descended I asked couldn’t even shift them. She had to call in one of the stronger males to help.”

We stared at each other for a long moment, blinking.

Maura seemed to hesitate before speaking again. “Diem... was there only a broken bone? Prince Luther said you saved his sister’s life.”

A lake of blood flashed into my vision. Colorless lips. A faded pulse. A mountain of crimson-soaked gauze. Then, seconds later, an unblemished back, perfectly smooth, no trace of a wound.

I shivered.

I busied myself at my worktable, avoiding her stare. “It was a minor wound that healed almost immediately. Who knew a prince could be so overdramatic?”

Maura loitered for a moment. Her eyes couldn’t stop trailing my arms, like she might peel back my skin to find some answer hidden beneath.

I shifted uncomfortably. “Did he say anything else? Anything about my mother?”

“There was one thing. He asked if I had known you as a child—if I’d seen you with brown eyes, before they changed. I told him I had, of course. And he asked if I knew your father.”

I held my breath. Maura was one of the few people outside of my family who knew that I was not the blood child of the Commander. “What did you say?”

Maura gave me a grave, meaningful look. “I told him everyone knows Andrei Bellator, the great *mortal* war hero.”

“So you didn’t mention...?”

“No,” she said firmly. “That’s none of my concern.” She turned back to her desk and resumed her writing, as if there was simply nothing further to be said on the subject.

We worked in silence for a bit longer until I finally worked up the courage to say the words that had been hanging on my lips all day.

“Maybe I should start taking some of the Descended work at the palace.”

Maura raised an eyebrow. “What was that you said about insufferable beasts? And now you want to dote on them?”

I scrunched my nose. “There will be no *doting*, thank you very much. I only mean that I can help. You don’t have to do it all yourself.”

She hesitated. “You know how Auralie feels about it, dearie. She’s already going to be furious about this morning.”

The heaviness I’d felt on the floor of the palace washroom settled back over me like a leaden cape. “It’s time to accept that she might not come back.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s been six months. There’s been no sign of her.”

“You can’t give up ho—”

“Don’t, Maura. Please. Hope without reason is... it’s *cruel*.” I took a deep breath, willing the burning in my throat to fade. “I can’t keep pretending like life is still normal. Like she’s not...” My voice wobbled. “Like she’s not gone.”

Maura sniffled a bit, but remained quiet.

“Teller fears they’ll revoke his admission to the Descended academy without a Bellator serving as the Crown healer. Even if that’s not true—I can’t have him worried about it. He needs to focus on school. I have to take my mother’s place until he’s finished.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“What do you mean?”

“When your mother made that arrangement, she didn’t merely agree to serve until Teller finished school. She—” Maura’s mouth snapped closed.

I rose from my chair. “Tell me, Maura.”

She winced, her pity hanging in the air like a cloying scent. “The bargain was for life, Diem. Your mother agreed to serve in whatever manner the Crown requests for the rest of her life.”

“What do you mean, ‘*in whatever manner the Crown requests*’?”

“I don’t know the details, that was between your mother and the royals. She only told me that she would keep working here as much as she could, but requests from the Crown would be her priority.”

My knees felt weak. I leaned onto the table, gripping the edge. “And if she breaks the agreement?”

Maura rubbed her hands over her face and exhaled deeply. “I swore to Auralie I would never tell you this.”

“Maura, if this affects Teller, I have to know. It’s my job to protect him now.”

She looked at me with genuine pain in her eyes. “If she doesn’t fulfill the bargain, then her life would be forfeit. She would be executed by the Crown.”

The room began to spin. Suddenly the shadows were too bright, the silence too loud.

I fumbled for words. “But... the King—Teller says he’s unconscious. If he dies... maybe no one else knows. Maybe—”

“Prince Luther knows. He’s the one who negotiated it with your mother on behalf of the Crown.”



AT DINNER THAT NIGHT, it was all I could manage to shove bits of food around on my plate. As Teller and Father gabbed about their days, I offered just enough nods and smiles to not be rude, murmured just enough innocuous details to satisfy their questions.

My mind was a *mess*.

I was ravaged by a thousand sparring thoughts, each one more terrifying than the next. None of them made sense. None of them I dared speak aloud.

When my mother had been here, it had been so easy to stay sheltered in the cocoon she’d built around me. I’d pushed back in all the ways that restless youth do, but I always surrendered in the end and accepted my curated existence.

She’d kept so many secrets. From all of us, but especially from me. Her daughter, her firstborn.

If anyone should have known the truth, shouldn’t it have been me? Before Teller, before even Father, it had been the two of us, alone in the world. An unwed mother and her bastard infant.

A part of me hated her for it, even though I knew she had done it for me. I knew in my heart, my soul, that my mother would do *anything* to protect me.

Keep any secret. Make any deal. Tell any lie.

And now, without her protection, I was being hauled toward all those truths I had been perfectly content to ignore, kicking and screaming all the way down.

If Teller had heard what transpired at the palace, he said nothing of it to me. Though when I sat in front of the hearth and gazed vacantly at the fire, I felt his curious stare on my back. I supposed my moodiness since I'd stopped taking the flameroot powder had made him wary enough to give me space.

The flameroot.

The vial of red powder burned a hole in my pocket. My chaotic thoughts circled it like vultures around a fresh kill. That bottle was my anger and fear, my anxiety and resentment—all my darkest emotions in tangible form.

When the sky turned black and the men in my family were lost in dreams, I gathered all the bottles in my mother's supply and slipped outside to the water's edge.

One by one, I hurled the moon-shaped jars into the sea. One by one, they hit the waves and sank forever to a watery grave.

Each quiet splash felt like the creaking open of an old, heavy door, its iron hinges rusted from ages of disuse.

I said a prayer to the Old Gods to make me ready for whatever lay beyond.

Chapter

Seven

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Henri’s voice yanked me back to the present and the hypnotizing patter of hoofbeats on the Ring Road, the circuitous trail that connected Emarion’s nine realms. We had left town hours ago, and I had barely spoken five words since.

“Talk about what?”

“Whatever it is that’s made you look like you want to murder the next person you meet.”

He wasn’t wrong.

My anger had been quietly smoldering for weeks, maybe months, but after the events of yesterday—especially Maura’s revelations—a burning disquiet had settled so deeply into my marrow that I was beginning to wonder if it was permanent.

“I’m fine.” I made my best effort to sound pleasant, but it wasn’t even believable to my own ears.

“Are you feeling guilty about leaving the center?”

“No.”

Not a lie. After seeing how rattled I’d been at the news of my mother’s bargain, Maura had suggested I take *several* days off.

“Is it Teller?”

“No.”

Also not a lie. Princess Lilian had been so appreciative of my help that she’d given Teller a kiss on the cheek and an open invitation to visit the palace any time. He was practically floating. Though I had my concerns about their growing relationship, I couldn’t help but be grateful to see him so happy.

A long silence passed between us, the clapping of hooves on gravel the only sound.

“Is it your mother?” His voice was quieter, gentler.

I tried to deny it, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Diem, we've been friends since we could walk. You know you can talk to me, right?"

"Of course."

That—that was the lie.

Henri hated the Descended more than anyone I knew, and for good reason.

When Henri was an infant, his mother had fallen ill with a rare disease treatable only by an herb native to Montios. Since mortals were forbidden, his father had requested permission to visit the reclusive mountain realm. He'd even risked his position as royal courier to beg the King for diplomatic assistance.

The request was denied without explanation, leaving Henri's mother to a preventable death and Henri's hatred forever engraved on his bones.

How could I tell him that Auralie, who had been like his surrogate mother, had signed away her life to those monsters?

How could I tell him she'd likely gone missing to do the King's bidding, or perhaps Prince Luther had killed her to keep his secret safe, or perhaps she'd fled to avoid the bargain, leaving me to take her place?

I wasn't even sure which outcome to hope for.

"Your mother is going to come home, D. I know she will."

I forced a grateful smile, but my heart wasn't in it.

If she did come home—what then? Be a lifelong slave to the Crown? Be executed for evading the agreement? If she *was* alive, she might be better off staying out of Lumnos for good.

No, I definitely couldn't tell him that.

Henri brought his horse up beside mine and reached over, taking my hand. "I can't explain it, but... I just know it. I know she's alive and safe and she'll be back. I've prayed to the Old Gods, and they told me to have faith."

I glanced nervously over my shoulder at his forbidden mention of the Old Gods. "Be careful Henri, if someone overhears you—"

"Really?" He gave me a sidelong grin. "This, from the girl who's broken every law in Lumnos?"

"Not every law." A smirk broke through at last. "Only the fun ones."

"Blaspheming our conquering invaders isn't fun enough for you?"

"Not fun enough to be worth execution. And keep your voice down, will you?"

“I seem to recall you thinking it was worth it when we made certain *improvements* to that statue of Lumnos they put up near the market.”

I chuckled at the reminder. At thirteen, we’d snuck out in the dead of night to consecrate an effigy of the realm’s patron goddess in the absurd way only two irreverent teenagers could manage.

“What can I say?” I drawled. “The moustache we painted really brought out her eyes.”

Henri dropped his head back and roared with laughter, and my lips curved higher. It had been so long since the two of us had had such a carefree moment.

“You’re a menace, Bellator.”

“*Was* a menace. Now I’m a professional, serious adult.”

“Oh, you’re still a menace. Don’t think I haven’t heard all about the trouble you caused at the palace yesterday.”

My smile vanished instantly. I pulled my hand back and settled it on the pommel of my saddle. “What did you hear?”

“If the rumors are to be believed—and we know town rumors are never wrong,” he quipped with a wink, “a royal princess keeled over dead, and you resurrected her with herbs and a handful of bandages.”

A knot twisted in my stomach. “She lost a little blood and got lightheaded. It wasn’t that serious.”

Another lie, but this time I had no good excuse. My palms throbbed at the memory of the strange, tingling light.

“Really? The Descended seemed to think it was serious.”

My head snapped in his direction. “Who said that?”

“That’s just the rumor.” He shot me a curious look. “Why were you at the palace? I thought all things Descended were off-limits.”

I chewed on my lip, feeling the heavy drag of guilt for all the secrets I was hiding from him, the one person I’d never kept anything from. “I think I’m going to take over my mother’s duties at the palace. And please spare me the lecture, I’ve heard it all from Maura already.”

A long silence passed, his attention shifting to the road ahead of us as he fell deep in thought.

“Good,” he finally responded.

I frowned. “You don’t think it’s a bad idea?”

“Were you hoping I would talk you out of it?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I wasn’t sure if I even knew the answer.

“I understand why your mother kept you away from them for so long,” he said. “The Descended are dangerous. They only care about themselves, and they will eliminate anything they think is a threat. Look at what they do to the half-mortal babies—even children aren’t sacred to them.”

I shuddered at the reminder of the senseless slaughter under the King’s progeny laws.

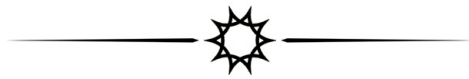
“But,” he went on, “sheltering you doesn’t keep you safe forever. To beat your enemy, you have to know your enemy—intimately. And there’s no better place to do that than in their own home.”

The calculating tone in his voice sent ice creeping up my spine. He sounded more like a soldier preparing for war than the goofy, carefree friend I’d grown up with.

“You’ve been spending too much time around the Commander,” I teased, a little nervously.

“Your father didn’t teach me that. Your mother did.”

I opened my mouth to ask more, but Henri glanced at the sun nearing the horizon and abruptly swung off his horse, his footsteps landing on the path with a heavy crunch. He grabbed his reins as well as my own and led us off the road and into the forest to camp for the night.



I WASN’T sure how long I’d been standing here, staring at the flames as they leapt around the glowing campfire. Henri had gone to gather fresh firewood, leaving me in silence to simmer.

I was so *angry*.

Angry at my father for acting as though my mother’s disappearance was a momentary hiccup. Angry at my mother for making a fool’s bargain. Angry at myself for letting my life get away from me, for not standing up and demanding the truth when I’d had the chance.

But more than anything, I was angry at that abominable Descended Prince.

The deal he’d brokered between my mother and King Ulther was almost too one-sided to be believed—a lifetime of service in exchange for four years of schooling. That was exactly how the Descended operated. They took and took, claiming everything of value for themselves, then

demanded unquestioned gratitude from the very people they had stolen from.

After all, that's what they had done to Emarion. The Descended had infected our once-thriving kingdom like a virus, infiltrating our homes and our religions, our cities and our universities, only to rise from the ashes of the Blood War and ban mortalkind from the very same realms that mortal hands had built.

And now, they'd done it to my family, too.

The longer I stewed, the more I hated Luther. *Loathed* him. Wanted him to suffer in some slow, painful way.

I wasn't proud of it. Any good healer should be focused on ending suffering, not causing it.

Then again, I hadn't exactly chosen to be a healer. That path had been set for me—by my mother, by my circumstances, by my lack of viable alternatives.

Sometimes I fantasized about going to Meros and finding work on a boat at one of its busy ports, sailing off on the Sacred Sea to see the world beyond.

Other times I imagined braving the shadowy alleys of Umbros, tasting all of life's vices and learning how to bring a man to his knees in every possible way.

I'd even considered enlisting in the Emarion Army just to have a chance to leave a mark on the world outside of my tiny, irrelevant village.

I should be grateful. I had a skill, which meant I'd never go hungry. I had a family, which meant I'd never be alone. And I had safety—no enemies, no threats. Provided I could learn to follow the rules, I would live a nice, long life. A *safe* life.

So why did the very thought of it make me want to tear my hair out?

I was so engrossed in my frustration that I heard Henri approach only a heartbeat before his arms slipped around my waist. The warm, solid planes of his body pressed against my back.

The bright orange flames of my anger shifted to a dark, hungry red at his touch.

"Hi," he murmured, laying a soft kiss on my shoulder.

"Hi." I tilted my head to the side in silent invitation, my eyes fluttering closed.

His lips slowly trailed up the curve of my neck. “You still have that look on your face, you know.”

“What look?”

“The ‘I’m in the mood to murder someone’ look.” His thumb burrowed its way under the hem of my tunic and dragged idle lines back and forth along the sensitive skin of my stomach. “What were you thinking about?”

Leaving this place behind and making a new life for myself across the continent.

“Something you said earlier,” I answered instead. “What were your exact words—something about getting to know my enemy... ‘intimately’?”

He laughed, his breath tickling my neck. “I take it back. There’s only one person I want you getting to know *intimately*.”

On the last word, his hand moved up my ribcage and brushed the swell of my breast, sending a bolt of desire thrumming through me.

“Or perhaps I’ll just have to make *you* my enemy.” I reached back and palmed the blade that hung on his hip before moving down his muscled thigh.

“In that case, I surrender now.” He pulled me against his hips until I could feel exactly what part of him he intended to surrender.

My back arched, a quiet breath rushing out of me. “Surrender? What a shame. I much prefer a good fight.”

I turned and clutched his collar, then tugged him down until our lips collided. My kiss was fierce and demanding, channeling my scorching emotions as our tongues danced in deep, longing strokes.

“Diem,” he breathed, resting his forehead to mine. “It’s been too long.”

It had been months since we’d touched each other like this.

It began last spring, when a balmy evening and too much ale had driven us to strip bare and dive into the sea. Our naked bodies had found each other in the moonlight and shed the platonic innocence of our youth.

Neither of us had been each other’s firsts, but we had been the first to mean something. The first to join the passion of physical touch with the intimacy of a kindred spirit.

And then my mother disappeared and my life fell apart, and I had desperately needed the simplicity of a friend with no expectations. Henri had stepped back into that role without complaint, ready to be whatever and whoever my grief needed him to be.

But the ensuing months had changed us both. Our sweet naivete had fled town right alongside my mother. We'd both grown harder, angrier, our souls calloused from life and loss.

Though I still cared for him as deeply as I ever had, I was no longer the laughing, carefree girl he had fallen for—and when I looked in his eyes, I struggled to find the tender-hearted boy I'd once known.

I wasn't sure exactly where that left us now.

I twisted in his arms until my lips again found his. His rough hand grazed low on my spine, toying at my waistband. The lonely woman trapped inside my red-hot skin pleaded for more.

His other hand brushed against my elbow, and my mind dropped me right back into that morning at the royal palace. How I'd lost my wits in Prince Luther's dominating touch, his piercing stare. His scar-torn face was seared into my thoughts. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw his icy gaze watching me, studying me, judging me.

I was overcome with the need to burn the memory from existence. My ravenous hands shoved Henri's shirt over his head and fumbled with the leather cord of his breeches, yanking at them impatiently. "These," I growled. "Off."

"Yes, ma'am," he answered with a lopsided grin. He loosened the ties quickly and shoved the pants free of his legs, but before I could reach for him, he cupped his hands around the back of my thighs and hauled me up against his hips. I wove my fingers through his chestnut hair as he carried me over to our bedrolls and lowered us both to the ground. Within a few breathless pants, my tunic was off and tossed blindly over his shoulder.

"The contraceptive tonic," I rushed out, my voice husky. "In my bag."

Henri made a noncommittal sound as his mouth roamed my exposed skin, tasting my fire-warmed flesh.

"*Henri.*"

"Do we really need it?" he murmured against my throat. "Who are we to interfere with the Old Gods' blessings?"

My lust cooled slightly as I shot him a sharp look. "If that's how you feel, then..."

I started to climb off him, and he groaned as he grabbed my hips to pull me back.

"Fine," he mumbled, reaching for my bag and fishing out the vial of green liquid. He swallowed it quickly and smirked. "Now can I get back to

ravishing you?”

I held my arms out. “Ravish away.”

He climbed over me and kissed me deeply, though it was more of a tender caress than passionate zeal.

“I missed this,” he whispered as he moved down my body and laid a trail of feather-light kisses past my navel.

Even in the haze of desire, Henri’s touch was soft and protective. That was the way he’d always been with me—gentle to a fault.

His previous lovers had been the sweet, quiet girls. The ones with shy smiles and ribbons in their hair, who never said an unkind word and managed to get along with everyone. I’d teased him for it, but in truth, I’d been secretly jealous. Not only for their relationships with him, but for that delicate beauty a part of me wanted so badly to emulate.

But I was made of swinging fists and rash words, my edges too jagged and my temper too hot. Nothing about me was *delicate*.

Sometimes I wondered whether Henri’s tastes had changed or whether he thought he saw something different in me—the nurturing healer who had stepped up to care for her family in her mother’s absence.

But I didn’t choose to be a healer, nor did I choose to take my mother’s role.

And I didn’t want gentle or delicate.

I wanted to *burn*.

I ripped the rest of my clothes away and flipped Henri around until his shoulders sank back against the bedroll. His eyes went wide, then closed with a groan of pleasure as I settled on top of him.

My name tore from his lips like a swear. He reached up to touch me, but I pinned his arms to the ground, the vulnerable part of me feeding off the control. I threw back my head, and I gave my body to the inferno.

And I burned.

I burned as we moved together, breathing each other’s names until we both glistened with sweat despite the chilly air. I burned as I rocked furiously against him in a desperate bid to chase the thoughts of what—and who—awaited me back in Lumnos.

But even after we each found our release and collapsed in each other’s arms, the flames inside me refused to die. They grew ever higher, stoked by restless frustration, scorching my skin from the inside out.

Even when Henri's arms curled around me and the rise and fall of his chest slowed into the steady rhythm of sleep, I stared at the depthless midnight sky, my thoughts as turbulent as they'd ever been, and I burned and I burned and I burned.

And I wondered how long I had until the fire in my soul burned me alive.

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Chapter Eight

I knew why I was here.

My mind kicked and thrashed at it, screamed in refusal, even though I knew my defiance was futile. My legs turned south, carrying me down the familiar, dimly lit road. With every step, I whimpered internally, begging to turn around or choose another path.

I knew where my feet would stop before it came into view. I braced for it, held my breath as I rounded the corner. Desperately, I willed my eyes to look away, but the effort was wasted. I'd fought and lost this battle too many times.

Just as it had before, a glimpse of coppery hair captured my gaze. My mother's back was to me, her body cloaked, facing a towering man in elegant clothing and expensive accessories.

In all the many times I'd had this dream, his face had always been fuzzy and indefinite, like a forgotten word hovering on the tip of my tongue.

This time, he stood out in stark, vivid detail.

Eyes like chips of ice. A knife-sharp jaw. Dark eyebrows that seemed permanently furrowed.

Prince Luther.

My mother's shoulders were tense, her hands gesturing emphatically. The Prince kept his face close and voice low, eyes narrowed to slits, fists clenched at his sides.

My feet moved again, dragging me out from my hiding spot behind the crates and into the open.

This had never happened before.

I waited for them to spot me, yet somehow, I stayed veiled from their sight. Their voices grew—a whisper, then a murmur, louder and louder until their shouts rang through the alley.

"A bargain was made," the Prince jeered, his scar twisting with his irate features, "and now the Crown is calling it in."

“I won’t do it. I won’t serve you.” My mother’s voice sounded peculiar, not entirely her own.

“Foolish woman, it’s far too late. You can’t beat us. You can’t escape us.”

“I’ll leave—I’ll go far away from here where you’ll never find me.”

“Then the boy must pay.”

“No!”

I wasn’t sure if the word came from my mother’s lips or my own.

The Prince’s mouth hooked into a cruel smile. “The Crown is owed a life debt. If you do not fulfill the bargain, the boy must. It’s your life or his.”

I reached out to grab my mother. I had to stop this from happening, had to warn her.

“You or the boy. Who do you choose?”

My hand brushed past her hair to settle on her shoulder. She started to turn, and the Prince snatched her elbow to hold her in place.

“Who do you choose?” he demanded.

I yanked hard, forcing her to heave backward until she finally turned to face me.

Only it wasn’t her at all. It was my mother’s body, her fiery hair, her aged hands—but staring back at me, silver eyes wild with terror, was my own face.

I lurched back. “No,” I whispered, voice shaking.

The Prince gave a dark laugh, quiet at first, until his head fell back and his powerful body shook with the force of it. There was no happiness in the sound, only the vicious satisfaction of a man who knew he’d already won.

“Please,” I begged. “Let us go!”

He sauntered forward until he stood directly in front of me. His shoulders were so broad, his chest so wide, he seemed to blot out the world. Slowly, his hand curled around my throat. He leaned forward until his breath warmed my lips.

“One of you will be mine. Tell me, Diem Bellator—who do you choose?”



I BOLTED UPRIGHT and clutched my neck. The brisk night air was a shock to my still-naked body.

The fire had faded to a pool of sparks that cast a faint orange glow across the campsite. In the dying light, Henri's breaths kept a sleep-soothed rhythm, a marked difference to my own heaving, panicked gulps.

With trembling hands, I crawled out from under the blanket draped across us and fumbled for my clothes before staggering out of the clearing.

I walked deep into the moonlit darkness until the campfire was a distant red blur, and I fell back against the trunk of a towering oak. The heels of my palms pressed against my closed eyes.

The release of sex had been hollow and short-lived. I could already feel tension twining inside me all over again.

The nightmare had rattled me. I'd relived that afternoon a thousand times over, asleep and awake, until I was no longer sure what parts of my memory were real or imagined. I'd prayed the answer to my mother's disappearance was somehow hidden in the details, a puzzle I could solve if I only looked closely enough.

The mystery of the Descended man's identity had been unraveled, at least—but it left utter madness in its wake.

Beware of answered prayers.

I slowly drew the crisp air into my lungs, hoping it would somehow soothe the heat that roiled inside. My attention was broken by the sound of a snapping twig.

I sighed, realizing I must have woken Henri. I pushed off the tree to turn back to the campsite—then froze.

Through the trees, the familiar outline of Henri's body still lay curled up and sleeping by the fire. Whatever was coming, it wasn't him.

The crackle of steps over fallen leaves sounded again. Closer.

I spun toward the noise and squinted into the darkness. The waning moon cast just enough of a glow to illuminate the woods, but a breeze jostled the leafy canopy above me, causing the speckled moonlight to dance in a way that camouflaged any movement.

A noise rumbled from the trees—low and distinctly inhuman.

Finally, I saw it. The dark browns and blacks of its body melted seamlessly into the wilderness, but its keen yellow eyes and white-furred snout gave it away. Four large paws moved deftly over the terrain, barely audible over its threatening growl.

My hand instinctively flew to my hip, but instead of finding the cold metal bite of my dagger's hilt, I grasped empty air. My weapons belt had been ripped off in the moment of passion with Henri and now lay uselessly at the campsite.

To be disarmed is to court death. It was my father's first lesson, a gift on my eighth birthday along with my first proper weapon, a bone-handled switchblade from his collection that I'd been eying for months. In the years since, many of his lessons had come down to that same crucial foundation: *The world will try to disarm you, Diem. Do not let them. By wits or by weapon, be prepared at all times.*

And yet, here I stood, barefoot and empty-handed, carrying nothing sharper than my fingernails and rapidly losing a staring contest with a hungry-looking wolf.

If the beast didn't kill me for my foolishness, my father certainly would.

The animal prowled toward me. Its lips curled back, baring a row of sharp white fangs.

I swore under my breath. I knew enough about survival to not turn my back and run, which would only trigger its predatory instincts. I could call out for Henri, but he might not make it in time—or worse, the wolf might turn on him.

The creature moved closer, near enough for me to smell its foul breath as it snarled. The hair on its back stood on end, its tail stiff and horizontal.

Bad signs. Very, very bad signs.

My eyes darted around for a rock or fallen branch, anything I could turn into a weapon, but my search was met with dirt and leaves.

Ice flooded my veins. Was this my fate—some pointless death in the middle of nowhere? Was this all my sad, unimportant life would ever be?

Without warning, the world fell away, just as it had that morning in the royal palace. The moon guttered, trees dissolved into shadow, all sound hushed to a thundering silence.

There was no longer a forest. There was only me, the wolf, and infinite darkness.

Fight.

As the *voice* inside me purred in anxious anticipation, a burning sensation pricked at my skin. A scalding frost, an impossibly frigid inferno.

I looked down to see my hands aglow with a silvery light, my fingers twitching in surprise.

My heart roared in my ears. This was impossible—was I still dreaming?

The wolf's ears flattened. It crouched on its quivering haunches, falling dead still as it poised to attack.

Shit. This was no dream. Within seconds, those fangs would be in my throat.

Fight.

For once, I agreed with the *voice's* call.

This was going to hurt, but I would fight back. I would scratch and claw my way to safety, even if I had to do it with my bare hands. I would not leave Maura and my family to the mercy of the Descended.

I refused to let this be my end.

I glared into the beast's amber eyes and felt an unexpected flicker of shared understanding. Its ravenous hunger gnawed at my stomach as clearly as if it were my own.

Suddenly, it launched off its hind legs and sprang toward me. I raised my hands to protect my vulnerable neck, eyes squeezing closed as I anticipated the impact.

Destroy.

A blinding flash glowed red through my clenched eyelids. A yelp—followed by a soft hiss.

Then deafening quiet.

The acrid stink of singed fur burned the inside of my nose. I dared to open my eyes.

Hanging in the air was a cloud of ash, a million particles floating like delicate snow to dust the glittering black stone fragments now scattered along the forest floor.

The wolf was gone.

No. *Impossible.*

The wolf had been *right there*. I had seen it, I'd smelled it.

I looked down at my hands again. They still shone with that same bizarre light, now fainter and fading fast.

Understanding crashed into me. I had felt these things once before in my life, a long time ago. A time I'd tried desperately to forget.

I sprinted back to the campsite and tumbled to my knees in front of my pack.

“Diem?” Henri called out groggily. “Is everything alright?”

I ignored him as I ransacked my belongings, growing more and more frantic. “Where is it?” I muttered to myself. “Come on—please be here.”

Frustrated, I turned the bag over until the contents scattered over the forest floor. It was an avalanche of food, weapons, undergarments, books—everything but the one thing I needed.

“Diem, what are you looking for?”

I couldn’t answer. I didn’t trust myself—didn’t trust him. Didn’t trust the moon above my head or the soil beneath my feet. If my theory was right, nothing was safe from its touch.

I turned over every item, murmuring *where is it* in an increasingly rabid chant. I untied the small suede pouch of medicinal supplies I’d brought along, hoping I’d placed it inside, but the vial was nowhere to be found.

The weight of Henri’s hand on my shoulder startled me. He gave it a warm, firm squeeze.

Real—that was real.

His touch felt like an anchor, a heavy weight that sank through the tempestuous sea of my panic and lodged me in solid ground.

But it was something else stuck in a bed of sand under the rolling waves that consumed me—the jars of flameroot I’d hurled into the Sacred Sea. Even the spare dose I normally kept in my satchel was gone.

“No!” I couldn’t stop shouting it. Maybe if I said it enough times, it would be true. “No, no, no, no...”

My entire body trembled violently. *What was I thinking?* A few weeks without symptoms, and I’d believed myself cured forever? I’d been so unforgivably hasty.

The part of my brain that belonged to a calm, professional healer tried to tell me that I was in shock, too much adrenaline going one way and too little blood going the other. My wiser conscience pleaded with me to lie down and breathe, but every movement felt too far outside of my control.

If my fears were right—*oh gods*, if this was true...

Henri knelt beside me. “Diem, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“My powder.” My voice came out scratchy, fractured. “I—I need my powder.”

Bless the Undying Fire, he knew what I meant. Henri was the only person outside my family that I'd ever told about the flameroot. Even Maura didn't know—another choice my mother had insisted on but refused to explain.

"I'll help you look. Calm down, it'll be alright."

I couldn't seem to choke the words out that looking was useless. I'd destroyed my only supply, and with my mother gone, I had no way of ever replenishing it.

Henri stoked the fire so the light of the flames spilled across the campsite, then returned to my side. He gently turned over my belongings as he searched, but his eyes lingered on me. "I thought you decided to stop taking it?"

Some haunted reaction must have commandeered my face. He immediately stilled.

"Diem, tell me what happened."

"I had a hallucination. Like... like before. Like when I was young."

He set down the items in his hands and leaned back on his heels. "What did you see?"

"There was... I saw an animal. Attacking me. I thought it was going to kill me. And then I—my hands... there was this light, and I—"

"What kind of animal?" His head was angled slightly, like he was trying to puzzle something out.

Why does that matter, I wanted to scream. I'm losing my mind, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

"A wolf," I gritted out. "It lunged at me, and then I—"

"Diem." The word struck me like a command, demanding my silence. His shoulders dropped. "That wasn't a hallucination."

My head was still shaking, though I wasn't sure if it was from shock or denial. "No. No, it couldn't have been real. My hands—"

"I saw it, too. Well, I didn't see it, but I heard it growling. The sound of it woke me up."

Everything paused.

"You did?" My voice came out strangled. "You're sure?"

He laughed, the sound clearly born of nervous relief rather than amusement. He reached over and took my hands. "Yes, I'm sure. You didn't imagine it."

So the wolf had been real. But if the wolf was real, then the rest of it had to be real, too. And what I'd done to the wolf...

"But, Henri... it lunged at me, and then—then it was just... gone. I think I... it almost felt like I'd—"

"You must have scared it off. You know how skittish wild animals can be around humans."

I stared at him, jaw hanging open. "But... if it was real—"

"By the Flames, Diem, you scared the life out of me." He laughed again, scrubbing at his face. He rose to his feet and pulled me up to join him. One arm snaked around me and tucked me in tight against his waist, his other hand stroking my hair. "This is exactly why I wanted you to come on this trip. You've been under so much pressure lately. I knew eventually you were going to snap under the weight of it all."

I nodded weakly and looked down to hide the scarlet flush on my cheeks.

Maybe he was right—maybe there'd been no strange sensation, no glow, no cloud of ash, no body burned out of existence. Maybe I'd simply been so rattled by the events of the past few days that the old fears of my youth had stirred from years of hibernation.

Henri squeezed me reassuringly before pulling back. "Come on, let's get some sleep. Dawn is still hours away."

As he turned, the glimmering embers of the campfire illuminated his muscled back. In his sleep-dazed rush to get to me, he'd left his shirt behind. My eyes caught on a patch of black ink on his shoulder.

A gnarled tree, with leaves of flame, inset in a circlet of vines—the sacred Everflame, the Tree of Life and Death.

According to the old mortal religion, all life began as sparks from the Everflame that fell to the earth as glowing seeds. At death, those found worthy by the Old Gods would be placed among its burning branches, where their earthly bodies would turn to ash but their souls would remain forever warmed by the Undying Fire. Those found unworthy were doomed to an eternity in a cold hell encased in ice, far from the Everflame's redeeming heat.

Though some mortals still clung in secret to the ancient faith, all references to the Everflame and the Old Gods were now outlawed across the nine realms. I'd only ever seen them in the old mortal books my mother collected—the one law she'd always been happy to flagrantly disobey.

My hand rose to Henri's back, fingertips tracing the dark lines etched into his skin. "When did you get this?"

He tensed and recoiled from my touch. "A few months ago."

He offered no further explanation as he grabbed his tunic and threw it hastily over his head.

"Why?" I asked.

"To honor the Old Gods."

"Do you know what the Descended would do to you if they saw it?"

"I don't care."

"Henri, they'd flay the skin right off your back."

"Let them try."

His bitter tone sent a chill rippling down my spine.

Before I could argue, he pulled me into his arms and crushed me with an eager kiss. His lips were rough and hungry, nothing like the sweet, gentle kisses of last night.

I gave a few halfhearted protests, my mind still reeling, but after being so overwhelmed by a whiplash of emotions, the simple ease of lust was a welcome reprieve. Desire won out, and we tumbled back out of our clothes and into night's sensual embrace.

Crouched in the shadows, watching and waiting from afar, were the memories of a missing mother, a dangerous Prince, and a cloud of ash that had once been a snarling wolf.

Chapter Nine

We arrived at the border of Fortos late the following morning

No matter how many times I'd made this trek, I was always surprised at the severe change in landscape between the two kingdoms. The leafy forests of Lumnos, now abundant with autumn's flame-colored foliage, gave way so abruptly to the rocky flatlands of Fortos that it almost seemed as if the magic that reigned over the realms was infused into nature itself.

And perhaps it was. Teller had once mentioned something about the Descended's abilities being tied to the soil of their realm of origin—or as they called it, their *terremère*.

He had come home from school one day and recounted with breathless fascination the story of a Descended woman who had defected from the snow-capped mountains of Montios to the secretive realm of Umbros. There, she'd given birth to a son sired by a mortal. Though the child was a Descended—as the laws classified anyone with even a drop of Descended blood as such—he initially showed no signs of magic.

However, after coming of age, the son felt an irresistible calling to return to his *terremère*. The moment his foot touched down on Montios soil, the ice magic native to the realm had unleashed. His body transformed into a walking blizzard that froze everything in sight as the pressure from years of magical restraint melted away.

According to Teller, the story was taught to Descended youth as a cautionary tale to discourage them from ever leaving their *terremère*, but I wondered if the real villain of the parable was shadowy, mysterious Umbros and its uncanny ability to pull Descended and mortals alike into its darkness, rarely to be seen again.

As we approached the border, I stole a glance at Henri and nearly burst with laughter at his glazed eyes and satisfied, sex-addled grin. His thoughts were clearly still back at the campsite.

“Mind in the gutter?”

His expression went sheepish. “Is it that obvious?”

I took the apple core I’d been nibbling on and tossed it playfully at his chest.

“I missed you,” he said quietly. “I missed *us*.”

“Me too,” I said, and this time, it wasn’t a lie.

Six months of grief-induced celibacy had created an awkward tension between us that we’d both needed to ease. For Henri, the relief had been immediate. He’d already fallen back into the comforting familiarity of our romance as if we’d never paused.

As for me... I just needed time. Time to figure out who I was—and who we were together.

“I’ve been thinking,” he started, his words slow and deliberate. “I was wondering if y—”

“Ow!” I yelped as a painful current shot through my body. “What was that?”

Henri’s blade was in his hand in an instant as his eyes scanned me. “What happened?”

I yanked my horse to a stop and searched for some sign of a wound or injury. The pain had been sudden and ephemeral, crashing like a wave before it just as quickly ebbed away. A faint throbbing still lingered in my limbs.

“Were you attacked?” He pulled up on his reins and whirled his head from side to side, scouring the vegetation for a hidden assailant.

But I couldn’t find anything on my body—no blood, no angry red skin, not even a single point where I could localize the pain. The sensation had radiated from around me like it came from the very air itself.

“I—I’m not sure.”

I glanced over my shoulder, scanning the road. My eyes fell to two circular plaques, one etched with Lumnos’s emblem, a flaming sun inset with a crescent moon, and the other engraved with a sword crossed with a bone, the sigil of Fortos. The golden panels were inset into the Ring Road along the strange demarcation line of grass and rock that marked the Lumnos-Fortos border.

The border. I’d felt the sensation just as we’d crossed it.

“Magic,” I breathed. My shoulders sagged in relief. “Fortos must have set up magical wards along their border.”

Henri frowned. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“Maybe it only affects women,” I grumbled. “Wouldn’t surprise me. Isn’t it the only realm that’s never had a Queen?” I huffed irritably. “How convenient that their precious magic has never found a woman worthy of the Crown.”

“That probably has to do with their magic.” Henri caught my confused look. “You know how every realm has two kinds of magic? Light and shadow in Lumnos, stone and ice in Montios, sea and air in Meros, and so on.”

No, I didn’t know about it at all—and frankly, I wondered how Henri did. The details of Descended magic were never taught to us in mortal schools. But Henri said it with such a casual, flippant tone that I felt suddenly insecure about my ignorance, so I bit my tongue and nodded.

“Well, in the other realms, most Descended get one type of magic or the other. Only the very strongest get both. In Fortos, it works differently. The female Descended always get healing magic, while the male Descended get the power to kill—they can make your body decay right in front of their eyes. Makes them tough to beat in a fight. There are some who aren’t fully male or female and have both types of magic, but I hear that’s rare.”

My nose wrinkled at the idea of one’s gender determining their fate. “Why would that affect how the Crown passes down?”

“Because it passes to the next most powerful Descended.”

“So?”

“So if only the men get the killing magic, they’ll always be the most powerful.”

My head shifted at a tilt, a hint of danger surfacing in my tone. “Because a fighter is more powerful than a healer, right?”

“Right.”

Daggers fired from my steel-silver eyes.

His face blanched. “I mean—no, I didn’t mean—of course not. Healers are strong. Very strong! Just as powerful—*more* powerful, even—”

“Next time you come crawling to me with an injury, I sure hope I’m not too *weak and powerless* to treat you.”

He flashed me a sheepish smile. “Would it help if I admit that you could definitely kick my ass in a fight?”

It did. A little.

“I could take Maura, though,” he said.

I snorted. “No, you couldn’t.”

He didn’t answer—too busy looking down at his biceps and flexing them with a frown.

“How do you know so much about Fortos magic?” I asked.

“Know your enemy intimately, remember?”

He shot me a suggestive smirk, and though I gave him the most exasperated eyeroll I could muster, the corner of my lips curled upward.

“Perhaps the bias in their magic carried over into how they run the army,” I said. “All the women who enlist are pigeonholed into roles with no prestige or command.”

I thought of the many times I’d overheard my father’s old soldier friends bemoan that women were “distractions” among the infantry’s ranks. To his credit, my father had always taken them to task for it.

If any man finds himself facing my Diem on a battlefield, the best end he can hope for is that she makes it quick, he had joked.

I smiled at the memory.

“That’s not true,” Henri argued. “Most of the army’s spies are women.”

“Spies?” My eyebrows flew upward. “If I’d known that, maybe I would have enlisted.”

I was only half joking.

Henri grabbed my braid, tickling my nose with the end of it. “Something tells me the only girl in Emarion with bright white hair and grey eyes might have a few problems sneaking around unrecognized.”

I swatted him away and laughed, but a twinge of sadness lodged in my ribs. He had a point. My distinctive appearance meant I might never be able to leave the safety of Mortal City, where enough townsfolk knew my mortal heritage that being mistaken for a Descended was never more than a passing risk.

In a world where mortals survived by blending in and avoiding attention, I was a walking red flag.

“Where did you hear that—about the army spies?”

Henri’s posture shifted almost indiscernibly. “I used to know one. I delivered messages for her.” He frowned at me. “Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

The question took me by surprise, and I realized I’d been absently rubbing at my still-aching skin. I gave one last glance behind me to the

abrupt edge of the forest's growth. I'd passed over the Lumnos-Fortos border countless times in my life, but never had I felt anything like that.

"I'm fine. Just a fluke, I suppose."

We shared a look, neither of us quite convinced. With no other answers to give, we continued on in silence toward the mighty capital of Fortos.



A FEW HOURS LATER, I found myself in a nondescript concrete box of a warehouse, humming as I browsed shelf after shelf of glass jars containing every item under the sun. The army stocked medicinal ingredients native to all nine realms, and Maura had sent a list of supplies that needed refilling back at the center.

"Thank you for letting us do this," I called out from behind a row of fluffy dried mosses and curling strips of ashen tree bark. "It's become so hard for mortals to get these things lately."

"Anything for Auralie," a robust but kindly voice rebounded in response. "I owe her more debts than I can count. The least I can do is let her daughter rob me blind now and then."

"We *have* tried to pay you, Leona. Many times."

"Oh, please. Bellator money is no good in these parts. If I tried to take it, Blessed Fortos himself might show up and strike me dead."

I tried to picture the fearsome Kindred warrior-god raising a finger to defend a mortal, even ones as honored as my parents. The thought was so inconceivable I nearly laughed.

"How are things in Lumnos?" Leona asked. "Rumor says your King is not long for this world."

"Oh really?" I mused, feigning ignorance. Though I'd discovered the King's illness from Teller and Henri, I had still taken a sacred vow to keep the status of my center's patients confidential.

"The Descended healers think we should see a change in the Crown any day now. Haven't seen that in my lifetime."

I didn't respond.

"I understand the King of Fortos is preparing to send soldiers your way if things get bloody in the transition."

I didn't like the sound of that at all. The last thing Mortal City needed was soldiers marching into Lumnos to take control in the wake of King Ulther's death. I wondered, with a shiver of dread, what they might do to the mortal healers who hadn't done enough to keep him alive.

"Bloody?" I walked out from behind the shelves to find Leona scribbling an inventory of the multicolored powders that lay in precariously stacked heaps around her. "Why would it get bloody? I thought their magic picked an heir and everyone accepted it."

"That's how it's supposed to go, but you know how folks can get when there's power up for grabs."

I snorted softly. Another thing I had no real knowledge of. I'd never had anything resembling power in my life.

"Do your realm's Descended know who the heir will be yet?" she asked.

Prince Luther's sharp, calculating glare flashed unbidden in my mind. The reminder of him standing so close to me in that hallway, the way it *affected* me, the heat of his touch and the coldness of his gaze, made my heartbeat stutter.

"Yes," I hissed.

She raised an eyebrow. "I take it you don't like this person?"

"It hardly matters. I don't imagine it will make much of a difference to my life."

Unless future King Luther decides I need to pay my mother's debt.

Leona paused her work and watched me for a long moment. "Since your mother's not around anymore, let me give you a little maternal advice. Whatever opinions you have on this person, you keep them to yourself, you hear me? Put on a pretty smile and keep your mouth shut."

A host of snippy responses rose to my tongue, but I needed this woman's help, today and for years to come. I bit down hard and nodded obediently.

Leona didn't seem to buy it. She skimmed the warehouse before leaning in close, her voice dropping to a harsh clip.

"Heed my advice, girl. These Descended may squabble with each other like dogs, but nothing unites them faster than a mortal who doesn't know their place." Her knobby finger poked my arm for added emphasis. "And don't think your little mortal friends won't turn on you in a heartbeat if the Descended come calling."

I wondered if *she* might turn on me in a heartbeat if the Descended came calling. I wondered if this wasn't so much advice as it was a threat.

I summoned an appreciative smile. "You're so kind to look out for me. Don't you worry, I have no interest in making any enemies at all, mortal or Descended."

I hoped she read between the lines.

Leona's eyes roamed over me in a sharp appraisal before she harrumphed and turned back to her work. "You keeping things together, with your mother gone?"

Gone.

A brutal question. I was grateful she couldn't see how I cringed at the words.

"Doing the best I can with what the gods have given me," I said almost robotically, parroting the words my mother had used a hundred times before. It was the right answer, judging by the woman's grunt of approval.

"You hear anything yet about what happened to her?"

"No." I asked carefully, "Have you?"

She shook her head.

I chewed on my lip and pressed further. "Did she mention anything to you about any trips she had planned?"

"No, not that I was aware of."

"What about..." I hesitated. "Do you know of any work she might have been doing for one of the Descended? Maybe... a powerful one?"

Leona's hands paused on her work, but her eyes didn't rise to meet mine. "You mean healing work?"

"Or... *other* work."

I held my breath. It was a big risk—especially after her warning—but a calculated one. If Luther was using my mother for something other than her healing services, it might have a connection to her time in the army.

For several unnerving moments, Leona stared at her stilled hands and said nothing. I forced myself to keep rummaging through the shelves, lazily filling my bag with supplies as if the question was only idle chatter.

Her shrewd gaze finally met mine. "What are you getting at, girl?"

My sad smile wasn't hard to conjure. My despair over my mother's loss was a tattoo permanently etched beneath my skin, invisible to the world but never far from the surface. "Just looking for answers wherever I can."

A touch of sympathy warmed her features. “I wish I had something to offer. Sometimes we have to accept that there are questions we won’t ever find the answers to.”

Never. When it came to my mother, I would never give up searching.

“Is there anyone else here I could talk to that might know more about —”

“No.”

The answer was so final, so unequivocal, that the jar of rainbow-tinted gryvern scales I was clutching nearly tumbled to the stone floor.

“I only meant to ask if—”

“No,” she said again, louder this time. “If your mother was doing work for the army, I would know about it, and I don’t. Sniffing around won’t end well, for you or for Auralie.” Her ash-brown eyes narrowed. “I think you’ve gathered enough supplies for today. Best be on your way now.”

My heart fell. I hadn’t realized just how desperately I’d needed this trip to finally give me some answers. With this door slammed in my face, I felt further from my mother than I ever had.

Dejected, I hurriedly packed my things to leave while Leona stood guard and watched.

I’d loaded my now-overstuffed bags onto my shoulders when my eyes snagged on a metal cage hidden in a corner behind a series of bookshelves. It wasn’t the cage that struck me, but the vibrant color blaring through it. I inched closer. *Could that be...?*

My breath caught.

Even if the violent crimson hue hadn’t given the flameroot away, the distinctive crescent-shaped vial was so familiar to my palm that I could pick it out blind. I’d held it in my hand, glared at it with trepidation and resentment, nearly every day that I could remember.

It was the one medicine I couldn’t make, buy, or substitute. With my own supply sitting on the sea floor, I’d done my best to convince myself I didn’t need it anymore.

But the tricks my mind had been playing on me... The glow at the palace. The wolf in the forest.

As much as I tried to justify it all away, I knew my symptoms were returning. The same symptoms that had haunted me all those years ago—visions, feelings I couldn’t explain. The belief that I was doing things I shouldn’t be able to do...

Magic.

I had hallucinated that I had magic.

And for a brief, terrifying time, as the brown eyes and auburn hair marking me as a mortal had faded from my features, I'd even believed myself to be a Descended.

I'd been hysterical at the time, nearly throwing myself into the Sacred Sea at the horrifying prospect that I might be one of the monsters from the ghastly stories my friends swapped at school.

But my mother had held me close, calmed me with soothing words and a tender touch, and broke the news that the man who had sired me had suffered from similar delusions that had driven him to his demise.

I'd hoped, somehow, that it would not pass to you, she'd told me in a voice soaked with despair, but don't you worry, my little warrior. I will protect you. I will not let you end up like him.

And as soon as I'd begun the morning flameroot regime—a pinch of the bitter powder mixed well in a cup of steaming water—the visions had stopped. Though it turned my mind cloudy and my emotions stunted, my life had returned to blissful normalcy.

But now. Now...

I noted a heavy iron padlock secured to the door of the cage. "Could I get some of this as well?" I called out, motioning to the vials.

Leona followed where I was pointing with wide, panicked eyes. Again she looked around for spying eyes and ears, her motions more frantic than before. She rushed over to the cage and yanked a piece of fabric over the top to conceal its contents, then whipped back to me. "Why do you need *that*?"

"We ran out," I said hesitantly. "Is there a problem?"

"What do you use it for?"

I could sense in her tone that the question was a test—a dangerous test.

"I, uh... I'm not sure. I'd have to check my mother's notes." A careful answer.

"How did you get any in the first place? You need permission from all nine Crowns to get even an ounce of that."

I couldn't think fast enough to stop my look of shock.

"That cage is warded so only the King of Fortos can open it," Leona hissed. "Even the Chief Healer doesn't have access. How did you get some?" Her voice turned shrill, almost accusatory. "*How?*"

“I must be mistaken,” I blurted. “It must be something else. I was just... confused.”

Her eyes shrunk to suspicious slits.

“What I need—it’s not that red.” I grappled for a plausible excuse, my brain still reeling from what Leona had just revealed. “Beetbark,” I finally eked out. “I’m looking for beetbark.”

The old woman darted off, disappearing behind a rack before emerging with a handful of jars of a deep magenta mixture dotted with clumps of chalky white stone. “Is this what you had in your stores?”

I nodded vehemently.

She shoved it close to my face, eyebrows a mile skyward. “Are you sure? You’re sure it was this?”

“Yes—yes, it was this. Pink, not red. I was confused.” I grabbed one of the jars and shoved it into my pack, offering a tense smile. “That’s the one.”

A heavy exhale escaped Leona’s mouth. She slid into a nearby chair, rubbing at the deep grooves that cut across her forehead.

I must have had a death wish at the words that came out of my mouth next, but I had to know.

“The red powder—why is it so regulated?”

Leona’s weary eyes turned up to me. Her lips pressed into a razor thin line. “It’s time for you to leave.” Her meaning was clear: the conversation was over. Not just for today—forever.

I offered a strained thank you and all but sprinted to the exit. I had almost crossed the threshold when I heard Leona call my name. When I turned back, her gaze had hardened, her features pulled taut.

“Merely knowing that powder exists is enough for the Crown to order your execution, girl. I don’t know what that mother of yours was up to down in Lumnos, but you need to stay far away from it.”

I walked away from the building as fast as my feet could carry me.

Chapter

Ten

That night, Henri secured a room at an inn above a local tavern to spare us the misery of camping on Fortos's hard, rocky soil.

The tavern was warm and raucous, alive with boisterous voices that rang out with laughter, debate, and the occasional drinking song. In the middle of the room was a roaring fireplace that filled the air with the scent of smoke and pine.

I scanned the room, quietly grateful there wasn't a Descended in sight. Though the villages of Fortos were not nearly as segregated as Lumnos, it seemed the mortals and the Descended wisely kept to their own where drinking was involved.

After ordering a hot dinner and pints of ale, Henri and I curled up at a small table near the fire. I did my best to smile and nod as he recounted the news he'd heard from around the realms, but my mind was on the other side of town, locked in a cage behind a warded padlock that apparently only the King of Fortos himself could unlatch.

The powder I'd seen in that cage was flameroot powder—*my* powder. That much, I was certain of. That bottle, that consistency, that color—it was too distinct to be a coincidence.

But why would a medicine be so strictly controlled by the Crowns of Emarion? What could it do that the Descended were so afraid of? And how had my mother gotten her hands on bottle after bottle of it?

"And that's how I decided to go to Faunos and ask them to turn me into a half-peacock, half-leopard. I really think it will spice up our sex life, you know?"

I blinked at Henri a few times. "Wait—what?"

He smirked. "Ah, you *are* listening."

My cheeks flushed, lashes lowering. "I'm sorry. Long day."

"Anything you want to talk about?" He nudged my untouched plate and still-full pint in silent encouragement. "You've looked like a ghost all

afternoon.”

I took a long swig of my drink. Stalling.

“Just a lot of memories of my mother, that’s all.”

He reached across the table, his fingers brushing against my own. “Did anything happen?”

The truth clung to my lips, nearly spilling off my tongue. Instead, I shook my head and pushed my fork around my plate.

“Diem... whatever it is, I would never judge you.”

I swallowed. He knew me too well. “The red powder I take—have you ever seen it in any of your deliveries?”

“The flameroot?” I nodded, and his eyebrows lifted. “Is this about what happened last night?”

“No.” He gave me a look, and I sighed. “Maybe. I ran out of it, and without my mother, I don’t know how to get more.”

He rolled his eyes, though the slight curl of his mouth told me it was more playful than annoyed. “The wolf last night was real, D. You aren’t having delusions again, I promise.”

“I’d feel better if I knew how to get more. Just in case.”

He paused for a moment, then leaned back in his chair, eyes glazing in thought. “I haven’t ever seen it myself, but I can ask around to some of the other couriers, they may have—”

“No!” I cried out quickly. A handful of patrons glanced at me in alarm.

If word got to the wrong person that Henri knew about the flameroot—worse, that he was trying to obtain some...

I pulled my hand away from his and tucked it into my lap. “There’s no need for that. I’m sure the recipe is in my mother’s records. Forget I said anything.”

I grabbed my utensils and dug into the plate of food in front of me, stuffing my mouth so I couldn’t say more. I might as well have been chewing on soil for all I tasted it, panic having dulled every sense other than the drumbeat of my heart in my ears.

Henri frowned. “Diem, what’s going on?”

The Old Gods must have been looking out for me, because I was spared from responding by the arrival of a swaggering, thick-bearded man. His lean body cast a shadow on our plates as he sauntered up to our table.

“I heard Henri Albanon was wandering around town with a gorgeous woman, but I was so sure it was a dirty lie that I bet my cutlass on it. Looks

like I'm about to be one blade poorer."

Henri snorted as he gripped the man's forearm in greeting. "Good to see you, Brecke. I would pretend to be insulted, but I can't believe she's willing to be seen with me, either."

"That makes three of us," I teased.

Brecke grinned. "And a fiery one, too. Are all Lumnos women like her? Maybe I'm in the wrong realm."

Henri slid an arm around my waist and tucked me possessively into his side. "I assure you, there's not another woman like this in all of Emarion." He winked at me, his smile radiant with affection, and my heart stumbled. "Brecke, this is Diem Bellator. Diem, meet Brecke Holdern."

The man appeared to be deep into his third decade, and despite the faint web of creases at his eyes and mouth, the brightness of his joy brought a youthful charm. His dark hair was closely cropped in the usual military style, and he wore a tunic embroidered with a rounded temple surrounded by a nine-leaved laurel wreath, part of the standard-issue Emarion Army uniform. Though the fabric's brown color marked him as a mortal tradesman, his arms and legs were trim and cut with muscles, and his skin was littered with scars—the body of a soldier.

I offered a hand in greeting, and his amusement faltered as he took me in. He grabbed my forearm and roughly pulled me closer, leaning his face to my own. "Your eyes. They're..."

My smile vanished. "Grey."

"I've never seen anything like it." His eyes—chestnut, with a touch of gold—narrowed. "Even the Descended don't have those."

"Childhood illness," I said bluntly, tugging my arm from his grasp.

He tilted his head as he looked me over head to toe, studying me more closely.

"If you don't believe me," I said coolly, bristling at the scrutiny, "you're welcome to take that cutlass you mentioned and see if my skin is as tough to pierce as a Descended's." I thumbed the weapon at my hip. "Though I can't promise you won't lose a limb in the process."

He gave a wicked grin. He crossed his arms, eyes lighting up at the challenge. "A Bellator, indeed."

My chin lifted in pride. I may not have been a Bellator by birth, but I took upholding my father's venerated name as a sacred duty.

Henri, visibly uneasy at the whole exchange, cleared his throat. He motioned for Brecke to pull up a chair, and the two men soon fell into a lively chat about mutual friends whose names I didn't recognize. I let my mind wander as I focused on my dinner, though I marked how Brecke shot me glances every time Henri looked away.

Eventually the men's conversation slowed, and Brecke turned to me directly. "Andrei is your father, then?" I nodded, and his expression smoothed, as if he'd solved some great mystery. "And Auralie is your mother."

"You know my mother?" That was unexpected—though deeply respected among the healers' circles, she was relatively unknown otherwise. I motioned to his tradesman tunic. "Are you a healer?"

"No, my trade is far less honorable than the noble healers." He flashed a wide, toothy grin. "I'm a bladesmith. I made a weapon for your mother once."

Another surprise. My mother never went anywhere unarmed, a trait I'd chalked up to my father's insistence, but unlike me, she was careful to always keep her weapons carefully concealed. I thought back over her collection of subtle, easily hidden blades and wondered which one had come from his hands.

"She's a hell of a woman, that Auralie," he said. "I can see where you get it from."

Another flutter of pride danced through me, this time shadowed with the whisper of grief.

"How did you meet her?" I asked.

Before Brecke could respond, the table jolted as if struck. He and Henri exchanged matching glares that had my brows rising, but Brecke rubbed his leg and quickly continued.

"We met in the army, and we've stayed in touch since then." His focus ticked down to the sheaths at my hip. "I can make one for you, too, if you'd like. Something quick and stealthy to replace those giant... *things* you're hauling around." His voice dropped, eyes gleaming. "And sharp enough to pierce through thick Descended hide without losing a limb."

I frowned at my twin daggers. I'd stolen them from my father when I was twelve. My childhood judgment had been awed by their heft and sturdiness, and they had served me well enough in the years since—if, admittedly, a bit bulky at times.

“In fact, I’ve got something that would be perfect for you.” He reached into his boot and pulled out a short, thin blade. Its smooth metal was the color of a storm-darkened sky—the telltale sign of Fortosian steel, one of the only substances that could pierce Descended skin. Its onyx handle was carved with wavering flames on one side and interwoven branches on the other. He balanced it between his fingers, running a thumb along its edge until a wisp of blood appeared, before sliding it across the table to me.

It was an exquisite weapon, the kind I’d normally have to save for years to afford. And if I was going to work at the Descended palace, it would be good to have a blade that might do me some good if things went *really* poorly.

“I can’t,” I said, even as I ran a fingertip longingly along the cool metal. “It’s beautiful, but I can’t possibly pay for it.”

Brecke shrugged. “Take it.” He unclipped the matching sheath from his boot and tossed it to me.

“You can’t mean that. You could sell this for a small fortune.”

“If I sold it for what it was worth, only the Descended could afford it.” His jovial mask slipped for a split second, something like resentment darting across his features. “I get enough of arming their kind during the day. Just promise me you’ll watch this one’s back.” His smirk returned as he elbowed Henri in the ribs.

Hesitantly, I dared to pick it up. Its weight was shockingly light despite its sturdy feel, but well-balanced in my hand. My fingers grazed the etching along the hilt, noting how the deep grooves caught my skin and improved my grip. A clever design—as much function as form. And the dull grey metal had been brushed to a matte finish, allowing it to be concealed more easily in the dark.

A weapon more suited to an assassin than a healer.

I almost whimpered as I offered it back to him. “I really can’t take this, it’s too generous.”

He raised his hands, refusing to touch it. “Then pay me in a favor. One favor, to be chosen and called in at some later date.”

“What favor?” Henri cut in. He shot his friend a frown that suggested he knew exactly the kinds of *favors* Brecke usually traded in.

“Don’t get your breeches twisted. Nothing scandalous—unless the lady prefers scandal.” His expression turned positively wolflike.

“The lady does not,” I answered. “Nothing illegal, and if it involves touching any part of you, I’ll slit you open with your own blade.” The threat only seemed to excite him even further. “But I’ll agree to any other favor within my power to do.”

“And nothing dangerous,” Henri added.

Brecke and I shot him matching exasperated looks.

“If it’s not dangerous, it’s not worth wasting a favor on,” I said as I sheathed the dagger and secured it to my boot. I marveled at how its sleek lines were almost undetectable against my calf.

Brecke roared with laughter. “Albanon, you better hold on to this one.” He slapped a very nervous-looking Henri on the arm. “If you can.”

Chapter

Eleven

I awoke to a cold, empty room.

Hours earlier, I'd left Henri and Brecke in the tavern downstairs, content to let them drink and banter while I enjoyed the solitude of a hot bath, but the more I'd soaked alone in the steaming water, the more my mind had flooded with the many demons nipping at my heels.

My missing mother. The agreement between her and Prince Luther. Teller's schooling. The wolf in the woods. The flameroot powder.

Each question was a stone slab in an wall surrounding me on all sides, thick and ivy-coated like the one I'd seen encircling the palace gardens, a beautiful but impenetrable cage. My mind hurled itself at the barrier, clawing for answers, but my pathetic mortal fists only scraped and bled as the wall inched closer and closer, squeezing at my soul.

In retrospect, solitude might not have been such a good idea.

After only a few minutes, I'd scrubbed hastily at my skin and hair before scurrying back to the room and collapsing into the scratchy cotton sheets, grateful to succumb to the refuge of sleep.

But now I was wide awake, and the empty expanse of bed beside me was cold and still neatly made. Henri had not yet come back.

A peek through the window at the moon hanging low in the sky told me dawn was nearing. Worry crept up the nape of my neck, forcing me out of bed and back into my clothing and blades.

As I wandered through the dim hallway and down the stairs to the tavern, worn hardwood planks creaked under my footsteps, slicing through the heavy silence. The air was thick with the scent of stale ale and damp wood, but there was no lively chatter from the patrons, no clink of glasses and dishware. Like the mottled brass sconces lining the walls, the vibrant signs of life that had illuminated the room hours before had all been extinguished for the night.

A hiss of whispers lured me deeper into the dining room. Around the corner, a group of eight men crowded around a wobbly, rough-hewn table, a single candle at the center casting ghoulish shadows that waltzed along the oak-paneled walls. Their shoulders hunched forward, expressions excited but earnest, as they murmured in low voices.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I spotted the dimpled jawline and disheveled hair of Henri's profile seated beside Brecke. The grin that had earlier seemed permanently stamped on Brecke's face was gone, replaced by knitted brows and a hand rubbing unhappily at his beard.

One of the men slammed his fist into the table, and I flattened against the wall. As emotions and voices grew hot, fleeting words and stunted phrases made their way through the room.

"...we cannot allow..."

"...send word to the others..."

"...gathering forces..."

"...almost time..."

"...war..."

The last word struck like a viper, fangs sinking into my skin.

War.

What war? Emarion had been at peace for my lifetime. If there were threats from abroad, surely my father would have mentioned something.

Or perhaps, with Mother missing, he would have kept any troubling news to himself to spare us from further worry. Just as Teller and I had been keeping our problems from him—and each other.

Anxiety tightened around my neck. As a mortal, Teller was now considered an adult by law. If there was a war, he would be drafted to fight.

And so would Henri.

And so, too, might my father. Despite his retirement, his expertise would be invaluable, and the loyalty he commanded among the mortal forces was unmatched.

And I would be left behind. Alone—unless I abandoned Lumnos to join the army, too. Unless I traded in my life as a healer to pick up a weapon and *fight*.

Fight, the voice inside me echoed.

A tingling sensation coated my skin, and the world around me went dark as a hazy image shimmered in my mind's eye.

I was standing on a battlefield aflame with silvery fire, clad in armor of deepest black that concealed mud and gore, the speckled evidence of war. My bloodied hands bore a great gold-handled broadsword whose onyx blade was veined with scrollwork that seemed almost illuminated from within. I swung the blade around me in slow, menacing circles that dared my enemy to approach. A shadowed figure stood nearby, and lifeless bodies—Descended and mortal—lay in a broad ring at my feet, as if they'd been thrown back by the force of a massive explosion. My face was grim, undaunted. Sad, I think—but strong. *Unbreakably* strong.

I cursed myself again for destroying my flameroot supply and leaving myself vulnerable to these delusions, but something about this vision was... different. Unlike the vivid hallucinations of my childhood, which had felt lucid and entirely real, this seemed more like a glimpse into something vague, something possible. Not a reality that was, but a fate that could be.

The vision faded as quickly as it came, leaving behind an energy humming in my blood. Though I was once again empty-handed in a dark tavern, I could still feel the glossy metal of the sword in my grip, still smell the rotten scent of death wafting on an imagined breeze. That sensation of power—no, of *being* powerful—was intoxicating in a way that left me as intrigued as I was unsettled.

My cheeks flushed as reality settled back in. I had no place on a battlefield—I was a healer, not a soldier. And even if I was equally as adept with blade or bow, my father had taught me better than to romanticize bloodshed.

War is no game, he'd once scolded after spying me giggling as I waged mock warfare against Teller with rocks and wooden sticks. *War is death and misery and sacrifice. War is making choices that will haunt you for the rest of your days. You fight to protect, or to survive, but never for the joy of killing, no matter how brutal your enemy.*

If war truly was coming, there would be no glory in it. Not for Teller, or Henri, or my father, and certainly not for me.

I was about to return to the inn when my eye snagged on one of the men. He had propped his arm on the table, his dirt-mottled sleeve pushed to his elbow. There, on his forearm, in stark lines engraved on pale skin, was a vine-encircled flaming tree. The Everflame—the same tattoo I'd seen on Henri's shoulder.

My eyes raked across the other men. There again—on a calf, protruding from the hem of cropped breeches. Another on a chest, edging out from an unbuttoned tunic. The bicep of another, midnight ink barely visible through a white linen sleeve. One more, hidden beneath tied-up hair.

Each of the men bore the symbol on their flesh, a permanent mark of some chain that connected them.

Henri had lied to me. I'd asked him directly about the tattoo's meaning, and he'd *lied* to me.

To honor the Old Gods, he'd said.

Honor the Old Gods, my ass.

I gritted my teeth and stalked out of the shadows across the tavern. Chairs screeched as I shoved them out of my path. The men startled at the sound, several tugging at their sleeves and collars to conceal the tattoos they'd so brazenly exposed moments earlier.

Henri jumped to his feet. "Diem!"

His guilty wince only stoked my irritation. Whatever he'd been doing, he obviously hadn't wanted me to know about it.

"These are my friends." He gestured to the table. "Everyone, this is Diem, the girl I was telling you about."

The men offered a chorus of nods and grunts in greeting but studiously refused to meet my glare.

"I thought you were asleep," Henri said. It sounded like a confession.

"I woke up," I snapped. "A word, please."

The other men glanced at each other and at Henri, the corners of their lips quivering with the effort not to laugh at the domestic doom their comrade had landed himself in. All except for Brecke, who was grinning outright.

I turned and marched back up the stairs to our room, spinning on him as the door closed behind him.

"I'm sorry," he started, "I didn't realize how late—"

"I don't care that you were out late. I'm not your wife." Henri flinched. "What does the tattoo really mean, and why do all of you have it?"

He opened his mouth and paused, hunting for an answer—and failing, judging by his silence.

"*'For the Old Gods'*, was it?" My glare was scathing. "I can't believe you lied to me."

“It wasn’t a lie, exactly...” He scratched the back of his neck, still avoiding my eyes.

“Are you all fools?” I smacked my palm lightly against his shoulder, and he staggered several steps back, eyes wide with surprise. “Do you understand how much trouble you could get in if anyone saw that?”

“We’re careful. We don’t let anyone see them.”

“Like you didn’t let *me* see them?”

He rubbed at his shoulder. “That’s different. I wasn’t trying to hide it from you. There’s no Descended anywhere near here.”

“Have you gone mad?” My voice was hoarse with the effort of not screaming at him, mindful of the thin walls and dangerous topics. “By the Flames, Henri, we’re in *Fortos*. The army painted this whole cursed continent red the last time a group of mortals got together under that symbol.”

His expression shifted, the lines of his face hardening in a way that made him seem older and weathered. “I am well aware of that, Diem.”

“Tell me what’s going on.” I crossed my arms, one brow raised expectantly.

His voice went quiet. “Like you’ve told me what’s going on with you?”

A long silence passed between us.

My conscience scolded me that he was right. I’d been pulling away from him for weeks, and his secrets, whatever they were, surely paled in comparison to the turmoil I was so carefully concealing from him.

But there was another voice. A louder voice.

Fight.

It was a creature of its own, this *thing* inside of me. It was a lit match that eternally wavered above the pile of kindling that was my shredded soul, a drumbeat that called my temper to arms at every provocation.

Henri rubbed at his face. “I don’t want to argue with you, but it’s safer if you don’t know.”

“I don’t need you to protect me. I’m not going to break.”

“Are you sure about that?” he snapped. “You haven’t exactly been stable lately.”

Fight.

Words bubbled up in my mouth. Awful words. Unforgivable words. Words that would break us in irreparable ways.

And it wasn't just words. The thoughts that were raging through my head struck true fear into my heart, even as they grew louder and more insistent.

Fight.

My eyes squeezed closed.

I... I wanted to *hurt* him. Break his bones. Claw his skin until he bled.

The thought horrified me.

Captivated me.

Purred to me.

"Go back downstairs to your friends," I forced out between clenched teeth. My quivering hands flexed and fisted, over and over.

The anger deflated out of him. "Wait, Diem, I'm sorry." He stepped forward and reached for me. I jerked away and staggered backward, my panic coming out as disgust. Henri looked as if I'd slapped him, but I was terrified I would do worse if he stayed.

So much worse.

Fight.

"Now," I snarled at him. "Go!"

He stared at me for a few seconds, heartbreak in his eyes, then turned and walked out of the room.

Chapter Twelve

If anything was worse than fighting with Henri, it was the awkward tension that came next.

At some point in the night, Henri returned to the room and fell asleep beside me, but even after we rose at dawn and gathered our things to travel back to Lumnos, the silence between us remained. Occasionally his eyes would linger on me, his muscles bunching as if he was straining against a pull to speak, but he held his tongue, and so did I.

As we stood outside the inn readying our horses, two of the men from the previous evening stopped to bid us a safe journey. I gave them restrained smiles and a polite enough thanks, but when one leaned in to whisper in Henri's ear, Henri's eyes met mine and my smile vanished.

We made our way back onto the wide, desolate path of the Ring Road. Our horses marched alongside each other, the thick silence punctuated only by the drum of their steady hoofbeats.

I'd wanted to hurt him.

The thought wouldn't stop haunting me. This loyal, kind-hearted man who had always been my closest friend... In that moment last night, I'd wanted to break his heart, and then break his bones.

The worst part was that I wasn't sure I wouldn't have done it. If he'd stayed longer, if he'd come closer—I couldn't shake the feeling that I wouldn't have been able to stop myself.

I'd always been a spitfire, and proud of it. An unbreakable spirit in a world that wanted me to be quiet, small, subservient. But no longer was that spark manifesting in courage or innocent mischief. Now, it had become something destructive. Something deadly.

And if I couldn't learn to control it soon, I feared it would destroy me—or the people I loved most.

We were several hours into our painfully withdrawn trip when I gave in and breached the silence.

“You were right.”

His attention jerked to me, looking like he had never been more relieved to hear a sound in his life.

“I wasn’t,” he said quickly. “What I said was out of line.”

“No, you weren’t. You were right. I *am* broken.” My voice faltered on the last word, and I squeezed my eyes shut. “Or breaking, at least.”

His leg nudged mine as he brought his horse closer.

“It’s not the worst thing to break a little every now and then. It builds character.” Even without seeing him, I heard the teasing in his voice, his gentle peace offering.

So I offered one in return. “You’re starting to sound like the Commander again.”

“I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.” When I opened my eyes, he was smiling. A monstrous weight lifted from my chest—not gone forever, but enough that I felt a flush of old familiar joy bloom through my blood.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I meant it.

“So am I.” And I knew he meant it, too. “I know you too well to try forcing you to talk about your feelings, but you know I’ll be here if you need me, right? Always. No matter what.”

My heart squeezed. It was all I could manage to smile and nod.

We continued without speaking for many long minutes, both of us quietly unspooling as the hours of tension eased away. This time, it was Henri who broke the silence.

“About a year ago, I watched one of the Descended kill a mortal boy.”

My eyes shot to his, but his gaze stayed fixed ahead, his expression grim.

“I was making a delivery in Lumnos City. The boy was delivering pears from a farm out west. He couldn’t have been more than fourteen, right out of school. He was crossing the road, but his arms were loaded with crates, and he couldn’t see...” He pulled in a shaky breath. “One of *them* was riding a giant horse—the biggest horse I’ve ever seen. I’ll never forget it. White as snow, with a patch of black between its eyes, and as tall as a house. Gold ribbon in its mane. And it was going so fast. Too fast for a busy road like that.”

He shuddered, and my stomach lurched.

“It was an accident. I know that. Just an accident. But the Descended...” His eyes blazed with remembered anger. “He barely even stopped. Gods, he was *swearing* at the boy for getting mud on his pretty jeweled saddle. When I told him the boy was dead, he sat there in his gold and finery and he looked at that boy’s corpse like it was *nothing*. He just brushed the dust off his horse and rode away.”

Henri’s fingers clenched around his pommel. His fingernails dug tiny half-moons into the leather with enough fury to suggest he was envisioning squeezing something else between his hands.

“I carried the boy’s body to three different villages, but no one knew who he was. I buried him on our family’s land so I can at least return his bones to his kin, if I ever find them.”

A chill rattled through me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because then I would have had to tell you what I did next.”

He clenched his jaw, still avoiding my gaze.

“I was so angry, Diem. It snapped something in me. Our whole lives they’ve trampled all over us, just like he did to that boy, and they don’t care. They leave us in the dirt, as if our lives are worthless.” His voice was rising, growing louder and more fervent. “So I decided if they could take a life from us, I could take one from them. I put on every weapon I could carry, and I went back to that street and waited. Every day for a week, I waited for the man to come back down that road, and I knew that when he did, I was going to kill him. I didn’t even care if I died in the process. I wanted them to see us, even if that was the only way to get them to look.”

“Henri,” I breathed sadly.

I’d almost lost him, and I hadn’t even known it. I’d been off somewhere teasing Teller, or perhaps working at the center, and all the while, Henri had been a few miles away, resigning himself to certain death.

I fumbled for the right words to comfort him, to convince him I could never judge him for it. I, of all people, knew what it was to be so consumed with anger that everything else was cast aside and forgotten. But that would require admitting a secret of my own.

He winced and continued. “A man found me—a mortal man. He took one look at me, and somehow he knew what I was there to do. He said I could die a meaningless death on one act of vengeance, or I could channel it into something bigger. Something that mattered. Something that would make a lot more of them pay than just that one man.” He finally turned his

gaze to me. His features had shifted to a serene, almost reverent expression. “When I said the tattoo was to honor the Old Gods, I meant it. They were watching over me that day.”

“Who was the man?” I asked.

He briefly scanned the road for prying ears and eyes. “I can’t tell you his name. It’s one of the rules: never reveal the identity of any member, even to those we trust completely. It’s a group for mortals who refuse to accept the Descended as the rulers of Emarion. We fight back in whatever ways we can. We call ourselves the Guardians of the Everflame.”

My body locked up, my heart jumping to my throat. “But that’s the name—”

“Of the mortal rebellion during the Blood War,” he finished with a nod. “The Descended thought they’d crushed it completely, but some of the rebel cells survived. They’ve been operating in secret ever since, gathering information and weapons. The hope is that someday we’ll be strong enough to try again and actually win.”

War. Last night, I’d heard them whispering of it. I could barely catch my breath as new questions and fears tumbled through me.

“And when is ‘someday’?” I asked.

“We can’t afford to act too early and fail again, but many think the blood sun on Forging Day was a message from the Old Gods that the time is coming soon. But only if...” He hesitated. “Only if we have more mortals on the inside.”

“Is that why your father is working as the palace courier?”

“No.” His features sharpened. “My father is not supportive of the rebel effort. Nor is he aware of my involvement.” He shot me a meaningful look, a silent request.

“I won’t say anything,” I said quickly. “To him or anyone else.”

He slowed his horse to a stop and adjusted in his saddle to face me directly. “Join us, Diem. The access you would have at the palace as their healer would be invaluable. You could find out their weaknesses, how to get around their healing abilities, maybe even test out different poisons by telling them it’s medicinal.”

A sick, greasy feeling twisted my gut. Healers took vows to save lives. To use my knowledge and the sacred trust of my patients to do them harm instead...

As horrible as the Descended were, I wasn't sure I could stoop that low.

Henri seemed to notice my apprehension. "You could at least pass along any information you overhear. Military things—movements of their armies, weapons they're developing."

As I gazed off at the road ahead, it struck me that this might finally be my opportunity to choose my own future. My family, my tiny village, even my work as a healer—these were all paths laid out for me by my mother. Even my body had lately felt like a prisoner to unwelcome thoughts and emotions.

And *voices*.

Mad as it was to work against the godlike creatures that were the Descended—this was something I could choose for myself. Whatever the consequences, they would be mine and mine alone.

Surely the Descended, and especially the royals, would not be foolish enough to divulge useful information in my presence. But if they did, if they slipped up—and if it was information that would not harm my patients, but rather protect innocent mortals...

Maybe that was exactly what I needed.

The *voice* kept demanding that I fight. Maybe instead of fighting *someone*, what I needed was something to fight *for*. Maybe I could channel the temper smoldering inside me and direct it somewhere it could help someone, instead of slowly burning me to ash. And if Prince Luther or any other Descended were responsible for my mother's disappearance, who better than the Guardians to help me find the truth?

But...

I took a vow. A vow so precious and sacrosanct that it was the foundation of a healer's training. A vow that a healer could be banned forever for violating. If I was caught, it would end my career. My mother would be ashamed of me, Maura might never speak to me again.

And worse, it would undermine my fellow healers. If our patients did not trust us to keep their secrets, they might not call on us when they needed help. Innocent people could die needless, preventable deaths.

No. I couldn't do it. That line was too important, too sacred to cross.

But... *but*.

"I'll think about it," I said finally.

Henri grinned and nodded as enthusiastically as if I'd given my full-throated agreement. He nudged his horse forward, and we continued down the path. "You won't be alone. I'll be there, and—well, I can't tell you yet. But there's other members you know. Maybe we could recruit Teller, too. The information he's learning at that Descended school—"

"Absolutely not." I shook my head vehemently. "Leave Teller out of this, Henri. He's too young. I don't want him involved."

"He's not a child, Diem, he's nearly a grown man. He might want to help."

"I don't care. I'll consider helping you, but only if you keep him out of it. Those are my terms."

"It should be his choice—"

"Promise me, Henri."

A shade of judgment passed across his features, but he raised his palms in surrender and gave me a curt nod. "Alright. I promise."

"And I'm not getting a tattoo, either. Unlike you and your friends, I have no desire to get skinned alive when the Descended spot it."

"Fair enough." He scoured my body with a heated gaze. "I like your skin the way it is, anyway."

I arched a brow. "Does your little tree club even take women as members? I didn't see any last night."

"My *little tree club* is run by a woman."

"Really?" I straightened. "In Lumnos?"

I could imagine that happening in some of the more progressive realms, but Lumnos and its dated traditions had always been a challenging place for women who wanted something other than being a wife and mother, as honorable as those sacred roles may be.

"Who is it? Do I know her?"

"I can't say. No revealing anyone's identity, remember?"

My shoulders slumped. "Would I get to work with her?"

"I hope so," he said, his eyes softening with some inscrutable emotion. "She is a force to be reckoned with—just like you."

As we continued our journey, Henri chattered on excitedly with veiled hints about the group and its surreptitious activities, broken by loaded gaps of silence that felt like held breaths whenever another traveler would pass us on the road.

He eagerly recounted missions he'd completed, mostly delivering messages among members within Lumnos or to cells in neighboring realms. He spoke of how he'd been working to persuade his father to let him assist with palace courier duties so he could intercept royal communications, though his father knew enough of Henri's hatred of the Descended to thus far refuse him.

I listened without comment, remarking how his face lit up with each story. He was so proud, so certain of his path. I knew I should be more worried, perhaps try to convince him away from an activity that could so easily get him killed, but it kindled a hearth in my heart to see him full of joy again. Maybe he needed a purpose as much as I did.

And to be able to share it with each other—maybe that was what we needed to bring us back together and restore what we'd been before my mother's disappearance.

"There's something else I've been wanting to talk to you about." His voice had changed, reined in by apprehension. "About us."

I stiffened. Had my thoughts been so obvious on my face?

He took a deep breath and reached across to take my hand in his clammy fingers. "I love you, Diem. The truth is, I've loved you my entire life. All the other girls I've been with, I was always just biding my time until you were ready to give me a chance."

My heart tripped over itself. We'd never said those words to each other before. Never even come close.

He looked at me with expectation in his eyes, and my mind became a whirlwind of frantic thoughts.

Did I love him? Yes, of course I did. He was my longest, dearest friend, as close to me as family. But maybe... maybe I didn't love him like he loved me. Or maybe I did, but the thought of what it might mean—what he might want from me in return...

The sweep of his thumb against the back of my hand felt like sandpaper over my skin. I had to fight to resist the urge to yank it free.

"I know we're still figuring this out," he said, gesturing between us, "but there's one thing I do know. You're my girl, Diem Bellator. You're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. And I was hoping you would do me the honor..."

My mouth went dry. "I care about you, too," I blurted out. "So, so much. And with so many hard decisions in my life to make right now, I'm

so happy that I can be with you and just... relax. Without any pressure.”

Shame weighed on my heart. I knew what he was about to say. What he was about to *ask*.

And, like a coward, I was running from it.

A shadow of disappointment darkened his eyes. He nodded and squeezed my thigh as we set back on the path and continued the long trek back to Lumnos. I avoided his gaze the entire way home, but his words—and our future—consumed my thoughts.

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Chapter Thirteen

Two weeks had passed since our trip to Fortos, and for the first time in a long time, I felt a glimmer of hope.

The day I'd returned, I'd burst into the center and boldly announced my decision to take over my mother's duties at the palace. Although Maura put up a fine enough argument in my mother's honor, I saw her flood of relief when she finally relented.

In the days since, I'd pored over my mother's records, familiarized myself with the small trove of potions and powders that were reserved for their treatment (none of which, to my dismay, included flameroot), and spent several long evenings being tutored by Maura on all the eccentricities of treating the powerful beings that I'd been so carefully segregated from all these years.

With all the secrecy my mother had shrouded it in, I'd expected some grand reveal that might justify her efforts, but in the end, their treatment wasn't all that different from the mortals.

There was one substance I'd learned could be lethal to the Descended: godstone, a rare material that could only be made by the Kindred. If formed into a projectile or blade, a serious strike could be instantly fatal, and even minor blows risked an infection from its lethal toxin. Though harmless to mortals, its effects were ferociously destructive to Descended, a gruesome and painful death with no known antidote.

It was the one piece of knowledge that lingered and haunted my thoughts for days afterward. This was precisely the kind of information Henri's rebel group would want to know.

If I decided to work with them.

And so, armed with an arsenal of newly acquired wisdom, I was ready to accompany Maura on her visits to the palace. Our first trip would be simple and quick—a final follow-up to check on the two youngest children who'd been hurt in the roof collapse weeks earlier.

“No shortcuts through the garden this time, I suppose,” I mused as we passed the patch of forest where Elric had led us through the hidden hole in the stone wall.

Another detail Henri’s rebels would be thrilled to discover.

“You’d do well to forget that ever happened,” Maura warned. “If they find out you know about an unguarded entrance into the palace, you’ll be lucky if losing your post as healer is the only consequence.”

“Front door it is, then,” I offered cheerfully.

And what a front door it was.

If the back of the palace seemed to be molded of glittering moonlight, the front was the dark side of its magnificent coin. Writhing, ominous shadows skulked along the facade as twisting vines in a perpetual state of growth. The dark cords knotted and twined along every balustrade and spire, looking like a nest of black vipers coiling to strike. The palace seemed to pulse with their endless movement—the throbbing, blackened heart of the realm.

It was incredibly intimidating, no doubt by design. I struggled to imagine how any potential enemy could take a single look at the shadowy edifice and not take off running in the opposite direction.

But what really stole every word from my lips was no feat of architecture, but the creature that guarded it. Like a living, breathing gargoyle, the beast reclined on a landing high atop the palace walls, its furred tail swishing idly as two glittering eyes skimmed the surrounding lands.

A gryvern.

I’d heard stories of them in school and seen their likeness stitched and carved into various materials around the realm, but to see one with my own eyes felt like walking into the pages of a fairytale.

The spiked, scaled head of a sea dragon. The wings and front talons of an eagle. The body of a lion. Kings of the sea, sky, and land—all transformed into a single beast. The fearsome amalgamation was the stuff of nightmares, unlike any other creature in our world.

When the Kindred arrived in the mortal realm many millennia ago, each of the nine sibling deities brought a gryvern as their companion and guardian. At the Forging, the Kindred bound the immortal beasts to an eternity of service to the Crowns of each realm. Only seven remained living, as the gryverns of Fortos and Montios had been killed by mortal

rebels during the Blood War. Though their deaths had been a great victory to the rebellion, a profound sadness struck me at the thought of such a glorious animal meeting its end.

Sunlight shimmered off the creature's iridescent scales, their smooth, dark surface reflecting a rainbow sheen like oil puddled beneath a lamp. A passing breeze ruffled the soft down of the wings folded tight against its back.

As if it could feel the weight of my attention, the gryvern's golden eyes lowered to meet my own. Its slitted black pupils pulsed and thinned, twitching as they took me in. I paused my steps, transfixed by the creature's gaze.

With a sharp jerk, it launched into the air. The beat of its outstretched wings kicked up swirls of dust as it smoothly circled the palace in a graceful arc, howling a shrill note into the clouds. Its shadow passed over us as its broad wingspan blotted out the sun. Its course abruptly shifted downward, and it slammed into the front walkway with enough force to send a tremor rumbling through the earth.

Maura shrieked and stumbled back a few steps, unapologetically tucking behind me to shield herself. I wasn't offended—in fact, a part of me sang with pride that she believed me capable of protecting her from such a beast.

My chin joined my gaze in lowering with deference. I took a tentative step forward, hand hovering at the blade on my hips.

The gryvern took insult at the gesture, a growl thundering behind its bared fangs. Muscles rippled along its thick hide as a talon stretched forward and scraped down the tiled stone path.

I froze. My hands rose, empty palms outstretched. "We're no threat," I murmured, wondering if the creature could understand. "We're here to help."

It took another step, then another, its spiked snout stretching to within an arm's reach from my face. Its nostrils flared wide—smelling me. Its head tilted slightly, first one way, then another.

Behind me, Maura whimpered. "Can someone h-help us please?" she called out to the guards in a desperate voice. She tugged at my arm in an attempt to pull me to a safer distance.

I held my ground, attention fixed on the gryvern. There was something so curious about its eyes. Something expressive, almost human-like in their

captivating shrewdness.

“I mean you no harm,” I said in a soothing voice, the same one I used on my wildest patients. Slowly, cautiously, I extended a single hand, pulled forward by some unexplainable urge.

The creature’s eyes darted to my hand, then back to me. Just as slowly, just as cautiously, its neck arched forward to meet my touch.

“Sorae, get back to your perch,” a gruff voice barked.

The gryvern hissed and whipped its head around, the tuft of black fur at the end of its tail smacking the ground in a furious thrash. A flash of sunlight glinted off a golden medallion hung from a chain around its neck, engraved with the interlocking sun and moon that served as the sigil of Lumnos.

A guard strode forward and swatted the animal’s haunches, then motioned back toward the palace. “Easy, girl. They’re just mortals, nothing to worry over.”

My irritation piqued.

The gryvern’s lips curled back in a snarl at the guard, but it obeyed his command, prowling back toward the building.

The guard beckoned us forward. “My apologies. Sorae’s temper has been on edge since the King took ill. Everything sets her off these days.”

“She wasn’t angry, just curious,” I said.

The guard gave me an inquisitive look, one that was mirrored on Maura’s face.

I didn’t respond.

As it turned out, entering through the main entrance of the palace was a veritable gauntlet compared to the ease with which we had previously shuffled in through the garden doors.

Sword-wielding watchmen grilled us with no attempt to hide their condescension. They demanded our names, our qualifications, the contents of our bags, our duties at the palace. Maura, despite surely having been through this routine countless times in the past, remained perfectly patient, answering their increasingly rude questions without an ounce of defensiveness.

My confidence in my ability to take over this role without starting a war was fading with each passing second.

Eventually, the guards grunted their approval and tossed our bags back at our feet. We gathered our scattered belongings and turned toward the

cavernous, marble-coated foyer when an armored forearm swung into my chest and stopped me short.

The man's cerulean eyes flicked to my hips. "Mortals must surrender their weapons before entering."

My jaw tightened. There wasn't a chance in all the ice-capped caverns of hell that I would agree to walk into the lion's den unarmed.

"I need them for my duties here," I protested.

His lip curled. "None of your duties here should require a blade."

I patted the hilt of my dagger with a bitter smile. "This blade helped save your Princess Lilian's life the last time I was here."

We glared at each other through narrowed eyes, neither one relenting.

"Diem," Maura hissed, a plea and a warning.

"Get Prince Luther," one of the guards commanded. "It's his call to make."

Maura waved a hand frantically. "No, no—that won't be necessary. She'll leave them here. Right, Diem?"

The guard smirked at me. "That's exactly what she'll do." He reached for me, one hand clutching harshly to my shoulder. His other palm brushed against my breast as he reached to grab my blade, and his lecherous smile left no doubt the act was intentional.

My control snapped, and my training took over. Before his fingertips could graze the hilt of my knife, I had one hand on his wrist, the other crossed to clamp onto his forearm. Then I was twisting, turning, using his momentum against him until his arm was locked at an awkward angle at his back and he was on his knees, grunting in pain and shock.

A simple maneuver, one of the first my father ever taught me. Effective even on an enemy twice your size.

Around me rang the peal of swords sliding free from their scabbards, pinning me into a circle of razor-sharp blades pointed directly at my chest.

"Well this is off to a flawless start," I muttered under my breath.

Maura yelped as a guard stepped forward and grabbed her, putting his knife to her neck.

"Get your hands off of her or you're a dead man," I snarled. The guard at my feet thrashed against my grip, and I twisted his arm further, drawing another pained groan.

It was unexpectedly easy to hold him in place, and from the confused looks his comrades leveled at me, I could tell they shared my surprise. My

father's training had kept me strong enough to handle the mortal men I'd scuffled with, but I had expected more of a challenge from the famously formidable Descended.

Another of the guards jabbed his blade in my direction. "Do you really think you can take us all, mortal?"

"Oh, just taking you would satisfy me enough." I shot a sympathetic look between his legs. "That must be the first time a woman's ever told you that."

Quiet snickers rippled through the room.

The guard's cheeks exploded into an angry red. He lunged for me. "You mortal slu—"

"Stand down."

The low, thunderous voice reverberated against the stone walls.

Collectively, our eyes climbed up the twin winding staircases to the imposing figure atop the landing. Tailored black suede breeches, a jacket of deepest midnight blue edged with silvered beading, jeweled sword, ebony hair tightly bound.

Prince Luther.

"I do not give second chances at following my commands," he barked.

His voice thrummed with an otherworldly power that filled the room with its presence. Even from across the expansive hall, I saw his icy stare settle on me.

The guards took a step back and sheathed their weapons, and the man who held Maura released her with a brutal shove that sent her cane clattering.

I held my ground.

Our eyes stayed locked as Luther stalked down the curving steps. He snatched Maura's cane from the ground, and handed it back to her, offering his arm out to her to clutch until her legs steadied. An annoying warmth pooled inside me at the chivalrous gesture.

"Your Highness," she stammered, "this is all a misunder—"

He raised a hand, silencing her immediately.

The warmth cooled away.

He turned and stood directly in front of me. His face was a mask of frozen calm, made all the more intimidating by the faint line of scarring that split his features like a chasm.

His focus shifted to the man quivering at my feet. "Explain."

“We told them no weapons,” the guard grunted out, trying again and failing to yank his arm free of my grasp. “Then they attacked us.”

“Bullshit,” I seethed. “Don’t parents around here teach their sons not to put their hands on a woman without her consent?”

“Indeed, they do,” Luther responded.

My eyes snapped back up to him. “Then it seems *several of you* didn’t take the words to heart.”

His features remained as immovable as stone, but the sparks and shadows whirling behind his sapphire gaze had sirens blaring in my head. It reminded me so much of the *voice* that had plagued my thoughts in recent weeks—how the thrill of a fight woke it up and set it begging for release.

Luther’s chin dropped slightly. “Release my guard, Miss Bellator. His behavior will be dealt with appropriately.”

So the Prince remembered my name. I wasn’t yet sure if that was good or very, very bad.

“Diem, please,” Maura squeaked out. She sounded frantic, near tears. “Let the Prince handle this.”

I highly doubted Luther’s idea of *appropriate* would match mine, but I’d backed myself so artlessly into a corner I didn’t know what else to do.

I loosened my grip on the guard’s arms and watched with open scorn as he clambered to his feet. His face was inflamed with a scarlet mix of shame and fury. As he moved to join the other guards, he slammed his shoulder into mine, jeering under his breath, “Watch your back, mortal bitch.”

Magic detonated into the room.

Though Luther barely moved, whiplike vines of sizzling light and inky shadow shot from his open palms. They twisted in a violent frenzy as they slithered around the guard’s chest and *squeezed*. His bones creaked against the mounting pressure, a choked cry whimpering from his lips.

I could feel it, that gossip-worthy power of Luther’s. It was as if the air around him had its own pull, thick and intoxicating. Something awoke inside me in response. If I had any common sense left at all, it might have been fear—but the intrigue stirring low in my belly didn’t feel like *fear* at all.

Before I knew what I was doing, I staggered a step closer, my own hand rising as if drawn in by its siren call. It was the same inexplicable pull

I'd felt toward the gryvern—perhaps I had a thing for cranky, dangerous beasts.

Luther's eyes ticked toward me, freezing me in place. His face remained passive, almost bored, as if the stunning display had cost him as much effort as swatting a pesky fly.

Still, as his gaze roamed over me, something flickered—something I couldn't quite decipher.

It was gone in an instant. Luther prowled toward the guard. The luminescent rope yanked the man's body higher, his feet dangling helplessly in the air, bringing the two men eye-to-eye.

"These women are here in the service of the Crown," Luther said coolly. "Is this how we treat His Majesty's guests?"

"But they were—"

Luther's fist tightened to a ball, and the cords constricted around the guard's neck, choking off his protest.

"No, Your Highness," he finally wheezed out.

"Then apologize." His eyes narrowed. "Be convincing."

The guard grimaced as his attention slid to me and Maura. "I'm... very sorry."

My glare deepened.

Luther's head tilted as he contemplated the man. "I should break your ribs for disobeying me, but then our guests would be compelled to help you set the bones. While that might be a just consequence for *both* of you—" His eyes jumped briefly to mine. "—I'll settle for burns and barbs."

With a twitch of his fingers, the ropes around the guard flared to life. Tiny, pin-sharp thorns grew from the shadowy threads, pricking thin trickles of blood across the man's body, while a sizzling sound emerged from the pulsating light, followed by the smell of burnt flesh. The man's screams struck up and resounded through the room.

Maura's trembling body pressed into my side. Though I forced myself not to react out of sheer stubborn pride, I finally admitted she was wise to be scared. This display of power, terrifying in its strength and savagery, was made all the more so by Luther's stony indifference. He was observing the man's torture at his hands with an unsettling detachment that left me thinking all the stories of the monstrous, heartless Descended were even truer than I'd thought.

But as I watched the man bleed and burn under Luther's chilling control, I didn't feel scared.

I felt... captivated.

"Miss Bellator," Luther said, turning to me, "you may retain your weapons as long as I am escorting you, but if you try to use them against any occupant of this palace, then this—" His magic dissolved into mist, and the guard slumped to a bloody, moaning heap. "—will be a kindness compared to what you will face. Do we understand each other?"

I swallowed. "We do."

He was convincing—I had to give him that.

"Follow me." He spun on his heel and strode toward the palace interior.

Maura appeared trapped in place, her face an ashen grey. I linked our arms together and pulled her forward, stepping over the collapsed man's body. I couldn't resist glancing over my shoulder at the guards we left behind and answering their sea of scowls with a victorious smile.

We continued up one arm of the magnificent staircase and down a series of winding halls, each more obnoxiously decorated than the last. Intricate tapestries of the most vibrant colors, lace-like carved marble, glittering ceilings that glowed from within, bejeweled and gilded *everything*. Even the air smelled rich, scented with the delicate sweetness of fresh-blooming roses. I struggled not to gawk at the splendor of it all.

"I understand you wish to take over as the palace healer, Miss Bellator," Luther said as we walked.

I nodded. "I'm taking on my mother's duties in her absence."

"All of them?"

My eyes snapped to his so quickly it took my mind a moment to catch up. There was a weight to his words, an implication that prickled my instincts. His expression gave away nothing, but I sensed I was on more dangerous ground than I fully understood.

Your mother agreed to serve the Crown in whatever manner the Crown requests, Maura had claimed.

I didn't respond.

Luther led us into a small sitting room. Two young boys played on the floor, giggling and looking as normal as any mortal child.

Their mothers, however, seemed as foreign to me as wild animals. They each wore gowns befitting a grand affair, shimmering fabric hanging

stiffly over layers of puffy candy-colored petticoats that swallowed them on their tiny tufted settees. Chunky gemstones circled their necks and wrists, unnaturally-colored hair piled atop their heads with a mess of ribbons and colorful feathers. It was such an absurd scene, I had to cover my mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Cousins,” Luther said with a shallow nod.

“Your Highness,” they said in unison as they rose and curtsied.

One of them, a pretty woman dripping in emeralds and mauve taffeta, fluttered her lashes in his direction. “How kind of you to come sit with us, Luther,” she cooed, her smile coy.

“*Prince* Luther,” he corrected, and the woman’s face burned pink enough to match her dress. “I’m only here to escort the healers.”

My eyes bounced between them, fascinated by the dynamic. They were... cousins? Was she... flirting with him?

And what kind of person expected family to use formal titles? I wondered if Luther had a spouse—surely no handsome face could be worth putting up with *that*. Gods, imagine the man in bed... he probably demanded his lovers address him by title there, too.

Harder, Your Highness. Wilst thou give me permission to come, Your Highness? Let me kneel for you and show the Prince’s little prince a good time, Your H—

Luther cleared his throat, and my eyes jumped to his face from where they’d been unintentionally lingering beneath his belt. I threw him my nastiest scowl, fighting my blush with everything I had.

“Who are they?” the second woman asked. She was a good deal older but still quite beautiful, her dark violet bouffant streaked grey at her temples. Her features seemed carved into a permanent frown as she looked us over.

“These are the healers who treated the boys the day of the incident,” Luther said. He turned to us. “Maura, Diem, these are my cou—”

“Why does that one have weapons?” she interrupted sharply. She gestured to me with a limp wrist and a curled lip, the way one might point to a pile of rotting meat. Her gaze rose to my face, then narrowed. “Your eyes, girl—are you Descended?”

“She’s just a mortal,” Luther answered on my behalf. “And she is permitted weapons while under my escort.”

“*Just* a mortal?” I said under my breath, drawing an elbow to the ribs from Maura.

Luther smoothly stepped in front of the woman to position himself between us. I nearly snorted, wondering which of us he was intending to protect.

I had my answer a moment later, when she waved her hand and a thin wall of shimmering pale blue light appeared around the two young boys. “Not around our children, she isn’t,” she sniped.

Luther worked his jaw. Though I *dearly* wanted to hold my ground and watch him squirm—this was a man who despised having his authority threatened, and now he was trapped between two women intent on doing exactly that—the children had begun to take notice of the tension. The littlest one was staring at us with growing fear in his sky-blue eyes. Whatever my dislike of Luther, I wouldn’t stoop to putting an already injured child through undue stress.

“It’s fine,” I said tersely. I strolled across the room to a far corner table and unhooked my knife belt, dropping it onto the wooden top with a loud clunk—though I left Brecke’s knife stashed safely in my boot. I whipped back around with a saccharine smile. “Problem solved.”

The woman sniffed, unimpressed, but a moment later, the glowing barrier disappeared.

We set to work before the tension could escalate further. Maura had the harder task, checking on the youngest boy’s numerous broken bones. I busied myself with the older child, propping him on an armchair and checking his mostly healed cuts and scabs while distracting him with corny jokes my father had taught Teller and me as children.

“What do you call a trout wearing a ball gown?” I asked as I peered beneath a bandage on his knee.

The boy beamed a gap-toothed grin at me. “What?”

“Very so-fish-ticated.”

He collapsed into giggles, nearly taking out my eye while he kicked his legs with glee. I laughed with him as I held his feet down. “How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh?”

“How many?” he nearly screamed, bouncing in anticipation.

“Ten-tickles!” I shouted back, reaching for his sides and wiggling my fingers. He squirmed out of my reach and dissolved into a fit of belly laughs.

“They are so adorable at this age, aren’t they?” the younger woman asked.

I smiled and turned my head up to answer her, but she was gazing adoringly at Luther, having moved to his side. His eyes were on me, his expression softer than usual.

“Aren’t they?” she asked again, setting a hand on his arm.

His features hardened immediately. “What?” he snapped.

I snorted quietly at the display of unrequited love and shifted my attention back to the child. “I think you’re all set, my friend. Has anything else been hurting you?” He shook his head and grinned at me, and I grinned right back. “Better run fast then, or else I’m going to have to...” I reached to tickle him again with a low, mischievous cackle. He squeal-laughed and darted away, fleeing to the safety of his mountain of toys.

I stood and settled my hands on my hips with a half-smile, turning to the younger woman. “It was touch and go, but I think he’ll survive.”

Her slender, milky-white hands—hands that made me wonder if she’d ever done a day of work in her life—flew to her chest. “What? He was hurt that badly?”

My smile vanished. “No! No—I was only joking. He’s perfectly fine. I —”

Her delicate features twisted into a glare. “A threat to a child’s life is hardly a joke.”

My cheeks burned. I glanced at Luther, who was watching me with one brow raised. His lips remained pressed tight, but he managed to look irritatingly amused. Now that it was my turn to squirm, he was thriving on the retribution.

I swallowed my pride and nodded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She crossed her arms. “I shouldn’t be surprised that a poor, dying child is what *you people* find funny.”

The embarrassment drained from my face, replaced by a hot flood of anger. I took a step closer, hands fisting at my sides. “What did you just say?”

Luther’s mirth vanished. Again he took a step between us, his muscles pulling taut at the shift in my demeanor. I ignored him and glared across his shoulder, eyes locked on the woman and her scathing, self-righteous expression.

“Every week I treat children dying of hunger because their families can’t afford food. I dread the winters and the orphans that will be found frozen to death in snowdrifts because they don’t have a warm home. Meanwhile, *you people* sit in this ridiculous palace covered in enough gold and jewels to solve every one of those problems like *that*,” I hissed with a snap of my fingers. “So don’t you dare lecture me about poor, dying children.”

The woman scoffed. “It’s hardly our fault if you mortals don’t take care of your own.”

Deep within, an impatient *voice* howled from its cage.

Fight.

Wisely, Luther moved before I could react. He snagged the woman by the forearm and pulled her far, *far* out of my reach. I caught a muffled exchange of words, but I was too busy grinding my teeth and fighting my boiling resentment to listen.

I snatched my things and stalked to the corner table to wait for Maura to finish. I reattached my weapons belt and violently chucked my items back into my satchel as I weighed the pros and cons of strangling a member of the royal family in their own palace.

At the moment, the pros were winning by a landslide.

“I apologize for that,” Luther’s voice carried over my shoulder. “She was out of line.”

“Seems to be a family trait,” I muttered.

His voice grew quieter as he moved to my side. “I came looking for you in Mortal City. I wanted to thank you for what you did for my sister.”

I snorted. “No, you didn’t.”

He bristled, shifting slightly. “I did. And... I wanted to apologize for my own behavior the last time you were here.”

“No, you came by to ask Maura if I was really a mortal.” I spun toward him and pulled one of my twin daggers, pressing its edge to my wrist. “Did she put your suspicions to rest, or must I slice myself open to win you over?”

To my *aggressive* indignation, he didn’t so much as blink. Without dropping my gaze, his hand closed around the blade. I couldn’t stop myself from looking, sucking in a breath as his fingers tightened around the knife’s sharp edge. He squeezed it so hard his knuckles blanched—with no trace of blood. Not even a scratch.

“I think,” he said, tugging it from my grasp, “it’s safe to say, Miss Bellator, you’ve already won me over.” With a lightning-fast flick of his fingers, he spun the blade in his palm to grip it by the handle. He stepped closer and smoothly slid the dagger back into my belt. “If you hadn’t, I’d be putting that knife somewhere other than your sheath.”

His thumb brushed against my hip, and my skin flushed with heat.

Gods, I hated him.

His brows dipped low. “Auralie was supposed to tell me,” he said suddenly.

I blinked a few times, the mention of my mother reeling me back to my anger through tides of unwanted lust. “You... what?”

“If conditions were that bad in Mortal City, your mother was supposed to warn me so I could provide assistance.”

My scowl returned in earnest. “Well she hasn’t been around to do that, has she?” He stiffened at the pointed accusation in my tone. “Besides, things are always that bad in Mortal City. Always have been.”

His posture was strung so tightly a vein popped against his neck. The motion lured my focus along his scar as it trailed through his lips and down the column of his throat, lingering on the spot where the pale, jagged line disappeared beneath the collar of his jacket.

“If there is a family in need, tell me and I will make arrang—”

“Every family is in need, Luther. Don’t pretend like any of *you people* give a damn about any of us.”

I threw him a look of challenge, daring him to correct me for not using his title, but he only stared at me, jaw ticking.

I took a steadying breath. With the *voice* already provoked, I was in no condition to have this debate with him, and I certainly had no faith that he had any real desire to help. If he did, he hardly needed my guidance—even a brief walk through the crowded, dirty streets of Mortal City would reveal the dismal conditions we lived in.

“How is Lily?” I asked tightly. “Does she need any follow up care?”

He frowned at my change in subject, his preternatural calm momentarily ruffled—a victory I silently celebrated. “She’s doing well. Healed. Unusually fast, in fact.”

“Good.” I stepped back and felt a tug at my hip—his hand still lingered there, still holding on to the hilt of my blade. He slowly pulled it away.

I swallowed and turned my back to him.

He watched me for a long beat as I resumed organizing my things. The peculiar aura that seemed to charge the air in his presence wove its way around me, buzzing against my skin and leaving me feeling like I was swimming a sea of *him*.

He moved to my side and lowered his voice. "I understand my sister and your brother have become very close."

Warning klaxons fired off in my head.

"I'm sure you're aware," he went on, "of the danger that can arise when relationships between Descended and mortals turn... reckless."

Again, I held my tongue.

"I'm sure you're equally aware that in those unfortunate situations, it's often the mortal who pays the highest price."

"My understanding is that it's the *baby* that pays the highest price," I said frostily.

He nudged forward until he could see my face. "What you must know is that—"

"What I know is the surest way to get someone their age to do something is to tell them they're forbidden to do it. If you wish to keep them apart, forcing it will only drive them closer." I twisted my shoulders to face him fully. "My brother is the furthest thing from reckless. He is smart and thoughtful, and I trust his judgment. Perhaps you should try trusting your sister, as well." I tapped a finger on his chest. "And if you think I would ever—"

His hand closed around mine, and all my angry words tangled in a giant knot.

My heart pounded so hard I was certain he could hear it. I waited for him to let go, to push me away, to bite back, to do something other than hold my stare in silent defiance, each of us daring the other to back down.

I should pull away. Why wasn't I pulling away?

The warm grip of his hand was infuriatingly distracting. I started to speak again, and his eyes dropped to my lips. My mouth went dry.

Gods, I really, *really* hated him.

The soft clearing of a throat stole our attention. I glanced over to see Maura and the two women staring at us. Maura's jaw hung ajar, her brows raised sky-high, while the two Descended women glowered at me with poison in their eyes.

It was only then that I realized how close Luther and I had been standing, how near our faces had come—close enough to feel a brush of warm air at his quiet exhale as I pulled my hand free.

Almost as if he, too, had been holding his breath.

I threw my satchel over my shoulder. My skin felt cold and strangely empty as I strode for the door and Luther's presence ebbed away.

"Done?" I said casually to Maura.

She pursed her lips and nodded. Without another word, we retraced our steps out of the palace, Luther following close behind. Once outside, I awkwardly avoided looking at him while Maura offered a polite goodbye.

We were almost to Mortal City before she finally spoke. Her eyes glittered, her voice full of teasing mischief.

"I'd say that went *very* well, wouldn't you?"

"Not a word, Maura," I grumbled. "Not. A. Word."

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Chapter Fourteen

I returned home that evening with fire still crackling in my veins.

My father took one look at me stomping through the house, and he grabbed two dull sparring swords.

“Outside,” he grunted, tossing one to me.

I didn’t bother arguing.

Though my father’s aging body had put an end to his days on a battlefield, his mind had never really left. Retired and without an army to train, he had turned his children into his new battalion. Until I began working full-time as a healer, he would corral Teller and me outside every single night to pass down his knowledge.

How to fight, by hand and by blade. How to creep up and sneak away. How to spot an enemy’s strength as well as their weakness. When to stand our ground, and when to flee.

We were Andrei Bellator’s most cherished soldiers, and he trained us well.

By now, the routine was so familiar that neither of us had to say a word. A certain nostalgic comfort warmed my too-tight muscles as we fell into position in the open clearing. Lit only by the moon and paint strokes of golden lamplight from inside the cottage windows, we began to move in a wide, slow circle.

He raised his sword high, too high, the blade wavering over his shoulder. Despite my foul mood, I cracked a smile. He was baiting me with poor form, trying to determine how badly my blown temper had clouded my mind.

Though I was quite tall for a mortal woman, I was still outsized by most male opponents, especially the unnaturally large and muscular Descended. Father had taught me not to cower at those qualities and instead see them as strengths.

Smaller means you're faster and harder to hit, he'd say. Weaker means you'll be underestimated, better able to catch them by surprise.

But it also meant I had to know my limits. And wasting my energy waving a heavy sword above my head to look menacing was one of them.

"Energy and blood, the two most important resources in a fight," I taunted, echoing the words he'd so often taught me. "Choose wisely how you spend them both."

He grinned. "That's my girl."

Despite his praise, he took advantage of my decision to hold back, lunging forward to bring his sword down at my unprotected head. I fainted left before spinning right, swinging my blade in a broad arc to his ribcage. I nearly clipped him, but he deflected at the last second.

We both pulled away, panting from the burst of effort as we resumed our circling.

"What happened today?" he asked.

My smile fell. "Injured children. Unfair world. You know, the usual."

"Must be more than the usual to have you this worked up."

This time it was my turn to engage, forcing his weight to one foot as he sidestepped a quick thrust. I swept at his ankle with my leg, and he dropped to the ground in a smooth roll that brought him right back to his feet.

"You were watching my right foot the whole time," he scolded. "Don't let your anticipation announce your next move."

A novice mistake, one I'd learned to stop doing years ago. The fact that he didn't point that out suggested he was more worried than he let on.

"Tell me what's bothering you," he pressed.

"I'm fine."

Before he could argue, I swung my blade in a swift circle to his shoulder. He parried, using my momentum against me to force my blade to my weak side. I twisted in a counter attack, but he knew my habits too well, and his sword blocked mine, the harsh gong of metal on metal reverberating through my bones.

Though I stepped back to regroup, he wouldn't allow it. He pressed forward aggressively, our limbs and bodies flying through motions as familiar to our bodies as a loved one's voice to our ears.

With each hit of our blades, I felt my temper rise, my movements turning increasingly sloppy. I knew better than to bring anger into combat,

but I couldn't seem to stop it. Ever since giving up the flameroot, my emotions had become an out-of-control firestorm, threatening to char everything in its path.

The butt of his hilt came down on my wrist, carefully aimed to strike a sensitive nerve. Searing pain rocketed up my arm, and my fingers loosened against my will. My blade thumped to the peaty soil.

"Tell me," he pressed again.

My resolve fractured.

"How did you stand it?" I snapped. "When you were in the army, how did you stomach serving the Descended?"

It was a question I'd never had the guts to ask him.

Others had. Most in Mortal City considered him a hero, or at least a seasoned warrior deserving of respect, but a few had accused him of being a traitor to his kind. His calm temperament usually paid it no mind, though the occasional heckler had earned a fist to the mouth—from him or from me.

His expression went icy. His eyes darted to my fallen weapon, then back to me—a wordless order. I scowled and snatched the sword from the ground.

"I didn't serve them," he said as we resumed circling each other. "I served Emarion. All of its people, mortal and Descended."

"But you took their orders. You fought the rebels."

"And I fought Descended at times, as well. My vow was to protect Emarion from any enemy it faced, no matter what blood ran through their veins. And I would do it again, without question."

I paused and lowered my sword. "But who decides who's an enemy?"

"The Crowns do."

"And what if the Crowns are the real enemy?"

"Careful, Diem." His severe tone matched his features. "You speak of treason."

My eyes rolled. "Was it not treason to the people of Emarion when they came in and took over our cities and our holy sites? When they cut down the Everflame? When they started slaughtering children for being born to mixed parents?"

He stabbed his blade into the marshy ground, then folded his arms. "Where is this coming from? You never cared about such things before."

His words felt like a blow.

“Of course I cared,” I shot back defensively, but the truth chewed away at me.

I’d cared. But I’d cared in the ways that affected *me*. I’d cared when I or the people I knew suffered, when the injustices inflicted by the Descended were forced into my path, disrupting my happy little bubble. And now, I was finally starting to look beyond the oily rainbow prism of that bubble’s edge to the reality of the world beyond.

“These lessons I’ve taught you out here, about fighting and facing opponents...” He trailed off, gesturing to the blade in front of him. “Strength wins, Diem. Strength endures. The Descended have strength on their side, and they always will. Ignoring that will only get you killed.”

“So we should surrender and accept it? You didn’t raise me to do that.”

“No, I didn’t. But what have I taught you about fighting an opponent that’s much stronger than you are?”

I sighed. Years of his lessons flowed mechanically from my lips. “If you cannot be stronger, be smarter. Choose both your battles and your enemies with care. Know when to flee a fight to win a war.”

“That’s exactly right.” He came closer and laid his hands on my shoulders. “Those lessons are as true off the battlefield as they are on it. Don’t you ever forget that.”

His dark amber eyes poured into mine, concern hiding behind his gruff expression. For all his bravery, I knew the reality of sending his children out into this wretched world terrified him. The sparring and the lessons and the memorable one-liners had been as much about managing his own trepidation as preparing us for the battles he couldn’t fight at our side.

“What if I don’t want to sit back and do nothing anymore?” I said. “What if I want to fight back?”

He cupped my face in his hands, his skin rough against my jaw. “I cannot tell you what to do with your life, my darling Diem. But whatever you choose—be smart. And above all, *survive*. Your life is far too precious to me to be wasted.”

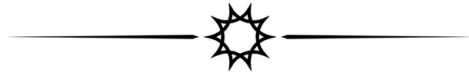
I sighed and kissed his cheek, the wiry hairs of his greying beard tickling my face. “Love you, Commander.”

His shoulders shook with laughter. “Love you too, soldier.”

We grabbed our sparring swords and headed back to the house, his arm draped around me and tugging me into his side. “I’m very proud of the

woman you've become, Diem. And your mother, wherever she may be, is proud of you, too."

Though I couldn't speak through the thick burning in my throat, I offered up a silent prayer that he wouldn't live to regret those words.



"IT'S BEEN AWHILE since you and Father sparred."

Teller and I were sprawled out in our beds in our tiny room, his face buried in his schoolwork while I laid on my back and stared blankly upward. We were both far too old to still be sharing a room, but Lumnos tradition dictated a child only move out when they married, and there was little chance of that for either of us any time soon.

"Not since before Mother's been gone," I agreed.

I felt his stare shift to me.

"Did you tell him about the flameroot? Or the Descended?"

"No."

"Are you going to?"

I didn't answer.

I gazed in admiration at the whorls of light skipping over the ceiling from the candles burning on our bedside table. A memory clawed at the edges of my mind, pleading to be unleashed from the coffin I'd sealed it in. A memory from so many years ago, when I'd laid in this very room, watching the same dance of light and shadow, imagining that I could...

No.

My eyes slammed closed. I shoved the thoughts back into a dark, cobwebbed corner buried deep in my head.

They were hallucinations. Visions. Nothing more.

I swallowed away a lump in my throat. "Teller?"

"Yes?"

"You're being careful with Lily, right?"

"There's nothing to be careful about," he rushed out.

I turned my head to look at him. "I wouldn't blame you if there was. She is very pretty."

His face turned a flaming crimson that said far too much. He shoved his head even deeper into his book. "It's not like that. We're just friends."

“Alright. If you say so.”

“Every boy in school would give up an arm to be with her. She can pick anyone she wants.”

“I can imagine.”

“And she’s a princess. The *only* princess. They’ll probably marry her off to some inbred cousin the moment she finishes school.”

I bit down on my lip to suppress my smile. “Probably so.”

He slammed his pencil down, his voice rising. “And she’s Descended and I’m mortal. You know the rules. No marriage, no children.”

He looked at me, and my wicked grin gave my thoughts away. He balled up a scrap of paper and bounced it off my forehead.

“Fine, fine,” I relented, struggling to wipe the amusement from my face as I turned my attention back to the ceiling.

Perhaps what I said next made me a terrible sister, or a bad influence, or recklessly naive, but to see the light in his eyes when he spoke of her...

“You know I would support you, right?” I said softly. “Even if you were more than ‘*just friends*.’ Even if you steal her from her cousin-husband and run off to Umbros to elope and have a thousand forbidden babies. I’d be the proudest aunt there ever was.”

And I meant it. Though I couldn’t fathom ever falling for a Descended—I would die before I’d ever allow myself to get caught up with one of *them*—I would stand by Teller’s side, whatever choice he made. Even if he was rash and foolish and broke all the rules, I would do it, because I knew he would do it for me, too. He always had.

“Be careful, alright?” I said. “No matter what happens, I’ll have your back. Just... be careful.”

He nodded without responding, a thousand words passing unspoken between us. We sat in the dim quiet for the rest of the evening. Though the silence was occasionally broken by the rustling of his papers, I knew my brother well enough to know his mind was far, far away from his schoolwork.

Chapter
Fifteen

The following day, my father's warnings still whispered through my thoughts. I had expected him to tell me to accept the immutability of the Descended's harsh rule and find other, smaller ways to make a difference. And perhaps, in some ways, he had.

But there was something else underlying his words that lingered. Somewhere buried in his lessons, there was a challenge. A calling.

I didn't know whether it came from him or from within my own heart, but I felt it as surely as the autumn breeze that chilled the sweat upon my neck.

I was not made to sit and do nothing. I was made to *fight*.

And as I made house calls to my patients throughout Mortal City, tending to broken limbs and persistent illnesses, the *voice* that had taken residence inside me whispered back.

It heard the calling, too. And now it paced, a rumbling beast in its pen, waiting for me to find the courage—or the madness—to set it free.

My last call of the day took me to the outskirts of Paradise Row, to a stretch of alleys where purveyors of sex hovered in every doorway, offering their carnal talents to the lonely, intoxicated souls who staggered out of the nearby pubs.

I knew better than to ask for too many details when making calls in this neighborhood, but when I walked into the brothel's parlor to find a very pissed-off woman standing with arms crossed and fresh blood coating her body, my curiosity got the better of me.

"What in the Undying Fire happened? I was told there were only bruises and possibly some broken bones."

"That's right," the woman said curtly. "The girl you're here for is in the back. This blood isn't hers."

"Is there a second patient?"

"No."

“If someone’s bleeding, I should really see them first, this is a lot of blood t—”

“The blood is none of your concern.”

She raised an eyebrow in an unspoken threat.

“Understood,” I rushed out.

She waved me into a back room where a woman was perched on the edge of a rumpled bed, naked and weeping. She clutched a bedsheet to her body to cover her more intimate areas, blue and purple splotches already visible on her coppery skin.

An entourage of women in lacy garments surrounded her, holding her hands and stroking her hair, murmuring tender words of support. Several were covered in blood. They were much younger and more scantily clad than the stern woman who’d greeted me—a madam and her girls, I guessed.

I ignored the guarded looks from the other women as I nestled beside the injured girl. “I’m Diem. I’m a healer, I’m here to help you.”

She sniffled up at me. “I’m... um... Peony.”

Not her real name—I knew that much. This area of Paradise Row was mockingly referred to as The Garden in honor of the fanciful flower names commonly used by its vendors. The pseudonyms played upon the male fantasy of the innocent ingénue and protected vulnerable workers and their families from being pursued by cruel judgments and dangerously infatuated clients.

I offered up a sympathetic smile. “Nice to meet you, Peony. I’m very sorry this happened to you.”

Tears clung to the sweeping lashes that curtained her large, tawny eyes. “How long will the bruises last? I gotta get back to work soon, I need the money.”

“Don’t you worry about that, Peony,” the madam said gruffly from where she leaned against the door frame. “We’ll take care of you. Won’t we girls?”

The other women nodded in emphatic agreement.

“Can you tell me what happened?” I asked.

“He... he...” Peony’s shoulders quaked as she dissolved into sobs.

“A customer wanted more than she was willing to sell,” another girl answered for her. “She told him no, and he tried to take it anyway. He got a few hits in before we could k—”

“Tulip,” the madam clipped. “That’s enough.”

Tulip looked down and pursed her lips.

I realized then there was blood on the floor, as well—not puddles, but long scarlet streaks that painted a path to the door. Suddenly I understood why so many of the girls were dripping with red. And why the madam had told me not to worry about it.

Like I said, Paradise Row women were nothing if not loyal.

I gave a sharp nod and set to tending the girl's injuries, grateful that my examination revealed only bruises and scratches.

As I worked, I egged the girl's friends into lighthearted conversation. With injuries like these, the kind that could scar your soul more than your body, laughter was often a better medication than any tincture I could whip up.

It only took one coy request for advice on lingerie to surprise the man I was seeing, and they'd instantly launched into a passionate debate on the merits of wispy scraps of satin versus silhouette-enhancing corsets. Even Peony had jumped into the fray with a soliloquy on costumes over negligees.

"What they really want is to pretend," she said matter-of-factly, her tears quickly drying. "They want something they can't have."

"What costumes do they like best?" I prodded as I spread an arnica mixture along her collarbone.

"Actually, they *love* healers," one of the girls answered, rolling her eyes and groaning. "They always want us to pretend to treat their poor, injured dicks."

Another girl grinned at me. "Maybe you could loan us some props."

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or be deeply disturbed.

"But what they like even more is when you pretend to be Descended," Peony said, joined by a murmur of agreement from the other girls.

"They all talk like they hate 'em, but most mortal men would pay every cent they've got to sleep with a Descended woman," another girl said.

That hardly surprised me. For too many mortal men, sex was about power and control in a world where they had little of either. Imagining the lengths they might go to exert their dominance over a woman in the ruling class made my stomach churn.

"There aren't any Descended women offering... services?" I asked.

"I've tried to recruit some," the madam said bitterly, "but the Descended think themselves too good to do our work."

One of the girls snorted. "Well they aren't too good to come screw us. Some of the Descended are my best customers."

"And unlike mortal men, they don't lie about taking the contraceptive tonic," another chimed in. "They're all too scared of the King to risk getting a mortal pregnant."

One of the girls studied me intently, her gaze thin and suspicious. "I've heard about you. The mortal who's got eyes like them."

I rolled my shoulders under her scrutiny. Even after all these years, attention on my eye color still put me on edge.

"You could make a killing here, pretending to be one of them," she said. "You could charge whatever you wanted."

"And they wouldn't beat *you* up," Peony teased, though a shade of sadness returned to her eyes. "They'd be too scared you might actually have magic."

"I'll, um, keep that in mind," I lied. I packed up my things and handed Peony a small jar. "You're all done. Keep putting this cream on the bruises, it will help them fade quicker."

Her lashes fluttered as she fought back a fresh round of tears. "How much do I owe you?"

"This one's on the house."

Relief fluttered over her face, but she quickly hid it behind a defensive pout. "I can pay," she insisted.

I rose to my feet and smiled. "I wouldn't dare. The lingerie advice you gave me was worth more than this would be."

I said my goodbyes and followed the madam to the front parlor. When we were alone, she tugged a suede pouch from the neckline of her corset.

"You're a sweet girl, but I'm not some pauper asking for handouts. If a customer takes a service, they pay for it. That's how I run my business here, and I won't accept different from you. How much?"

I gave her a hard stare and weighed my response. I understood her convictions, but the idea of profiting from what had been done to Peony didn't sit right in my soul.

"If anyone's going to pay, it's going to be the man that hurt her," I said, choosing my words carefully. "And I have a feeling he already has."

Her lips thinned as she gave me an appraising once-over. "The girls were right, you know. You could make a lot of money here with those eyes of yours. I'd cut my percentage in half for you."

“I already have a job.”

“You can be a healer when you’re old. You only get a few years to be young and pretty. Seize your opportunities while you got ‘em.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m not sure my betrothed would be too happy if I accepted.”

A small lie. Henri wasn’t my fiancé—yet. Merely thinking about that step turned my throat scratchy and tight. But it was an easier explanation than the truth.

It wasn’t about the work. I’d had my share of casual lovers, and I respected these women and their profession. Men sold the strength of their bodies as sellswords and assassins, bricklayers and carpenters. Why should it be any less acceptable for women to sell the softness of theirs?

The truth, the *real* truth, was that I’d made one too many calls like this to Paradise Row. I’d seen firsthand what happens to the girls here—a few bruises were the least of Peony’s worries. And no matter how many bad men this madam made disappear for their evil acts, there would be more.

Until someone brought change to this realm, there would always be more.

“Tell me, girl, what’s your beloved, a farmer? A blacksmith?” She sniffed dismissively. “You could bring in five times his income working here. You could make enough to travel, maybe buy yourself a cute little house in some better realm. You could even get off this gods-abandoned continent.”

I couldn’t deny a part of me thrilled at the idea of having the means to escape my tiny, miserable pocket of the world in search of a grand adventure. As a healer, making ends meet in Mortal City was about the best I could hope to achieve.

But my father. My brother. Henri. Maura.

My mother.

I sighed. “Thank you, but... I can’t.”

She shrugged and tucked the coin purse back into her brassiere. “Suit yourself. But whatever you do or don’t do, sweetheart, do it for yourself. Don’t choose a mediocre life for a mediocre man. Go be exceptional. If he’s worth it, he won’t judge you. And if he’s really the one, he’ll come along for the ride.”

A bloodcurdling shriek pierced the air, floating in from outside the open door.

The madam didn't even flinch. "Think over my offer," she called out with a halfhearted wave as I bolted into the street.

I'd heard enough screaming patients in my work to know the difference between a cry of fear and a howl of agonizing pain—and this had been unmistakably *both*.

My head whipped back and forth in search just as it rang out again to my left, followed by shouting and a child's wails. I pulled a dagger from its sheath and broke into a sprint.

"Please, don't—my baby! *My baby!*"

A woman's voice, plaintive and desperate. And the child—their cries had morphed into a sound that turned my blood ice cold.

Ahead, wisps of dark smoke blanketed the ground and unfurled in a curiously slow, deliberate sweep, like gloved fingers stretching for something just out of reach.

No, not smoke—*shadow*.

Another scream drew me closer, and I skidded to a stop at the edge of the tendrils' grasp. Nearby, a woman cowered on the ground, arms outstretched to shield a small child clutching her waist and bawling hysterically.

Across from them towered a wiry man whose shimmering golden hair capped an expression carved with hate. He wore a fine jacket in a rich sienna hue, its ivory buttons undone low to reveal a fair-skinned chest.

The glow of his eyes cut through the darkness of the alley.

The vicious blue eyes of a Descended.

More hazy, curling shadows leaked from his open palms. The sentient darkness formed an arc of floating onyx spikes around the woman and child.

My hand tightened on my dagger.

"Get out of the way," he growled at the woman. "I'll make it as quick and painless as I can."

"This is your *child!*" Her tone wobbled between begging and sobbing. "How could you be so cruel to your own son?"

"That half-breed should never have been born," he spat. "This is your fault—you should have ended the pregnancy when it began. You hid it from me for four years, and now that boy's blood is on your hands."

She pleaded, tears plunging from her cheekbones. "Let me go to the King and beg for mercy. Or—or I can leave. I'll take him to Umbros, and

you'll never hear from us again."

"I can't take that risk. My family has spent centuries building our position with the royals. We are finally among the Twenty Houses, and I will not have some mortal whore and her illegal spawn ruin everything we've worked for."

The venom dripping from his voice seemed to infect the shadows at his control, making them darker and crueler. His fingers curved into hooks, and the sharp points tightened around them.

The *voice* inside me roared to life. The pulsating of his magic reverberated like an echo of its restrained rage.

Fight.

"Get out of the way, or I'll kill you both," he ordered.

"Like hell you will," I snapped, unsheathing my second dagger. "Step away from them."

He barely acknowledged me, waving his hand with disinterest. "Leave here, mortal. You want no part of this."

"Oh, but I do," I growled back.

A smarter, more rational part of my brain clutched at my hem and dug in its heels, hissing at me to heed the man's warning and turn away. This wasn't like the belligerent louts or school bullies I was used to tangling with. This was a *Descended*. Other than the Prince's display at the palace—which I couldn't seem to get out of my head—I'd never even seen their magic up close.

But smart and rational were privileges of the lucky, the fortunate few who could afford to close their eyes to injustice and walk away.

The people of Mortal City—*my* people—had never been allowed to be lucky.

And I was not built to walk away.

Choose your battles and your enemies with care, my father had said.

Well, today I chose *this* battle. Today I chose *this* enemy. I would not let one more innocent child perish at the hands of the Descended.

And if this is how I had to die, so be it.

Fight.

I dropped my chin and marched toward him.

He drew up his fist, and the shadows at my feet spiraled into steel-like bars to block my path. I swore, jerking back, my hand pausing in mid-air.

The *voice* swirled into the tips of my fingers and coaxed them forward, filling me with a terrifying urge to touch the strange dark matter.

“This is my last warning,” he barked at the mother.

She turned to me with red, watery eyes that had lost all hope. “Save my son,” she pleaded. “Let me die, but I beg of you, save *him*.”

I froze as recognition smashed into me. The day of my mother’s disappearance, this woman had helped me, distracting the men chasing me so I could escape. She might very well have saved my life that day—and now her fate was in my hands.

The man roared, swinging his arms forward, and the ring of night-black spikes closed in as her scream of agony burned through my head. The dark bolts sank into her flesh, becoming a splatter of scarlet flecks across her body. The wounds grew and grew and grew, her blood trickling in a slew of tiny waterfalls to the ground below.

I shouted for him to stop and reached for the bars. They crackled as I grew near, tiny barbs spiking toward my hand and forcing me to pull back.

If I couldn’t get through them, my blades could. I cocked an arm and launched one of my twin daggers, carefully aiming through a slim opening in the obsidian cage.

My heart sung as my blade hit its mark. The point dimpled into the soft flesh of his throat, right over his jugular—the kind of wound that could end a life in seconds.

Buried deep beneath my fear, a cold, heavy numbness spread through me at the prospect of his death at my hands. Not a sadness or regret, but a dark acceptance that made all my precious ideals seem distant and foreign.

But as quickly as it came, despair took its place. The knife bounced harmlessly to the ground without leaving so much as a scratch.

My blades—my worthless, cheap, *gods-damned* mortal blades—could not pierce Descended skin. I might as well try to pelt him to death with a pebble. It had been so pathetic an attack, he hadn’t even turned his head to acknowledge it.

I looked on in horror.

“Gods save me, *please*,” the woman sobbed. She clawed at the spikes in a frantic, futile attempt to yank them free. A second ring of them materialized and plunged into her throat. Blood bloomed along her collarbone and trailed down her chest like a cruel necklace of dangling rubies.

My gaze locked on a pair of frightened blue eyes beneath her slumping body. The child was too young to understand what was happening—only that his mother was hurt, and he was scared, and he didn't know what to do.

Neither did I, and the realization destroyed me. I couldn't get to him, couldn't save his mother, couldn't stop his father. I could swagger and act cocky, making my brash threats against the Descended all day long, but in the end I was just another weak, useless mortal.

As I sank to my knees, a desperate idea broke the surface of my anguish. The blade Brecke had given me—he'd claimed it was sharp enough to pierce Descended skin. Maybe, just maybe...

Careful to avoid notice, I slid the blade from its sheath along my calf.

The man thrust his arm upward. The spikes impaled in the woman's body rose, dragging her with them into the air. He flung out his hand, and she flew across the alley and thumped against a thick stone wall.

I flinched at the sickening crack. I knew the sound of shattering bone when I heard it. When I finally mustered the courage to look, my gaze met the vacant, glassy eyes of a corpse that would see no more.

Fight, the voice demanded. ***Fight***.

A snarl erupted from my chest. "You killed her, you fucking monster!"

He didn't hear me. His eyes were singularly focused on his next target.

I frantically gestured to the boy. If I could get him to safety, then make just the right throw...

"Come to me," I coaxed.

His face jumped between me and his approaching father, his features pinched and unsure. He took a step toward me before pausing with a wary glance at the bars that held me back.

"I don't want this, but I don't have a choice." The man spoke low, though loud enough for me to hear, and I wondered which of us he was trying to convince. "I have to do it. It's the law."

"You don't have to," I pleaded. "I won't tell anyone. I'll take the child away and say it's my own."

He paused.

"If we're found out, I'll bear the consequences myself," I rushed out. "I don't know your name, I couldn't turn you in even if I wanted to. No one will ever know."

His gaze went thoughtful as he stared silently at his son. His eyes rose to me, and my heart staggered to a stop.

“Please,” I whispered. “He’s just a child. Don’t do this.”

His face hardened. “No.”

He closed his cowardly eyes to hide from the truth of what he did next. With a single outstretched palm, a bolt of shadow shot across the alley.

Fight.

Instantly, I moved. Brecke’s blade left my hand and soared toward the Descended. This knife was still new and foreign, its delicate balance so different from my heavy daggers. My years of training were enough to put the blade in his neck, but it struck too far from any veins that would bring him down.

He stumbled backward, hands fumbling at his throat as dark crimson slithered through his fingers.

In the midst of the chaos, the cage he’d built around me flickered and faded away. I launched toward the boy and covered his body with my own. He was curled into a ball, tiny arms wrapped protectively around his dirt-scratched knees.

“You *bitch*—you stabbed me!” The man’s words came out gurgled and half-drowned in blood, but he managed to stay on his feet. The shock in his eyes twisted into something sharper and angrier.

He jerked the knife from his neck and let it rattle to the ground. I watched in horror as the gash began to clot before my eyes.

I knew they could heal, but to see it work—to see a wound that could be fatal for a mortal man cause them no more danger than a minor cut...

These people truly were gods.

Evil, horrible, murderous gods.

Father was right. Mortals didn’t stand a chance—not in a battle of strength, at least. If we had any hope of surviving them, it would have to be a game of wits.

Fight.

A plan began to form. I filled my lungs with air and screamed a single word as loud as I could.

“Fire! Over here—*fire!*”

The man balked, his ire cooling to confusion. I screamed the word again—and again and again. My throat scraped raw with the effort of casting my voice as far as it could fly.

With a swipe of his hand, the shadowy spikes dissolved from the woman’s corpse and reappeared, one by one, in a lethal halo around my

chest.

“You should have walked away,” he warned. “You mortals have such pathetically short lives, and yet you’re all so quick to throw them away.”

“Fire!” I shouted again. “Fire!”

Nothing happened. My confidence in my plan was turning bleak.

Death stared me plainly in the face, its toothy grin enjoying the misery of my demise. I was going to die in this disgusting, forgotten alley. Would anyone even bother checking my body or searching for a next of kin? Or would I be yet another woman who disappeared on the streets of Mortal City, following in my mother’s footsteps in one final, horrible way.

FIGHT.

The *voice* thrashed, no longer asking for release but demanding it—snarling to be unleashed and bring the world to ash.

But I had nothing left to offer, to the boy or to myself. No weapons, no magic, only the protection of my flesh to shield him from his father’s vicious wrath.

I had never really been religious. I’d never sought the guidance of the Old Gods, and aside from the occasional sacrilegious swear, I had certainly never invoked any of the Kindred, knowing better than to expect any help from the very same beings who had fractured our world in two.

But if it could bring even a sliver of peace in these final moments or curry a crumb of favor from whatever infernal thing ruled over the afterlife—for this boy and his mother, I had to at least try.

Sacred, ancient words flowed through me—the Rite of Endings, a forbidden prayer from the ancient mortal religion.

“End be your time, a trade in kind, a life well-lived for peace to find.”

As the prayer tumbled from my lips, the man’s feet shuffled over dusty stone. He sauntered closer, and my words quickened with my racing heart.

“Be not afraid, as shadows fade, all pain and woe shall be unmade.”

“A blasphemer,” he sneered. “Good. I’ll sleep easier knowing you earned your death.”

“Now fate well-sealed shall be revealed, for those whose worthy souls shall yield.”

“Your mortal gods can’t help you now, girl. Perhaps the Kindred will have mercy on you both.”

I wrapped my hands tighter around the child and squeezed my eyes closed.

“In love and calm, our holy psa—”
And then he struck.

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Chapter

Sixteen

Tingling exploded through my body. That same peculiar icy heat I'd felt in the palace, and then again in the forest, now poured into every crevice, every soft curve, setting my skin ablaze with waves of frost and flame.

A bright flash illuminated my eyelids, followed by an ominous silence.

I waited to feel something—pain, or impact, or whatever lightness of being people ascended to whenever they died. But there was nothing. Only my own panting and the fading sensation that consumed me moments ago.

“How?” he stammered. “How did you...?”

I cracked my eyes open.

Nothing had changed. A child still huddled in my arms. His mother was still dead in a heap against the wall. And the Descended man still stood over me, slack-jawed and stunned.

He missed.

He missed.

He shook his head. “But... I hit you.”

The glint of light against metal caught my eye. Brecke's blade had fallen a short distance from the man's feet. If I could just reach it, if I had one more chance...

He followed my line of vision. Sensing my intention, he lunged forward with palms out. Shadows materialized and hardened into a volley of razor-tipped arrows.

I locked up as the darkness surrounded me.

Another icy tingling.

Another blinding glow.

My eyes closed in reflex. When I reopened them, wisps of shimmering mist dissolved into the air.

He'd missed... *again*? I'd seen the attack with my own eyes—the arrows were on a direct trajectory, locked on to my thundering heart. There was no chance they wouldn't hit.

And yet...

Our eyes met in parallel stares of confusion, quickly interrupted by the sound of yelling and approaching footsteps.

My plan.

“Fire!” I yelled again, lurching upright. “Fire, over here!”

A crowd gathered at the edge of the alley, including several burly men carrying buckets that sloshed with water.

Years ago, I’d tended to a woman in these alleys who had been stabbed by her lover’s wife. The wounds hadn’t killed her, but they’d left her unable to walk. After hours of crying for help with no response, she’d realized that in Paradise Row, no one was brave—or foolish—enough to come to the aid of a total stranger.

But if she yelled *fire*... well, that was different. A fire, in these closely packed streets, could take out a swath of buildings in minutes. While the people here might not risk their lives for a stranger, they would do it for their own homes and businesses.

And the people that stood before me now might never intervene to save me from this Descended, but they could be an audience. And that just might be enough.

He looked at the approaching crowd and swore.

I hurled myself toward my fallen knife. My fingers closed around the cold metal just as my shoulder skidded across the grit-covered ground. I twisted my body and swung the blade at his leg.

Instinct guided my hand toward his ankle. Thanks to my training both as a healer and a fighter, I knew a cut at just the right spot could sever the tendon and render him unable to walk, but a trapped Descended who couldn’t flee might decide to take out this entire crowd. I didn’t need the man disabled—I only needed him *gone*.

My aim shifted up at the last second, and I flinched at the knock of metal striking bone. Hot blood splashed across my fingers as the knife slashed through his fortified skin as easily as warm tallow.

The man roared in pain and jerked away. He yanked the dagger from his leg and hurled it in my direction, but it was more anger than aim, and the knife skittered harmlessly across the ground in front of me.

I grabbed it and glared up at him. “Go now, or I’ll aim for your face next.”

His nostrils flared. I saw in the jerky movement of his eyes that he was committing my face to memory, filing me away to deal with later. He gave a final glance to the boy that nearly had me acting on my threat, then fled across the opposite end of the alley.

Murmuring and grumbles arose from the crowd.

“What’s going on?”

“Where’s the fire?”

“She fuckin’ tricked us.”

I scrambled to where the boy still lay curled into a tiny ball. “You’re safe,” I whispered, gently tugging at his arms. “He’s gone. No one’s going to hurt you now.”

His hand pulled away too easily. There was no strength in his grip, no resistance when I released his arm and watched it thump back to his side.

No.

I forced the child onto his back. His clothing was punctured in too many places to count, his entire front covered in the dark ruby stain of blood. His lips had gone blue, his eyes...

Open. Lifeless.

“No!” I screamed, reaching for his neck.

No pulse.

Think, Diem, I hissed at myself. Force air back into his lungs, pound on his chest, jerk his heart back into rhythm, pack the wound with gauze and give him meadswart to speed the clotting. But with so much blood gone...

It was too late.

I was too late.

I drew him into my arms and wept as anguish poured from my lips.

If I’d come by sooner. If I hadn’t hesitated to attack. If I’d remembered Brecke’s blade earlier.

I dropped my forehead to his chest, silently begging his forgiveness for my failures as my hot tears mixed with the still-warm blood pooled on his fragile body.

A hand grazed my arm. “I’m so sorry about your son,” a voice said softly.

I couldn’t stand to look away, could barely force myself to breathe in between my gasping sobs.

“He’s not mine,” I choked out. “His mother—she’s over there, by the wall.”

“Gods... may the Everflame receive them. Did you know them?”

I shook my head, unable to speak.

An older man with thinning grey hair and a curling, peppered beard crouched at my side and touched the boy’s ashen face.

“That foolish girl, getting wrapped up with one of *them*,” he said, clicking his tongue. “She should have known better than to lay with the kind of creature that would kill their own young.”

A rage born of injustice rooted inside me, as dark and deadly as the thorned vine of the Descended’s shadowy magic.

“So it was her fault?” I snapped. “Look at this boy—she protected him for years. She loved him. She was willing to *die* to save him.”

He gave me a sharp look. “And what kind of life was he to have, with a death sentence hanging over his head for the rest of his days? Today might have been the first time he ever left his home.”

My body quivered with flourishing fury, now so deeply woven into my devastation and guilt, I couldn’t tell where one emotion began and the others ended.

“He shouldn’t have to live like that,” I yelled. “He didn’t choose to be born to that vile monster. These laws are wrong, they are evil and wrong and *that gods-damned King*—”

The man shushed me and glanced nervously over his shoulder, though the crowd had already grown bored and dispersed. Dead bodies were hardly an unusual sight in these parts.

“Hold your tongue, woman. No sense getting yourself killed over a stranger.”

“Why not?” I shot back. “This boy was one of ours, too. Shouldn’t we protect him? Shouldn’t we fight back and make them pay?”

These were dangerous words—deadly words. This man could make a pretty penny turning me in for treason. In a city of poverty, I might as well have signed my own death warrant.

But with the child’s corpse still warm in my arms, I couldn’t bring myself to care. Self-preservation had given way to smoldering, infinite wrath, breaking the dam that held back all my words.

“They’re the ones that diluted their own power, all so they could populate *our* cities and fill *our* schools. Why should children pay the price

while they shun us and shore their magic back up again? Why should any of us bend for their Flaming w—”

The man jerked to his feet and shook his head. “You go get yourself killed, then. I want no part of this.”

He turned, and my hand flew out and grasped his ankle. “Wait—please. I... I need your help.”



IT WAS a blessing I knew this path so well I could follow it blind, because my mind was a thousand miles away.

I’d somehow talked the grey-bearded man into helping me carry the bodies to the forest to give the mother and her son a proper burial. He’d eyed me warily the whole time, and by the lack of questions about my eye color, I suspected he knew who I was, or at least knew enough to find me if he wanted to.

Whether he would turn me in for my traitorous outburst, only time would tell.

Without a shovel, I’d only managed to claw out a shallow grave in the root-thickened soil. I’d laid out their bodies together in a gentle embrace, the boy cradled in his mother’s arms for all eternity. I prayed they found the serene safety in the Everflame’s warmth that the gods never allowed them in life.

It was hard not to think of my own mother at the sight—to wonder whether she might be waiting for them, or me, on the other side. To wonder whether someone had found *her* body, and whether they’d bothered to bury her in an unmarked grave, too.

Despite the arrival of a blustery rainstorm that seemed determined to linger over my head, I’d gone back to Paradise Row to find anyone who might have known them. In the six months since the fateful day my mother vanished, I’d honed my memory on other details, leaving my brief encounter with this woman lost to the murky edges.

I wandered the alleys all evening, hoping some forgotten detail might trigger a recollection. After several hours I was soaked, freezing, and miserably hopeless.

And angry. So very, very angry.

Earlier my rage had been molten metal, red-hot and flowing in a river of destruction. Now it had cooled and solidified into something steelier. Something sharp and unforgiving.

My fury went far beyond the murderer himself. I hated him, of course—my mind swarmed with visions of what I might do if I ever saw him again, and the *voice* inside hummed at each progressively darker and more violent scenario.

But the real focus of my wrath was the Descended and the cursed King that put these progeny laws into place.

Seeing the child die had cracked something fundamental inside me. How could I be so useless? How could I watch a murder and not be able to stop it?

Healing now seemed like an absurdly frivolous pursuit. Healing was reactionary. Passive. Being a healer meant sitting idly by and waiting for someone to get hurt.

I was sick of waiting.

The time had come to fight. And I was ready.

My eyes zeroed in on my destination. *Please be at home*, I thought. *Before I lose my nerve.*

Through the glossy, candlelit windows of the post office, I spotted Henri's father at work. He was alone, whistling as he sorted packages for the following day's deliveries.

I crept around to the back, eyeing the nondescript door that led to the attached living quarters. With my ear to the wood, I caught the muffled sounds of footsteps and a baritone voice muttering to himself. Any other day I might have cracked a smile or plotted how I might tease him, but today...

My fist slammed against the door, a heavy drumbeat echoed by my heart. Inside, I heard the footsteps still.

"It's Diem," I grunted. "Open up."

The door cracked open, and for a moment Henri's face lit with heated smirk and the spark of speculation about why I might be showing up at his house so late in the evening.

But as he studied me further, soaked clothing plastered to my skin, the splatters of mud and blood coating my arms wiped any salacious thoughts from his expression.

"What happened?" he asked.

“I’m ready. I’ll help you.”

“Help me?” Henri blinked. He stepped aside, opening the door wider.
“Come inside and dry off.”

I held my ground. “I want to help you. I need to do something, Henri.
Anything.”

“Help me with what?”

“I’m ready to fight the Descended. Whatever it takes.” I took a long,
trembling breath. “I want to join the Guardians.”

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Chapter Seventeen

It was one thing to hear the stories about Lumnos City. I'd certainly heard plenty of gossip about the wild extravagance of Descended cities, and I'd even caught the barest glimpse of it the day I'd gone to the palace with Maura.

But standing here at Henri's side in the center of Descended territory, I felt more like we'd been transported to a different plane of existence than a short walk down the road.

"You've really never been here before?" he asked.

I shook my head, trying to scrape my jaw from the pristine cobblestone street. "I passed by once, but I didn't see... *this*."

Everything about Lumnos's capital thrived on excess. Though their physical features were as varied as the mortals, each of them had an otherworldly sense of perfection, a gentle blur to smooth away any flaws. Their faces were all impossibly symmetrical, their skin unblemished, hair shiny and bouncing.

I could barely tear my eyes from all the chiseled jawlines and curling, mile-long lashes, but there was something about it that made me almost sad.

I glanced at Henri from the corner of my eye. His nose was slightly bent, thanks to a drunken bar fight, and myriad scars coated his hands and forearms. When he caught my stare and flashed his usual grin, one tooth was crooked, another chipped from a childhood fall.

Still, my stomach fluttered. Henri was as handsome to me as any man in this city, not in spite of those traits but because of them. Those small idiosyncrasies littering his body were signs of his life and character, a map of his soul that only those who truly knew him could read.

When I lay awake in bed, conjuring up memories of my mother's face, it wasn't her beauty that came to mind. It was the freckle on her chin and the creases at her eyes. The nick on her ear from a horse with an angry bite. The way her smile hitched just slightly to the left when she laughed.

Those were the things I clung to so desperately in the dark, haunted by the fear that one cruel, unavoidable day, time would pluck them from my mind, never to be remembered again.

Though the Descended were so lovely it was almost painful to look at them, there was a certain emptiness to the way their beauty had become a standard-issue uniform. Each one of the handful I'd now met were stunning enough to take my breath away—beyond that, I couldn't recall a single detail more.

All except for Luther and his curious scar—another face that haunted my thoughts.

I had joked with Maura that the scar must be proof his soul was deeply corrupt, even for a Descended, and she had wasted no time reprimanding me for my ignorant cruelty. She'd pointed out the original wound must have come when he was very young, before his healing abilities had manifested. It was hard to stomach the thought of any child being so gruesomely hurt, let alone surviving it, and now I couldn't help but imagine a young Luther every time I thought of the little boy in the alley whose death had led me to this very spot.

I took Henri's hand and gave it a quick squeeze, shaking those memories away. "Thank you for coming with me today."

"Of course. I couldn't miss my girl's big audition."

I frowned. "Is this really necessary? They won't let me join unless I bring them some kind of gift?"

Henri glanced around and tugged my hand until we were out of earshot of any passers-by. "It's not a gift, it's a test. The Descended rounded up every rebel and executed them after the war. Now the Guardians have to be more careful who we reveal ourselves to. You have to prove to the others that you're not going to betray them."

"Fine," I muttered. "But does my test have to mean spying on some very powerful and probably very *murderous* weapons dealer while I tend to his sick daughter?"

Henri's hands grazed along my upper arms. "We've been targeting this man for months. He's the head of one of the most important Houses in Lumnos. Anything you can get from him..." He tapped a knuckle on my cheek. "It could save a lot of lives."

"Oh good, that will be such a comfort when he catches me and kills me on the spot," I said flatly.

He grinned. “Don’t do anything too risky. If you can’t get information safely, just get out alive, understood?”

I nodded.

“I’ll be right outside the whole time. If anything goes wrong, yell as loud as you can.”

I started to remind him that, for the Descended, killing two mortals was hardly more of an effort than killing one, but I thought of the murders that brought me here, and my lips snapped shut.

I’d chosen this. I couldn’t show myself as a coward at the very first trial.

I inhaled deep and turned back to the stone-paved road that wove through the residential district. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but it definitely wasn’t this.”

Henri laughed, tucking me into his side. “They certainly are *colorful*.”

That was putting it mildly.

What the Descended lacked in physical individuality, they made up for in their extraordinary clothing. The main thoroughfare was like strolling through the finest textile market after nibbling on the wrong kind of mushroom. Every color competed with the next to be the most flamboyant, some so bright I nearly shielded my eyes. There were fabrics I’d never seen before—some shimmering and liquid-smooth, others stiff and coated with glassy beads or jewels. Some seemed almost alive—a skirt cascading like a misty waterfall or bouffant sleeves curling and crackling with pale blue flame.

While the Descended in the palace dressed as if they expected a ball to arise at a moment’s notice, here on the street, it was a sartorial free-for-all. There were men in ruffled robes and skin-tight suits, women in barely there lace and head-to-toe feathers.

But what truly stopped me in my tracks was the casual use of their magic. In the handful of times I’d seen it, it was always as a weapon—something designed to do harm.

I’d never seen—never even *imagined*—that I’d witness a woman whose corset glowed with spun twilight or a man cloaked in a fog of wispy darkness.

All around me, light and shadow were being crafted in unimaginable ways. Two children pranced among illuminated ribbons woven by an older companion. A woman floated past with limbs outstretched, carried on a bed

of solid dusk. I nervously avoided the intense glare of a bare-chested man whose tattoos were not tattoos at all, but a living ink that seemed to shift in time with his thoughts.

The city itself was a glittering jewel of its own. The streets were spotless, unlike the dusty, trash-filled alleys I was used to. Every bit of foliage was flourishing and expertly trimmed, most dotted with fluffy-petaled flowers that perfumed the air. Magnificent estates with gold-tipped gates and bubbling fountains stretched for miles down every street, some so enormous they looked as if they could house the whole of Mortal City.

And then there was me.

I'd naively hoped my grey eyes might allow me to pass among them unnoticed. I'd even taken the time to fashion my hair into a milk-white braid that circled my crown, and I'd snagged a handful of wild berries from the woods to tint my lips. It was the closest I'd ever come to looking pretty, and for a brief moment, I'd actually been quite proud.

What I hadn't prepared for was the scorn directed at my worn, hole-ridden boots. My rumpled clothing, irreparably stained with dirt and blood. My calloused hands and dry, chipped nails.

My pride insisted I hold my head high, but beneath my armor of feigned confidence, I cringed, feeling every bit the imposter I was.

"I should have at least dressed the part," I said quietly.

"Don't let their nasty looks fool you. They like it better when we mortals look dirty." Henri's expression was jovial, but it was cut with an edge of bitterness. "They get suspicious if we look too clean or put-together. Makes them think we don't know our place."

"Have you ever been in one of their homes?" I asked.

"They never let me go further than the front door. You have an advantage—they'll trust you more, as a girl and as a healer."

I winced. *As a healer...*

I hadn't entirely come to terms with my decision to break my sacred vows. I'd tossed and turned all night, jousting with my conscience and trying unsuccessfully to ignore the imagined scolding of my mother's voice.

Today, I was crossing a line that could never be uncrossed. I prayed that everything I was sacrificing would be worth it.

I blew out a breath and tucked all of my hesitation into the recesses of my thoughts, an act that was becoming disturbingly frequent. "How did you

know his daughter would be sick, anyway? And how did you know he would send for a healer?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "We have eyes on all the key Descended. We look out for these things. You know, just in case."

"You watch out for their children falling ill?"

"We look for any reason they might invite a mortal into their home."

I arched a brow. "Isn't it strange that he called for a healer two days after I told you I was willing to help? That timing is—"

"A blessing from the Old Gods, that's what it is." He shrugged. "When they present an opportunity like this, we have to take it."

I frowned at him, but his gaze was fixed on a palatial estate that began at a bend in the road and ended somewhere far, far, *far* away.

"Evrin Benette is the head of House Benette, one of the Twenty Houses that control the realm," he explained. "He has a hand in most of the weapons in Emarion. If we could intercept one of his shipments and put some of them in mortal hands instead of Descended, it would go a long way in leveling the odds."

He turned to look at me, cupping my chin and pulling me close. "You could save a lot of lives today."

I nodded. "I can do it. I *will* do it."

"Good." He gave me a quick kiss before releasing me. "Now go on. I'll follow in a few minutes and wait nearby. Remember—just get in and get out safely. Don't pick any fights."

"When have I ever picked a fight?" I asked, barely able to get the words out before Henri shot me an unamused glare.

"I mean it, D. This isn't like the trouble we used to get into in Mortal City. The Descended kill people like us every day, and they think nothing of it. If you want to take them on, you have to learn to blend in, not stand out."

Something about his words sat wrong in my heart, the plunk of a distant piano hitting a sour note. The *voice* inside me seemed to shudder with equal distaste.

I flexed my leg, feeling the outline of Brecke's knife press into my calf—the only weapon I'd bothered to bring with me. I'd never admit it to Henri, but if things went wrong, this knife and I were on our own. I would die before I'd take him down with me.

I rolled my shoulders back and turned my gaze to House Benette. "Time to be a spy."



“WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?”

There was something very humbling about being sneered at by a child wearing silk.

The boy in the doorway glared at me from beneath a splash of white-gold curls, his cobalt eyes taking in my scruffy apparel with blatant contempt. He looked to be barely a teenager, but he carried himself with the unearned cockiness of a far older man.

“I believe someone in your family called for a healer,” I said.

“And they sent *you*?”

“I can leave, if you’d rather heal the patient yourself.”

He said nothing, only looking me over with the same snobbish air.

I shrugged and turned away. “Suit yourself.”

“Wait.” He pulled the door open wider. “If you’re all they’ve got, then come in, I suppose.”

I followed him into the front parlor, trying not to gape at the endless floor-to-ceiling ivory marble. Unlike the palace’s bright colors and showy details, this home reflected a more muted elegance. Every surface was glossy and polished to pristine gleam in a sterile palette of whites and creams that only the very wealthiest could afford to keep clean. Standing in the midst of it, I looked like a glob of mud splashed on a wedding gown.

“Stay,” the boy ordered as he turned for a nearby hallway.

I gritted my teeth at being commanded like a stray dog. My guilt over betraying this family was evaporating quickly.

The moment he was out of sight, I quietly followed his path. A long corridor, column-lined and soaked with sunlight streaming from the arched glass roof, revealed a row of open doors. Most of the rooms appeared to be for entertaining guests, some with mile-long dining tables carved of milky quartz and others with regal busts perched on alabaster pedestals.

Eventually the hallway forked in opposite directions. To my left, the clink of pots and pans mixed with the wafting aroma of smoky meat and fragrant spices. I turned instead to the right and crept deeper into the interior, where rumbling voices floated from a room ahead.

“The last three shipments have been missing half of what we ordered. If Sophos can’t hurry up their research, we’ll have no choice but—”

“Father?”

“Not now, Lorris. What was I saying? Right—we’ll be forced to turn to Umbros to fulfill our needs. I have no desire to work with that whore Queen and her little army of sex slaves, but you tell Doriel that I will if I have—”

“Um, Father—”

“I said *not now*.” A growl, and a pause. “If Sophos can’t find something to match the rebels’ explosives, I’ll find someone else who will. I’ve got too much gold on the line with orders from Meros and Fortos to let anything get in the way of—”

“Father, there’s a healer here to see Evanie.”

A thunderous snarl. “Do I look like I care about a Kindred-damned healer, boy? Go find your mother.”

“But... um... Mother’s out having lunch at House Hanoverre.”

“Then *you* handle it. What do you expect me to do, hold your hand and walk you to your sister’s room?”

“N-no, Father, I—”

“Then get out of my office. Unless King Ulther himself is at the door, don’t ever bother me during a meeting again.”

Another pause. Then, softly, “Yes, Father.”

Light footsteps moved toward the door. I sprinted down the hallway to the parlor, skidding back into place just as the boy reappeared.

Hurt and anger shone in his downcast eyes. Despite his earlier rudeness, a twinge of sympathy twisted my heart. With a father like that, it was no surprise the boy had turned out so dour.

He squinted as he studied my eyes. “I didn’t know there were any Descended healers in Lumnos.”

For once, I didn’t correct the assumption.

I shrugged. “My mother taught me. It’s an interesting way to pass the decades.”

That sounds like something a Descended would say, right? I wondered.

“What House are you?”

“Um... pardon?”

“Your House. What House are you from?”

My stomach dropped. I’d pieced together enough about Descended society to know they divided themselves up by family heritage, and the status of one’s clan determined their social rank—but other than the royal

family of House Corbois, which even I would never be fool enough to claim, I couldn't name a single Descended House if my life depended on it.

Which it might, in the very near future. *Very near.*

"I live on the other side of town," I said brightly, hoping he'd find me more stupid than suspicious. "Small home though." I let out a low whistle. "Nowhere near this fancy."

"Not your residence. Your House. What family do you belong to?"

Henri's teasing voice drawled in my head. *Think fast, Bellator.*

I mustered my nastiest glare to rival the boy's own. "You're paying me by the minute, you know. Would you like to waste more of your father's gold getting my life story, or can I get to my duties already?"

He paled at the mention of his father. "Very well. Follow me."

I trailed him through the house, even managing to catch a peek into the room where I'd heard the voices earlier. Inside, two men reclined beside a mahogany desk piled with books and scattered papers. They spoke in voices too low to hear as they swirled a caramel-colored liquid in sparkling crystal tumblers. Neither man gave us so much as a glance as we passed.

We reached the end of a darkened hallway, and the boy came to a stop and turned awkwardly to me. "Evanie's in here."

My eyebrows lifted. He blinked at me in silence.

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong with her?" I pressed.

"Isn't that your job to figure out?"

I made no effort to hide my eyeroll as I brushed past him into the mammoth room, the size of which could have easily engulfed my family's home. Missing were the candy colors and frivolous trimmings one might expect of a toddler's room. Instead, the furnishings were muted, dreadfully somber, echoing the austere decor throughout the rest of the estate. Even the toys displayed in perfectly even lines on chest-high shelves were carved from bleached woods or painted in various hues of eggshell and ecru. It was elegantly beautiful—and utterly soulless.

How very fitting, I thought dryly.

At the edge of the room, an enormous bed swallowed up a girl nestled beneath a cloud-soft mountain of thick, downy covers. The fabric jostled with the sound of sniffing, followed by a faint whimper of pain that cracked my heart wide open.

"Hello there," I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. I scooted closer and brushed away the golden, sweat-soaked ringlets matted to her forehead.

She was young, around five years old, and though her skin was pallid, it was warm to the touch. “You must be Evanie. I’m Diem—I’m a healer. I hear you’re not feeling so well today.”

Her pale eyelashes fluttered open, revealing two irises of robin’s egg blue. “I want Momma,” she whimpered.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, your mother isn’t here. But I’m going to try to make you feel better, alright?”

She nodded weakly, sniffing again.

I glanced across my shoulder at the boy, who was watching warily from the door. “Your sister is sick, and neither of your parents were willing to stay with her?”

He scoffed. “My parents are very important. They don’t have time to sit at home and coddle us.”

The dark timbre of his father’s cruelty already echoed in his young voice. My heart sank at the thought of the man he would likely become.

I struggled to keep pity off my face as I evaluated the little girl’s condition. With parents like these, what kind of woman would *she* become? What kind of spouse would she seek out? What kind of children would she raise?

Though we Bellators had our problems, I knew with soul-deep certainty what loving parents and a happy marriage looked like. My mother and father had made sure Teller and I always knew what it was to be cherished, to be given a soil of unconditional love to nourish our growth and keep us rooted no matter the world’s storms.

Until now, I hadn’t realized just how rare a gift that was.

Lorris moved closer to the bed. “Is she going to be alright?” Though he wore the same petulant scowl, concern crept into his features.

“I think so... but I could help her much better if I knew what happened.”

He studied his sister for a moment, then eyed me skeptically. “Yesterday, we were in town with Mother, and Evanie wandered off. When we found her, she said a woman had given her some flowers. A few hours later, she had red marks all over her skin.”

“And you think it was the flowers that caused it?”

“There’s a mortal man who tends the plants on our estate. He saw her carrying them and told us to take them away from her.”

I frowned. “Do you still have them?”

“No, we threw them out.”

I looked back at the girl. The bedding was pulled high and tucked tightly at her neck, but a hint of redness peeked out below her jawline.

“Evanie,” I cooed, “do you mind if I take a look at your arms?”

She shook her head vigorously. “Don’t touch! No touch!”

I held my hands up. “I won’t touch, I promise. I just want to see what they look like.”

Her eyes flew to her brother’s face in search for some confirmation that I could be trusted. I expected him to huff out of the room with a snide remark, but to my surprise, he sat down beside her.

“It’s alright, Ev,” he said in a calm, steady tone. “Show her where it hurts.”

Hesitantly, she pulled at her blankets until her arms appeared—thick and swollen, her fair skin covered in puffy, ring-shaped welts. My scrutiny shifted back to her face. Her eyes were clear and free of redness, her sniffles not caused by tears, but from a persistent runny nose.

“These flowers,” I asked, “were they small and yellow, with big waxy green leaves?”

The boy nodded. “I think so.”

“And did they smell of butterscotch?”

He sat straighter, surprised. “Yes—how did you know?”

I frowned again, then reached for my satchel, rifling through my assortment of bottles and creams. “Well Evanie, I have good news, great news, and fantastic news. Which do you want first?”

She looked at her brother again, still unsure. “The fantastic news,” she said softly.

“The fantastic news—” I pulled out a handful of bright pink and orange lozenges wrapped in waxed paper. “—is that you get candy for being so brave.”

Instantly, her pitiful mood disappeared. She burst upright and stretched her tiny hands for the sweets, her injuries long forgotten. I might have left out that the lozenges were more medicine than candy, but that was one healer’s secret I’d take all the way to the grave.

“What’s the good news?” Lorris asked.

“I know what caused these welts. It’s a plant called deathshade.” The children’s eyes bulged in unison. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. As long as you don’t eat it, it won’t get any worse than this.”

“And the great news?” Evanie chimed in.

“I have a cream to treat it.” I held up a small jar containing a mustard-colored mixture. “And it works quickly. You should feel better by this evening.”

“Is there any bad news?” Lorris asked.

“Well, I’m going to have to put this cream on those sores, and that might be a little painful.”

“No touching!” The little girl shook her head again and recoiled away from me, tucking her arms back under the blankets.

I shot Lorris a hopeful look. “Maybe you could hold her hand and show her how to be extra brave for this part?”

A wrinkle formed between his brows as he glanced between the two of us, clearly torn between caring for his sister and wanting to seem as distant and too-important as his father.

Happily, and unexpectedly, his compassion won out. He reached forward and untucked his sister’s hand, folding it in his own. “Remember what Father told us, Ev. We’re the head of House Benette. We have to be strong and never show weakness. The entire House looks to us. We can’t embarrass Father by crying.”

She stared at her brother and nodded slowly, even as her bottom lip quivered.

With painstaking care, I dipped my hand into the jar of cream and tenderly eased my fingertips onto her skin. She winced at the touch, her hands turning white as she squeezed her brother’s fingers.

I worked as quickly as I could, slathering her arms in a thick coat of the mixture. “Try blowing on it,” I urged them both. “The breeze will make it feel a bit better.”

The girl gave me such a patently suspicious frown that I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing, but her brother took the bait, leaning in close and blowing on his sister’s arms. She gasped, then giggled. “Lorris, that tickles!”

Soon we were all laughing and taking turns puffing cool air as she squealed and squirmed around the bed. Even the boy let loose a grin, his harsh facade finally broken.

I took advantage of the happy distraction to finish applying the cream, but despite my lightest touch, as my hands moved toward the worst of the sores, the girl’s laughter retreated back to whimpers.

“Here Evanie, look,” Lorris rushed out, holding out his hands. “I learned how to do this last week at school.”

At the center of his cupped palms, a small orb of light sparked into being. For a moment it only wobbled and spun, but slowly a shape began to form, warping into the outline of what looked to be a dying, half-eaten moth.

“A butterfly,” Evanie breathed, her eyes growing wide as saucers as the show of magic cast a soft blue glow across her face. “It’s beautiful.”

Lorris’s brow scrunched tighter with careful focus, his tongue jutting out from the corner of his mouth. The moth—no, *butterfly*—flapped one limp, mismatched wing, and Evanie squealed, clapping her hands in pure delight while I seized my chance and lathered on the last of the cream.

“Is it hard to craft the light into shapes like that?” I asked him.

He gave me a puzzled frown. “Don’t you already know?”

My stomach dropped as I realized I’d forgotten my brilliant—no, *stupid*—ruse. “Oh, um... I have the other kind. The, uh, shadow kind.”

He nodded like that was an acceptable answer, and a breath rushed out of me. “At school they said light and shadow work the same, but my magic tutor has both, and she says the shadows are harder to convince into doing what you want them to do. She said the light wants to please its wielder, but the shadows only want to fight.”

I rubbed at my chest, a strange discomfort kicking at my ribs. “I guess it’s a good thing you have light magic then.”

He shrugged, looking at the moth—*butterfly!*—with a kind of resentment hardening his face. “It doesn’t want to please *me*. Father hired a tutor as soon as my magic came in, but I still can’t make anything bigger than this.” Right on cue, the magic fizzled into a curl of smoke, and Lorris’s face fell, as did Evanie’s. He glanced at me. “You must be weak, too, if you’re just a healer.”

I bristled. “There’s more than one way to be strong. You don’t need magic to be a leader or to help people.”

“You need it to defeat your enemies,” he argued.

My lips curled into a smile. *We’ll see about that.*

“You know Lorris, you’re a really good older brother, taking care of Evanie like this.”

He sat up, back stiffening. “Family is important. It’s everything.” His voice was rote, the words sounding memorized rather than heartfelt.

“Still... you’re her only family here now.”

“I told you, our parents are very important. Someone like *you* couldn’t possibly understand.”

“I only meant—”

“Is that all?” He jerked away and stood up. “I’m important as well, you know. I don’t have time to babysit little girls. I presume you can handle the rest on your own?”

My heart clenched at the hurt that struck his sister’s face. “Yes, of course, but I’m sure Evanie would love it if you—”

“You can wait for me in the parlor when you’re finished.” Without another word, he stalked out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

I could only stare for a long moment, rendered speechless by his turbulent emotions.

“He’s always like that.” Evanie’s soft voice broke my daze. When I turned back to her, she rolled her eyes rather adorably. “Momma says he’s moody.”

I leaned in close to her and smirked. “*Boys*—what a mess, aren’t they?”

She grinned and nodded. I wiped my hands clean, then took one of the candies and unwrapped it from its crinkly paper coating. She snatched it from my hand and popped it into her mouth before I could even make the offer.

“Evanie, your brother said a woman gave you those flowers—that was yesterday? Do you remember what she looked like?”

She chewed on her lip. “She told me not to tell anyone.”

A nagging suspicion twisted my gut. I’d gone to Henri’s home three days ago, and the following evening he’d told me the healers’ center would receive an inquiry from an important Descended about a sick daughter. If this girl was only infected yesterday...

“The woman’s eyes,” I said, “do you remember what color they were?”

She screwed up her face, not understanding the question. It occurred to me that a child this young might have only ever seen blue eyes, particularly if her parents kept her away from any mortal servants who worked for them.

“Were they blue, like your parents and your brother? Or did they look like this color?” I gestured to my cognac-hued leather breeches and taupe

satchel.

Come to think of it, practically everything I owned was some forlorn shade of dingy brown. For a mortal in a world where standing out too much could get you killed, color was as much a luxury as an existential threat.

She hesitated, then pointed to my pants. “Like that, I think. They were dark.” She beamed. “Like chocolate!”

My suspicion turned to fury.

I walked to a nearby desk and scratched out a quick note to her parents explaining my diagnosis and instructions for her care, then set the jar of cream and a few more lozenges on top.

“It was nice to meet you, Evanie. If you’re not feeling better by tomorrow morning, have your mother send for me again, alright?”

She nodded and sank back into the puddle of pillows arranged behind her. I gently tucked the blankets to her chin and stroked her hair, humming softly until her eyelids drooped and finally closed.

Careful not to wake her, I snuck out of her room and eased the door shut, creeping down the empty corridor until I came to the office I’d passed by earlier. It was now abandoned, the glittering tumblers lying empty on a lacquered side table. The room oozed of vanilla and tobacco and the musty aroma of old books, messy piles of which were strewn across the nearby desk.

A growing part of me wanted to leave this place without ever looking back. With what I now suspected the Guardians of doing to that little girl, I was no longer sure I wanted any part of their ruthless activities.

But I knew Henri’s heart as well as I knew my own. He would never condone such a thing, and he would certainly never rope me into it, especially unwitting. And the man who ran this family was no doubt a vicious creature doing terrible things of his own. I might never get a chance to stop him again.

With a quick glance over my shoulder, I tiptoed into the office and tugged in the door until it was barely ajar—closed enough to block me from view, open enough that I would hear anyone approach.

I crept to the desk and rifled through the stacks of documents, where ledgers of unfamiliar words and confusing numbers were scrawled in an elegant script, precious little of it making any sense. A corner of what looked to be a sketch lay visible at the base of one pile, and I carefully edged it free.

A map—the blueprints of a building, marked with various rooms. Many had labels I didn't recognize, but a few I knew all too well.

Blades. Armor. Crossbows.

An armory, I suspected—and a large one, judging from the floorplan's sprawling scale. I folded the paper and slipped it into my satchel along with a handful of the other documents.

My eye wandered to a red velvet ribbon tucked between the pages of a leather journal teetering on the edge of the desk. I pulled it closer and cracked it open, finding tea-stained pages lined with names, dates, and amounts—a customer ledger, perhaps.

I grabbed a mostly blank paper from the desk and copied the names as quickly as I could. I cringed at my blocky, inelegant lettering, once again reminded how deeply I did not belong in this world of wealth and etiquette.

I'd only copied a handful of pages when the thump of heavy footsteps grew louder in the corridor, and my heart plummeted to my feet. The only place hidden from view was under the desk, but if someone came around to sit... there would be no explaining that away.

A figure stopped outside the office door, the outline of their shadow just visible through the slim opening—I was out of time.

I collapsed to the ground, then cowered as far as I could into the dark shadow of the desk's cove. My hand clamped across my lips to muffle my ragged breathing.

Boots clicked along the marble floor, then softened to the rustle of shoes over a thick, lavish rug. A glug of liquid—refilling a drink, perhaps—then the crackle of a dying fire being prodded back to life. Then more footsteps—closer this time.

A panicked sound strangled in my throat. In a matter of seconds, I'd be found out. They'd arrest me. Execute me. If they didn't kill me on the spot, I'd be lucky if I even got a chance to say goodbye to my family.

Fuck—I'd be lucky if they didn't kill my family, too.

The footsteps came so close I saw the tip of glossy ebony boots as they rounded the side of the desk. I squeezed my eyes shut and prepared for the worst.

“Father?”

Lorris.

Sweet, miserable *Lorris*. I took back every awful thought I'd had about the boy.

“What is it now?”

“The healer... I, um... I can’t seem to find her.”

“What do you mean, you can’t *find* her?”

“I told her to wait in the parlor when she was finished, but she’s not there, and she’s not in Evanie’s room, either.”

“You left a stranger unattended? In *my* home?”

A long, excruciatingly heavy pause passed. Though he was hidden from my sight, I could picture Lorris shrinking under the scorch of his father’s harsh judgment.

“You stupid, worthless child. Have I taught you nothing about protecting our House?”

“Yes, of course, Father. I only thought—”

A loud smack of skin on skin cut through the air, then a shaky whimper.

“Don’t think. Obey. Do you understand me?”

A whispered, “Yes, Father.”

Two pairs of footsteps exited the room and faded down the hall. I scrambled out from my hiding spot, finally allowing myself to heave in several gulps of air. Any interest I’d had in exploring more of the items on the desk had fled the room with Lorris and his father.

I ran to the door and checked that the hallway was clear before bolting for the home’s entrance. At the last minute, instead of turning toward the parlor, I continued straight, following the noise of the busy kitchen.

When I burst in, still gasping for breath, a wave of confused blue-eyed stares turned my direction.

“I’m looking for the master of the house,” I blurted out. “Could one of you help me?”

An older woman covered in flour wiped her hands on her apron, then walked over and leaned in close. “And who are you?”

“A healer. I came to treat the little girl. I need to, um, get my payment. That’s all.”

She gave me a disdainful glare. “You can’t be in here. No outsiders allowed near the family’s food. Now we’re going to have to throw all this out and cook it again.”

My eyes rolled entirely of their own free will. “Oh for the love of the Flames, is that really necessar—”

“The *Flames*?”

My mouth clicked shut.

The woman snatched me by the arm and roughly dragged me down the hall. Lorris and a much older man appeared at the opposite end, fixing me with a pair of matching scowls.

Oh, those two were *definitely* related.

I flashed them a sheepish smile. “Made a wrong turn and got a bit lost in the kitchens, but this nice lady kindly offered to help me find my way.”

The woman threw me a scowl of her own that left me wondering if *she* was related, too.

“I just need to get my payment, if you don’t mind,” I hurried out. “Three gold marks.”

I honestly wanted no part of their money, particularly if the cause of the girl’s illness was what I feared. But to forego payment would raise even more suspicion, and at the moment, my survival instincts outstripped my guilt.

The father looked supremely irritated as he dug around in a pouch on his waistbelt, then held the heavy coins out toward me.

My hand wobbled as I plucked them from his palm and dropped them into my satchel. “I left some medicine in your daughter’s room. Don’t hesitate to send for us again if she doesn’t improve.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then arched an eyebrow. “Is there more, or are you done wasting my time?”

In my head, I rattled off some exquisitely colorful commentary on his parenting style, but I knew too well that with men like this, it would be the more vulnerable members of his family who paid the price if my temper wounded his ego.

So I held my tongue, smiled sweetly, then power-walked toward the door at a blistering pace one could only describe as *get-me-the-hell-out-of-here*.

Chapter

Eighteen

“Henri Albanon, I’m going to *murder* you.”

Henri lounged against a stone pillar outside the family’s home, half-hidden by a tree laden with blooming ivory camellias. I stomped past him, refusing to pause on my warpath for the street.

He jogged behind me. “What happened? Did you get anything useful?”

I didn’t answer at first, too focused on soothing the adrenaline scalding my veins.

“Diem, wait.” He tugged on my arm, but I jerked it out of his grip. “Are you alright?”

I spun to face him. “No, I’m not alright. I almost got killed in there. And I have some serious questions about what happened to that little girl. Did you—”

“Killed?” His focus skipped across my face, then down my body. “Are you injured?” He fell deadly still, eyes narrowing. “Did he do something to you?”

“No, but he came a foot away from catching me hiding under his desk, and if he’d found me there—”

“*Under his desk?* You got into his office?”

“Yes.”

His expression went slack. “You... got into... Evrim Benette’s personal office...”

I glowered. “Try to look a little less shocked.”

“Was he there with you?”

“Not at first.”

“Did you find anything?”

I huffed and grabbed his wrist, dragging him around a nearby hedge until we were out of the public view. I reached into my satchel and handed over the documents I’d spirited away.

As he slowly rifled through them, I suddenly felt small and insecure, a nervous student cringing in wait for their teacher's assessment. Despite my irritation at how the mission had unfolded, joining the Guardians was my only real chance at getting the vengeance against the Descended I so desperately craved, and these documents were the keys to my acceptance.

"I don't know if they're useful," I said, already guarding my heart for his disappointment. "That was all I had time to copy."

I paused, waiting for him to speak, but he only gazed at the papers in torturous silence.

My anxiety grew by the second. Had he expected more? Had I just wasted a crucial opportunity?

"I also heard a conversation. Something about Sophos researching explosives. And he mentioned orders from Fortos and—"

Henri gave a loud, abrupt laugh.

My shoulders slumped. "Is it not enough?"

"*Not enough?*" He laughed again and carved a hand roughly through his hair. "Shit, Diem. I didn't expect you to get anything. I didn't think he would even let you out of his sight."

My head cocked. "Then why send me in at all?"

"The point of the test is to show that you're willing to *try*." He grinned. "No one ever actually completes their first mission."

"Are you joking? I almost got killed just to prove that I would try? I swear to the gods, Henri, I really am going to murder y—"

He lunged forward and wrapped me up in his arms, lifting me into the air as his lips crushed against mine and stole my words away. "I'm so proud of you," he said breathlessly. "This is incredible, D. Most of the Guardians wouldn't be brave enough to do what you just did."

I froze, my temper paralyzed by his unexpected words.

"These documents..." He released me and stared again at the papers in his hands. "You have no idea how valuable these are. This is..."

He shook his head and gazed at me, his smile nearly blinding. His eyes glowed with admiration, his expression one of wonder and a reverent kind of pride.

Warmth spread through me—he'd never looked at me like this, not in an entire lifetime of knowing each other. This was something more than friendship or even love, something that went beyond merely being

impressed. This was *respect*—the kind that could only be earned through trials and proof.

I'd seen it in strangers' faces when they looked at my parents or spoke of their illustrious careers, but I'd never felt it myself. All my life, I'd stood in the shadow of their well-earned greatness. Now, for the first time, I felt like someone who might be worthy of greatness myself.

Or at least someone capable of it.

"You truly think these will be useful?" I asked.

"Diem, this is some of the best intelligence we've ever had. The Guardians have been trying to find information on Benette's business for so long. This isn't just information—this could be enough to blow it up entirely."

A grin slowly crept up my lips. "Really?"

"Yes, really. If they had any doubts about letting you in, this will put an end to it."

"Doubts?" My happiness faltered. "Why would they have doubts about me?"

He tensed. "I only meant—you know, they're sensitive about new members. And with your father's history in the army and all..."

"Why should that matter? Brecke's in the army, and he's a member, isn't he? I saw his tattoo."

"We have many members in the army. But they're all soldiers or tradesmen, not high-ranking officers. Not people loyal to the Descended."

I pulled back and frowned. "My father isn't loyal to the Descended, Henri."

He stared at me for a few beats. "Diem..." His head tilted slightly, his features softening. "He led battalions for decades. Do you know how many rebel cells he attacked? How many Guardians he's responsible for capturing or killing?" His tone was gentle, but I couldn't miss the judgment in his eyes.

It's not that I wasn't aware—I'd heard the accusations before, I'd even made them myself the other night. But to realize that joining the Guardians might set my father as my own enemy...

"It's not always so black and white," I argued, a heaviness knotting in my stomach. "My father fought back in his own way. Sometimes you have to do things you hate in order to stop worse things from happening."

I wasn't sure whether I was trying to convince Henri or convince myself.

When he didn't respond, and only looked at me with a quiet sort of pity, I got the impression Henri had the very same question.

I sighed heavily. "You really think they won't let me in because of my father?"

"When you show up with these documents? Gods, D... they're not only going to let you in—I wouldn't be surprised if they give you a whole team of your own." A delighted grin returned to his face. "You're going to be a hero."

My pride swelled, and with it, my arguments shriveled on my lips.

I still had concerns—too many, if I was really being honest—but for once in my life, I felt a sense of purpose. Of righteousness.

This was a path I had chosen, free of my family's influence or the expectations of society, and through it, I could help far more people than the occasional patient. If I could work with the Guardians to win this war, I could help every mortal in Emarion and ensure peace for generations to come. No more violence, no more suffering—surely that was worth more than whatever worries were shouting from the back of my conscience, wasn't it?

Besides, I could be more careful, take fewer risks. I could lay ground rules with the Guardians—lines I wasn't willing to cross. If Henri really believed I could be a leader within their ranks, I could use that to ensure we fought this war with honor, never sacrificing one innocent life to protect another.

There was so much I had the potential to do.

The one thing I couldn't do was *nothing*.

I drew in a deep breath and nodded. "Alright then. Let's go meet the Guardians."



"WE'RE HERE for the card game."

Henri and I stood outside a nondescript door on the back side of a seedy, run-down tavern. The evening air was damp and brisk, and both of us were wrapped tightly in thick woolen cloaks. I couldn't stop myself from

tugging my hood down over my head every few seconds, my focus darting around constantly in a sweep for prying eyes.

Outside the door, a burly man sat on a stool with arms crossed. He was slouched against the wall, a broad-brimmed hat pulled down nearly over his eyes and looking immensely bored.

“Quiet night tonight,” the man said.

Henri’s voice dropped to a whisper. “But the tree burns on.”

The man tilted his hat up, then studied the two of us, his eyes sticking on me. “No card game here,” he said finally, taking a lazy drag from his pipe.

“Come on, Brother—you know me.”

“No card game here.”

Henri glanced over his shoulder, then flipped his cloak away and pulled at the back of his tunic. The fabric bunched upward until the image of spindly roots appeared on his skin—the base of his Everflame tattoo.

“That good enough for you?” he hissed as he pulled the fabric back into place. “Let us in.”

“I *said* there’s no card game here.” The man jerked his chin toward me. “Not for her.”

I shifted my weight uneasily.

“She’s new,” Henri said. “The Father arranged her test, and she’s already passed it. And she brings an offering—a really good one.”

“I don’t care if she brings the keys to the royal fuckin’ palace. Until someone that matters tells me she’s in, there’s no game for her.”

“I just need to talk to him and show him what she’s got. Give us five minutes, Dar—”

“*Watch it*,” the man snapped, rising to his feet. “Remember the rules, or there’ll be no game for you either, *Brother*.”

Henri bristled. “My apologies, Brother. But I’m telling you—the Father is going to want to see what she brought.”

The man looked between the two of us, then came over and stood in front of me. Without warning, he jerked my hood down and grabbed my chin, pulling it closer.

A smarter Diem might have remembered that she was supposed to be acting obedient and loyal to prove herself worthy to these people. A smarter Diem might have let this stranger manhandle her a bit if it convinced him she wasn’t here to cause trouble.

But I had always been an act first, think later kind of girl.

I grabbed his wrist and wrenched it from my face, then slammed my other fist into his chest, carefully targeted on the soft flesh below his sternum. Breath wheezed out of him as he doubled over, groaning in pain.

“Diem, stop!” Henri wrapped an arm around my waist and dragged me away. “What are you doing?” he hissed in my ear.

I gave him a glare that said *Shouldn't you be the one defending my honor?* but a round of boisterous laughter froze us in place.

Though still hunched over, the man's shoulders shook with each rumbling chuckle. “Now there's a woman who knows how to land a punch.”

He straightened and took me in anew, a terrifying gleam in his eyes. I couldn't tell if he wanted to bed me or kill me.

“You,” he pointed to Henri, “go in and speak with the Father.” His lips twisted. “She stays with me.”

Henri started to protest, but I nudged him forward. “Go on, it's fine.”

He hesitated. “Are you sure?”

I made a show out of curling my fingers into a fist as I returned the man's smirk. “Don't worry. Me and Tiny here are going to be best friends.”

His grin widened.

Henri gave me a pleading look that was half panic, half admonishment. “Just give me a few minutes.” I waved him off, and he disappeared inside.

The silence grew tense as the man and I each tried to intimidate the other with equally malicious smiles.

“You're the Bellator girl,” he said.

I didn't respond.

“You're not supposed to be here.”

I ached to ask why, but I refused to give him the satisfaction.

“How's the ribcage feeling?” I asked instead.

He gave a low, dangerous laugh. “So what's this offering you brought that's so special?”

“Why don't you come try to touch me again, and I'll show you.”

He snorted. “Big words for a little girl.”

“Better a little girl than a little...” My gaze briefly dropped to his crotch, and I clicked my tongue sympathetically.

His lip curled. “You do remember that you need my permission to get inside, don't you?”

“Really?” My eyebrows lifted. “You said only ‘someone that matters’ can make that call. But when I do finally speak with the Father—” *Whoever the hell that is*, I thought flatly. “—I’ll be sure to ask him if he got your permission first.”

A moment later, the door swung open. A group of three men strode into the alley and formed a semi-circle around me, Henri following close behind. The air was so rich with violent energy, my hands flexed with an urge to fly to my weapons.

The man who’d positioned himself directly in front of me stepped forward. He was older, near my father’s age, skin rough and marked with the scars and wrinkles of a hard-worn life. Something about him was distantly familiar, though I couldn’t place his face in my memory.

“You’re the healer that went into House Benette?” he asked.

“I am.”

“And you were able to get documents from Evrim Benette’s office?”

“Only a few.”

“Show me.”

I shot a glance at Henri, who nodded and gestured to my satchel. I pulled out the documents and, hesitating for a heartbeat, held my breath as I handed them over.

The three men huddled close, mumbling comments too quiet to hear. I watched the other two men react with shock, their lips parting and nostrils flaring wide, but the man who had initially addressed me gave no reaction.

Again, my insecurity surfaced. I hated, *despised*, that I so deeply needed the approval of these men. I’d grown accustomed to the confidence that my proficiency as a healer had earned me, the sureness of self that came with being an expert in my field and experienced beyond my years.

But here, I was nothing and no one, a woman they did not know raised by a man they did not trust. To these three strangers, my only worth lay in the scraps of paper in their hands—and if that wasn’t enough to impress them, my time as a Guardian could be over before it began.

The longer their whispered deliberations stretched on, the higher my anxiety rose, and I found myself rambling before I could stop the words from coming out. “The names—they were from his customer ledger, I think. It was a large book, but those were the most recent entries.”

The man in the center glanced at me, then back down. “Is this all?”

I stiffened. “I... I also overheard a discussion. I’m not sure who it was with, but they were discussing shipments and purchases from other realms. And research—something about explosives.”

All three men stilled at that.

“Tell me,” he demanded. “I want to hear everything—every detail, no matter how small.”

I recounted all that had happened and all that I’d seen and heard, leaving out only the details of the two children I’d met and the things they’d shared. Though I’d already betrayed my healer’s vow, there were some boundaries too sacred to cross—even for me.

When I finished, the man folded up my documents and handed them to the others. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave me a long, indecipherable stare. “Did anyone there recognize you?”

“No.”

“And no one saw you go in or out of his office?”

I shook my head.

One of the men turned toward him. “You can’t really be considering letting her in. Do you realize who she is?”

He continued to watch me, his dark eyes drilling into my own. “I know exactly who she is.”

“Then you know why she’s off-limits.”

He narrowed his gaze. “How old are you, girl?”

“Twenty.”

“An adult, then. Capable of making your own choices and deciding for yourself where your loyalties lie.”

It didn’t feel like a question, but I nodded nonetheless. “I know what you’re fighting for. And I know the risks. I’m not afraid. I want to help.”

Something tingled against my skin. A chill from the evening cold, perhaps, or my conscience warning me of the dangerous line I was about to cross. Or...

I glanced over my shoulder into the darkness of a nearby alley. My eyes squinted as I peered closer, scouring the shadows.

“Father,” the third man said, drawing my focus back to the men, “I have to agree with my Brother. She’s a Bellator. She shouldn’t be here. It will cause too many problems when...” He stopped himself, but he tipped his head to me with a loaded frown.

The man in the center—the man I now realized was this *Father* they kept referring to—glanced back at the guard I'd socked. "And you, Brother—what do you think? Is she more trouble than she's worth?"

His lips spread into an enormous grin. "Oh, it's up to *me*, is it?"

I almost groaned.

He sauntered over until he was standing so close, the folds of my cloak brushed against the dark curls that sprang free from his half-bared chest. I wanted to choke on the smug arrogance on his face, but I forced myself to fix my chin high.

His hand rose to my face as if to grab it once again. I jerked back and raised a clenched fist in warning. Even if I'd already lost, I sure as hell would go down swinging.

He laughed and dropped his arm. "You got fight in you, girl. We need more of your kind around here." He turned back to the man in the center. "I say let her in."

"Then it's decided," the Father said. A dark smile curved his lips. "Welcome to the Guardians of the Everflame."

Chapter **Nineteen**

From what I'd seen of Henri's rebel friends in Fortos, I had expected the Guardians to be an assortment of brusque, overbuilt soldier types, the kind of men that usually swarmed around my father like bees on freshly bloomed mint.

And although plenty of men of fighting age clumped together, slapping each other's shoulders and laughing raucously as they talked, it was everyone else milling about in the crowded meeting room that caught me by surprise.

Women—and lots of them—of various ages, many of whom I recognized. A seamstress who knew my mother well, a few sex workers I recognized from the Garden, a former classmate chatting with our old teacher. Children, too—some not even old enough to have finished school, their faces still round with youth and pocked with teenage blemishes. And a number of elderly, too old to fight, but perhaps still willing to put their lives on the line in other ways.

There was even one of my own trainees from the healers' center. Lana, the girl who had accompanied Maura and me to the palace on my first visit, rushed over to Henri and began chatting animatedly with him before her eyes caught on me hovering in the background.

Her face drained of color. Mine might well have done the same.

The instinct rose in me to judge her—to march over and scold her for putting her future as a healer on the line. It was harder than I wanted to admit to remember I no longer had any moral high ground to stand on.

I didn't dare make too much eye contact with anyone. My presence here still felt like an unwelcome intrusion, a violation of something deeply intimate and fiercely guarded. They, on the other hand, watched me like predators on the prowl. I wilted beneath the burn of countless eyes as I slumped into a seat near the exit and stared at my open palms.

A door in the front opened, and the man they called the Father strolled in, flanked by the same two men. The room went quiet, and everyone hurriedly made their way into the scattered chairs. Henri slid into the seat beside me and lazily reclined back, his arm draped across my shoulders.

“Who are those three men?” I whispered.

“The one in the center, the man who let you in—his name is Vance. We call him the Father because he leads the Lumnos cell of the Guardians. The one on the left is Brant, the one on the right is Francis. They’re Vance’s second- and third-in-command.”

“You told me the Guardians were run by a woman.”

“She’s in another realm on a mission. Vance is leading us now.”

I frowned, my heart drooping. A small part of my drive to join the Guardians had been to meet whatever mystery woman had carved out such a unique position of power.

“What was the mission?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Vance doesn’t share specific details on missions until they’re over. It limits the damage if anyone betrays us.”

I bit back my response. Frankly, if anyone betrayed them, everyone in this room would be dead soon anyway.

“Welcome, everyone,” Vance announced loudly. “Blessed is the Everflame.”

“*Emarion soil, we shall reclaim,*” the room chanted in unison.

I nudged Henri. “You didn’t mention there were secret passwords.”

“You’ll learn them after the blood rite.”

My eyes snapped to him. “Blood rite?”

He stared ahead blankly and nodded. “In a minute, you’ll be called up to confess the worst things you’ve ever done so the group has leverage on you if you try to quit. Then we’ll all strip naked and put a drop of blood in a chalice, and you have to drink it. It’s the second test of loyalty.”

“Are you *out of your Flaming mind?*” I hissed. “I am not doing any of that.”

“It’s too late. Once you come in the meeting, you can’t leave without taking the blood rite. You’ve already seen too much.”

Anger and panic flooded my veins. Henri hadn’t warned me about this. Any of this.

“This was a mistake. I’m getting out of here.” My hand shot down to my boot, sliding Brecke’s knife from its sheath. “I’ll fight my way out, if I

have to.”

I moved to creep past Henri’s chair. His arms wrapped around my waist and dragged me back to my seat. “You can’t go.”

“Oh yes I can,” I ground out, struggling against his grasp. “Get your hands off me.”

“D, wait—”

“*Let go*, Henri.”

“Diem, stop.”

“I swear on the Everflame, if you think I won’t stab you—”

“I’m *joking!*”

I jerked my blade at him. His lips were pursed to hold back a smile, and his shoulders quaked with barely suppressed laughter. Several faces had turned at the commotion, earning me a number of disapproving stares.

“I was teasing you,” he whispered. “I couldn’t tell you the secret words until Vance let you in. There are no rites or confessions.” He rolled his eyes and grinned. “We’re not a cult.”

My glare only made him laugh harder.

My cheeks flushed bright red, and I slumped back against my chair.

“That was incredible,” he said, biting his knuckle. “You should have seen your face.”

“Keep laughing. I want to remember every second of this the next time you ask for a little nighttime *fun* out in the woods.”

His laughter abruptly stopped.

Vance’s announcements continued on, though I could hardly focus, his words nearly drowned out by my now-pounding heartbeat.

“...several successful recent missions. Sister Samyra completed a high-risk delivery in Lumnos City.”

Near the front, a petite brunette looked around and smiled shyly at the smattering of applause.

“And our newest member, Sister Diem, obtained some very valuable documents from the home of a prominent Descended target.”

A round of eyes turned toward me, accompanied by clapping and a few appreciative nods. My cheeks burned even hotter.

Without meaning to, my eyes met Lana’s, and I saw the same judgment I had felt toward her now reflected in her own expression. She knew about my visit to House Benette, as did all the healers at the center.

Any hope I might have had at hiding my decision to betray my vows was officially, unavoidably gone.

It didn't matter that I could likely say the same of her. She was only a trainee. I was her mentor, her guide, meant to lead by shining example. Now we both knew I was a fraud.

The desire to melt into my chair and fade away was overwhelming.

Vance started up again, his voice taking on a graver tone. "With the arrival of a new member, I want to remind everyone of our oldest and most important rule. The names of your fellow Guardians are to be protected at all costs. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Father," the voices echoed.

"You are not to reveal the identity of any other member. There are no exceptions to this rule—*ever*. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Father," I answered this time with the crowd, the words tasting awkward on my tongue.

The eyes of the three men in the front turned on me and lingered for a beat too long. There was something there, something in their sudden fixation—as if they could see the discomfort written on my face. The two men at Vance's side exchanged a look, some inscrutable expression passing between them.

They didn't trust me. Henri had been right about the cloud my father's legacy cast over my loyalty to the mortal cause. My so-called *test* may have been enough for Vance, but I evidently had a long way to go to be accepted by the others.

"As I mentioned," Vance continued, "Sister Diem has brought us priceless intelligence that we hope will be useful in our coming mission. Many of you are aware that we've been planning a more aggressive course of action in light of the fraud King Ulther's illness, and with this new informat—"

"Fortos's balls, Albanon, you actually did it. You talked her into joining."

I looked over to see Brecke slip into the seat on Henri's opposite side.

"Brother Brecke," Henri said quietly as they clasped forearms. "You're a long way from home."

Brecke smoothed a hand over his dark beard. "Someone told me there were feisty women to be found in Lumnos." He winked at me. "I had to come see it for myself."

I leaned all the way across Henri's chest and dramatically laid a hand on Brecke's thigh. "What fortunate timing you have, Brother," I purred. "As of a few minutes ago, I seem to be back on the market."

Henri grabbed my hand and tucked it into both of his palms. "Don't listen to anything she says, she's high on Descended wine."

I shot him a fierce look, but Henri's face was so full of guileless mischief, his eyes still lit with pride in me at my successful mission, I couldn't resist the smile that sprang up on my lips.

"So he convinced you to become a Guardian," Brecke said, his voice low as the meeting droned on ahead of us.

"It's my first night," I said.

"She broke into Evrim Benette's personal office," Henri added. "Stole a pile of documents off his desk and walked right out."

"Shit, Bellator!" Brecke clapped his hand on my knee. "You're definitely one of us now."

My gnawing guilt eased a bit at his praise.

"How's that knife I gave you?" he asked, nodding at the blade still clutched in my hand from Henri's prank. "Stabbed any Descended with it yet?"

I smirked and slid it back into its sheath. "I did, actually."

"You did?" they said loudly in unison.

A scowling woman turned and shushed us, and I cowered deeper into my seat with an apologetic grimace.

Brecke leaned closer. "You really stabbed one of 'em?"

I nodded. "I saw a Descended man attacking a mortal woman and half-mortal child a few days ago. He..." My voice hitched at the still-tender memory. "He got away, but I got two good cuts in."

Brecke beamed like I'd told him I had regrown the Everflame.

Henri frowned. "You didn't tell me that part."

I winced. I'd kept most of the details of what had happened in that alley from Henri. When I'd gone to him afterward, I'd been too lost in my anger to relive it in full, too focused on seeking retribution through the Guardians.

And there were still some parts about what happened I was not yet ready to revisit. Not until I understood them better myself.

"I forgot," I lied, avoiding his eyes. "It was an emotional day."

"You forgot you stabbed a Descended?"

I shrugged and leaned back, pretending to turn my attention to the meeting. An awkward silence followed, then I wandered in and out of eavesdropping as Brecke and Henri talked quietly about Brecke's real reason for coming to Lumnos—something about a weapons shipment I mostly ignored, having already had enough exposure to that world for one day.

Every now and then, I caught Henri's eyes watching me. After nearly two decades of friendship, I knew the subtle signs of his temper, and I knew it bothered him deeply that I hadn't told him about my fight with the Descended man.

But then, until our trip to Fortos, he hadn't told me about the mortal boy whose death he witnessed, either. It seemed we'd both become experienced at keeping secrets from the other—at least where the Descended were concerned.

At the front of the room, Vance's second, Brant, was soliciting help for future missions, and the energy had shifted to an eager excitement. It felt as if everyone but me was listening intently for some way to be of use.

There was a need for horses for a visit to the more rural countryside of western Lumnos, for which a flurry of hands shot up, and a delivery to Faunos that Henri claimed before Brant even finished his sentence.

One by one, the more seasoned Guardians stepped up to volunteer. With each passing task, I slumped deeper into my chair.

"The Mother of the Arboros cell sent word. She's planning a significant mission to take place soon, and she'd like our help. We need a Guardian that can obtain access to the royal palace of Lumnos and find a way to move around the ground floor unseen. We'll provi—"

"That's you," Henri whispered as he prodded me with an elbow. "You could take that one."

"Prince Luther never takes his eyes off me when I'm there. There's no way I could get away without being seen."

"You got away from everyone at House Benette. You could figure it out." He nudged me again. "Come on, this mission is made for you."

He started to raise his hand, and I yanked it down, hissing in his ear. "Henri, no—I'm brand new. Don't you think I should learn the ropes a little first?"

"Learn the ropes?" He looked at me like I'd sprouted wings. "D, you accomplished more on your *test mission* than most people here have done

since they joined the Guardians. You don't need to learn anything. You're ready."

He flashed me that same goofy grin I'd originally fallen for, eyes bright with affection. Working with the Guardians had infused him with a passion I'd never seen in him before. His contagious excitement was difficult to resist.

Henri shot to his feet and yanked me up beside him. "Sister Diem can do it," he announced.

Every eye in the room turned to me. Brant raised his eyebrows. Even Vance looked up from his papers and fixed me with a thoughtful gaze.

"The palace is a dangerous place for our kind, Sister Diem," he said. "If you're caught, there may be nothing we can do to spare you the consequences. Are you sure you're prepared to do this?"

No. I wasn't prepared at all. I'd only barely survived my mission at House Benette, and as intimidating as Evrim Benette had been, he had *nothing* on the Prince of Lumnos. Saving his sister's life had won me a measure of his patience, but if he found out I was spying for the Guardians, I had no doubt he'd end my life without a second thought.

But...

I'd always dreamed of living a life worthy of a legacy. Being *great* was a privilege, and it wasn't one that mortals in Lumnos were often given. If I wanted to burn my mark into the world, here was my chance to start.

I sighed and raised my voice. "I'm ready. Tell me what you need me to do."

Chapter Twenty

“There’s protocol,” Maura explained as we walked the long road to the palace. “Kneel when you first greet him, and wait to be told to rise.”

“I thought the King was unconscious.”

“He is. But Prince Luther will be there. He’s given me leave to bow on account of my leg, but he’ll expect you to kneel. He’s very strict about decorum.”

I snorted. “Of course he is. Laying the foundation now for his future reign of terror.”

She shot me a look. “Keep comments like those to yourself, dearie. Your jokes won’t find a welcome audience around this lot.”

“But Luther seems so fun and laid-back. I bet he would *love* my jokes.”

Maura’s eyes raised skyward. “It’ll be a miracle if you don’t get yourself killed.”

“Fine. Back to protocol. To please Prince Luther, I’m to stay down on my knees until His Future Majesty is fully and *completely* satisfied.”

“Diem Bellator!”

I grinned wickedly. “I’m listening, I swear.”

She massaged her temples, exasperation wearying her aging features. “Don’t speak until you’re spoken to first. Try to avoid looking the King or the Prince in the eyes—”

“You must be joking.”

“—and do not conceal your hands or make any sudden movements.”

“Are we meeting rabid dogs or civilized human beings?”

“Neither. These are the Descended—they’re something else entirely.”

I debated reminding her that the last two times I’d been in the palace, I’d broken every one of these rules, but her long-suffering sigh kept me silent.

Today, I would break rules far more serious than these anyway.

Despite my jokes, I wanted this meeting to go well. This was supposed to be my last visit to the palace accompanied by Maura and my first interaction with the King. Getting the royal family to accept me as my mother's replacement was the key to all of my plans: protect Teller's place at the Descended school, succeed on my mission with the Guardians, and find the truth of what happened to my mother.

"Remind me again why they even need mortal healers for the King?"

"Your mother said the Descended healers in Fortos already did everything they could. Whatever illness has taken him, it doesn't respond to their magic."

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

"Make him as comfortable as we can until he goes. The sickness has weakened his healing abilities, so he's not much different than any mortal patient nearing their final days."

Across the treetops, the shimmering towers of the royal palace came into view. From this distance, its walls of dazzling light seemed like a desert mirage, the edges watery and indistinct against the soft pastels of the dawn sky.

"It's strange, isn't it, to think that this King who has lived and ruled for generations is now just a helpless, dying old man?" I asked.

Maura hummed thoughtfully. "They may walk very different paths, but at the beginnings and the ends of their lives, they're as mortal as we are. Perhaps their Kindred did that for a reason."

"If the plan was to humble them, I don't think it worked."

Maura laughed despite her disapproving squint. "The stories say the goddess Lumnos and her siblings wanted the Descended to protect the mortals. Perhaps this was meant to remind them of what it means to be vulnerable and in need of protection."

"I don't think that worked, either. The only people they seem to have any interest in protecting are themselves."

"How quickly you've formed your judgments, for someone who is only just now entering their world."

"Their world, our world, isn't it the same? Just because they hole up in their lavish cities doesn't mean we don't feel the consequences of everything they do. Maybe I haven't been rubbing elbows with them my whole life, but I'm not blind to all they've done. I know what they've taken from us."

She halted and turned to me. “Diem, is treating the King going to be a problem for you? You know we leave our opinions of our patients at the door.”

I couldn’t deny that I was struggling with it. It was one thing to overlook a sordid occupation or personal vices, but having watched that boy and his mother slaughtered in cold blood, knowing it was the result of the King’s policies...

Maura gave me a stern look and a swat on the leg from her cane, and I was instantly taken back to being a mischievous little girl getting a scolding from her elders.

“You’re better than this,” she said. “You’ve always been the healer we could send to our worst, most disagreeable clients.”

“You sent me because I wasn’t scared of them like all the other trainees.”

“No, we sent you because you had *compassion* for them. Under all your sass, you still treated every patient like a human being who deserved a chance to be saved.”

I looked away, shrinking under her scrutiny. “Yes, well, like you said—they’re not human. They’re something else.”

“They descend from Lumnos’s mortal mate too, don’t they? They’re children of both worlds. They might have forgotten that, but we don’t have to.”

When I didn’t answer, Maura studied my face for a long moment. “This was a mistake. You go on back and let me handle the King.”

“No—that’s not necessary.” I straightened my back and schooled my expression into apathy. “I’ll be fine. Really.”

“That Prince is more perceptive than you think, Diem. If he suspects —”

“I can handle it. I can certainly handle *him*.”

Maura was not convinced.

“Honest,” I promised. “I just needed to talk it out of my system. I’m a professional, remember?” I faked a brilliant smile and poked her arm. “Learned from the best.”

She huffed and turned back down the road, worry still radiating from her fidgeting hand and drawn posture. A lump lodged in my throat as I watched her shuffle on ahead.

If she knew what I really had planned today, worry would be the mildest of her emotions.



THE GRYVERN MET US FIRST.

It was a knee-rattling sight to gaze upon the menacing draconic head, lithe leonine body, and broad, feathered wings circling the skies above our heads. Her imposing shadow swooped back and forth as we walked up the topiary-lined path that led to the palace entrance.

Every time I dared a look upward, my stare met with the gryvern's—Sorae, they'd called her. I had the strangest sensation that she wasn't just watching me, but sensing me, *reading* me. Her golden eyes seemed to peer beyond my face and pierce something far deeper—something I wasn't prepared to share.

"Does she normally do this?" I asked, squinting up at the creature.

"No—never." Maura's face had gone pale and more than a bit green. "That thing makes me as nervous as a one-legged mouse in a field of cats."

We neared the steps leading to the entry. Sorae's spear-sharp claws clattered against stone as she slammed down onto a landing perch near the roof, sending Maura jumping nearly out of her skin.

"Unarmed this time, Miss Bellator?"

I tore my attention from the gryvern to see Prince Luther standing in the wide archway with his usual stone-faced expression. The jeweled sword handle that rose above his shoulder glittered in the morning sun, a grandiose juxtaposition to his bleak ensemble of all-over black jacquard. The muscles of his arms flexed as they crossed over his chest, making his already broad form seem all the more imposing.

I threw him a dazzling smile and held out my arms to show off the lack of weapons at my hips. I'd left my twin daggers at home to avoid attention—and in the hopes that if I was caught in the midst of my plan, I could plausibly argue I had no intention of doing any harm. Only Brecke's knife remained, hidden inconspicuously in my boot. It was the only thing that might actually save my life if this went all to hell.

"I wouldn't want you to think I was here to hurt any children," I called out sweetly.

He gave no reaction, though his glacial eyes trailed me as I strolled past him into the foyer.

The guards circled around us and began rifling through our bags, then our clothing. Their inspection was far more aggressive than before, perhaps because they knew we were visiting the King—or perhaps in retaliation for challenging them on my previous visit.

I forced myself to meet Luther's stare while his men ran their hands across my body like I was property to be seized, no more human than the satchels they'd crudely ravaged with their indelicate hands. I flinched at the unnecessary squeeze of a hand on my ass. The guard snickered at my reaction, his fingers jabbing deeper into my flesh.

A muscle ticked on Luther's jaw.

"That's enough," he said curtly.

The guard stared up at him. "But... Your Highness—"

"I'll handle it from here." Without breaking my gaze, Luther sauntered forward. The presence of his immense power hit me like a physical force, and I had to dig in my heels to hold my ground.

His hands dropped from his chest and hovered in the air by my hips. "May I?"

My brows arched. "Now you ask?"

"I wouldn't want you to think I wasn't taught to ask for a woman's consent."

A spark of challenge glittered in his eyes. *You're not the only one who remembers our previous chat*, they seemed to say.

My shoulder bounced, coming off more like an invitation than a shrug. "Go ahead then. If you must."

He held my eyes for a beat longer—just long enough to take my carefully constructed indifference and turn it on its side. I hated how one look from him could unnerve me with that unrelenting focus and that piercing *I-see-you* stare.

Worse, I hated that he *knew* it, and that he wielded it against me with such expert precision. Another weapon I couldn't equal.

His hands settled on my wrists, kneading their way up my arms. His large palms felt as if they lay directly against my flesh, the warmth of him bleeding easily through the meager fabric of my tunic. Though his eyes finally released mine, freeing a pent-up breath to rush from my lungs, I felt more trapped by him than I ever had.

A trail of searing heat followed the deft glide of his palm down my spine, fingers splaying wide at the hollow of my back. They trailed around my ribcage, thumbs moving in slow circles beneath my breasts—far enough away to stay appropriate, but not nearly far enough to keep muscles from tightening on both of our throats.

His hands skated the curve of my hips to the low-hanging brim of my pants. The intimacy of it, especially surrounded by an audience of Maura and the other guards, had heat tingling in places I tried desperately not to think about.

“No commentary?” he asked, sinking to his knees. “I’m disappointed.”

“I’m too busy enjoying the view.”

I risked a glance down, expecting to see the same obnoxious smirk his guard had worn, but for once, Luther looked as flustered as I felt. If I didn’t feel like my skin was about to spontaneously combust, I might even have enjoyed watching him squirm. And on his knees, no less.

His fingers formed a cage around my thighs, his thumbs stroking gentle pressure against the fitted leather. I focused on keeping my lungs steady despite the very acute awareness of what part of my body was mere inches from his face.

“Too bad I didn’t wear a dress,” I murmured.

His hands slid higher, and my breath hitched.

Our eyes caught for a split second. He said nothing, but I swore I felt his fingers tighten around my inner thigh.

His touch stayed firm as he grazed down my leg and over the swell of my calves, brushing my ankle, then moved to my other leg. He had already begun to stand when his palm pressed the top edge of my boot.

We both froze at the same time.

Shit. Brecke’s knife.

Unlike my mortal daggers, this blade could do real damage—to him and to the King. If he found it, no amount of clever quips would explain it away.

His fingers subtly traced the outline of the sheath, and my stomach dropped. Though Brecke had made it impressively thin, almost invisible to a casual observer, Luther’s proximity to me now was anything but casual.

I opened my mouth to blurt out some flustered excuse, but before I could speak, Luther’s hands dropped away from my leg.

He rose to his feet and gave me a long, silent stare, then turned away.

“Grab your things and follow me.”

Maura’s eyes bulged at me with an expression that could have talked for hours. I quickly gathered our bags, and she grabbed my hand and tugged me into step behind him.

My brain tried to make sense of the near-miss I’d just stumbled through. Luther knew—I was certain of it. I’d seen the keen awareness in his eyes. The judgment—the warning.

And yet... he’d let me go without a word.

Why?

I couldn’t afford to linger on the question. As Luther led us up several staircases, I wrestled my spinning mind in an attempt to refocus on my surroundings.

Getting in was the easy part, I reminded myself. Now comes the real challenge.

I noted everything: The placement of the guards at each landing and along every corridor. The shadowy corners the daylight didn’t quite reach. The hiding places—vacant rooms with doors ajar and opaque drapes large enough to conceal a body.

My hand pressed against my chest, where a piece of folded parchment lay hidden in the tight bandeau of fabric across my breasts, mercifully undetected by the guards’ search. The soft crinkle of paper against fabric soothed my nerves. In a few short moments, it might become my lifeline.

We turned into a hallway that was more abandoned than the others. A guard posted at the far end made it less than ideal, but I didn’t know how much longer we had left, and I was running out of options. I slowed my pace, feigning interest in a tapestry until I fell out of Maura’s eyesight. As subtly as I could manage, I slung my bag into a darkened alcove.

Step one, complete.

I sped to catch back up, my mind racing to note every step. Left turn, then right. Twenty paces, then another left. Right again where the columns thinned.

Finally, we approached a set of arched iron doors engraved with the emblem of Lumnos—a flaming sun inset with a thin crescent moon—topped with the symbol of a crown. The doorway was flanked by two guards who bowed their heads in deference to the Prince.

He ignored them and flicked a wrist upward. Dark, twisting vines crept out from the doors’ edges, sprouting thorns and shadowy leaves as they

slithered across the metal slab.

“*Diem*,” Maura hissed.

I stiffened. I’d stepped up to the door without realizing it, drawn by the pull of Luther’s magic. My hand hovered in front of me, reaching for a tendril of pulsing darkness.

“Careful,” Luther murmured. He watched me intently, though he made no move to stop me, nor any move to pull his magic away. “In this palace, the shadows are as dangerous as the people.”

I had no doubts about that.

Still... I couldn’t seem to tear myself away. Deadly as it was, there was something intoxicating about the unearthly power they wielded, some innate song that overrode my every survival instinct and lured me in.

Perhaps that was part of its danger, too.

“How does it work?” I asked, frowning at the mass of tangled vines. “In the mortal world, light and shadow aren’t solid, and they can’t hurt you. Why is your magic so different?”

A long silence stretched on, and I was sure he wouldn’t answer. But then—“Have you ever held up a magnifying glass to sunlight on a clear day?”

“My brother found a lost monocle on the street when we were little. We used it to start fires in fallen leaves in the woods.” I huffed a laugh. “If it hadn’t been such a rainy season, we might have burned down half of Lumnos.”

“*Diem, hush*,” Maura whispered, her wide, frantic eyes darting between me and the Prince.

The corner of his lip twitched in what might have been a smile, if the rest of his face wasn’t so dreadfully stiff. “Our magic works the same way. We conjure light and focus it down to its essence. At its purest, light can burn through almost anything.”

“What about the shadows?” I asked.

The two guards at the door shifted their weight, and one of them softly cleared their throat. From the disapproving downturn of their mouths, I suspected this was information mortals were forbidden to know.

Luther continued ignoring them, his eyes fixed on my hand where it lingered near the door. His brows pinched as a hazy spiral uncurled from the vine and stretched toward my finger, stopping just beyond my reach.

“Shadows work the same way. Darkness isn’t just the absence of light—it’s the absence of everything. No light, no heat, no air. True darkness can destroy even life itself.”

Something stirred beneath my ribs.

I looked at him. “That still doesn’t explain how you can make it solid. Even pure light and darkness can’t do that.”

His lip quirked again—higher this time. “That, Miss Bellator, is why we call it *magic*.”

Despite the mile-long list of reasons I had to hate him, his answer was so unexpected, so uncharacteristically charming, my grin spread from ear to ear.

For a moment so ephemeral it might not even have lasted a heartbeat, the stony fortress he’d built around himself lowered its gates, allowing a fleeting glimpse at the man who lived within. A man who might be something far different than I had once believed.

It was gone before I could make any sense of it. The square slant of his jaw flexed tight, and anything resembling a human emotion disappeared. He was once again a marble-carved statue—pretty to look at, impossible to know.

He raised a palm, and the ebony vines pulled the doors wide open. The colossal chamber inside was as elegantly appointed as the rest of the palace, but this room seemed warmer and more comfortable. The parlor was filled with overstuffed chairs, plush cushions, and gauzy curtains that hung along a wall of arched openings.

Luther led us into an antechamber housing a canopied bed carved from polished, swirling burlwood. A frail figure lay mostly shrouded under layers of coverlets. The Prince paused in the doorway, kneeling and dipping his head in respect.

King Ulther.

I had never actually seen him before. He had come to the mortal side of town on occasion—primarily to christen one of the edifices of the goddess Lumnos they sometimes placed around Mortal City as a subtle threat against any surviving worship of the Old Gods—but my mother had been careful to keep me at home on such occasions.

I felt a hard yank on my arm. Maura was bowing low over her cane and shooting me an insistent look.

Right.

Kneeling. Deference. Protocol.

I sank obediently to one knee, though I couldn't tear my eyes from the King's face. I arched my neck, straining to get a better look.

He looked startlingly young. An older man, certainly, but not nearly elderly enough to be fading away from what seemed to be the Descended equivalent of natural causes. If he were a mortal, I would have imagined him to be the same age as my father.

But I knew better. His reign had begun long ago, ages before even the oldest living mortal had entered the world. What must it be like to outlive generations of mortals, watching them age and die, over and over? The idea struck me as terribly sad.

Of course, these Descended likely had never met a mortal they cared enough about to mourn.

I felt the heat of Luther's gaze settle on me. He had risen, now standing beside the King's bed, watching me as always. Judging me, I guessed, for the defiant glare I couldn't seem to resist, even in the presence of the Crown.

Beside me, Maura held still. Her shoulders hunched in submission, eyes fixed on the floor, waiting for the Prince's permission to rise.

The sight of it needled at my pride. What had either of these men done to deserve such obedience from her? Their vicious laws stole innocent lives, while Maura saved them. Why should she, or I, be expected to kneel to them—or to anyone?

Without waiting for Luther's approval, I shot back up to my feet, shoulders back and chin high. I tugged Maura upright and flashed Luther a bold, unrepentant smile that dared him to correct us.

He held my gaze, refusing to react. "You may attend to your duties," he said flatly.

Maura's fingernails dug into my skin as she dragged me toward the bed with a scowl that was a clear command: *Behave*.

My nostrils flared in silent response: *This is me behaving*.

She shoved her satchel into my hands, then turned to the King. We each got to work, me laying out the items from her bag onto a side table while Maura evaluated the King's condition.

His eyes were closed and his breathing steady. If Maura hadn't warned me that he'd drifted into unconsciousness months ago, I might have thought him merely sleeping. The only sign of his more ominous fate was his grey

pallor and the hollow cling of flesh against bone where his muscles had begun to atrophy.

Despite my best efforts to detest the man, I felt a stab of sympathy. My head understood that he was responsible for countless atrocities, having reigned over generations of oppression and cruelty toward my kind, but in this moment, my heart saw only a frail, dying man.

Were he any other patient, I would take his hand and sit with him, speaking soft words to soothe whatever bit of his soul still remained. But the Prince had not moved his eyes from me since I entered, and standing a breath away from the Crown with a knife of Fortosian steel in my boot was already pushing my luck.

I fell back as Maura smoothed salve on the King's bedsores and massaged his many swollen joints. I should have been helping her. I *really* should have been doing it myself, considering this was to be our formal handoff.

Today, I had other plans.

Maura—thank the gods—struck up some chipper conversation to lighten the tension. I smiled to myself at the ease with which she roped Luther into a mundane back-and-forth about her wife's recent harvests on their small family farm that subtly coaxed him into lowering his guard. Maura's maternal warmth could put even the coldest hearts at ease. Though it came far less naturally to me, it was one of the earliest and most useful skills I had picked up from her.

Their conversation picked up, and Luther's gaze finally broke from mine as his focus turned to Maura. I took advantage and slowly inched my way toward the exit.

"Oh, shoot," I said quickly, backing through the door. "I left my satchel at the front. I must have forgotten it in all the *excitement* when we arrived." I gave Luther an accusatory look.

He took a step toward me. "I'll have one of the guards—"

"No need, I remember the way." I took off jogging before he could block my path. "I'll grab it and return right away."

"Miss Bellator—"

"Give me two minutes!"

"Miss Bellator, *stop*."

"I'll be right back!" I hit the hallway outside of the King's chambers and took off at a dead sprint.

Voices shouted behind me, joined by the scuffle of running boots. I forced my body to push itself as fast as my feet could carry me while my mind retraced the steps I'd memorized.

Right turn, twenty paces—or what felt like twenty paces at full speed. Right turn again, then—*damn*, was it a left or a right?

I ducked into a room I'd spotted earlier, a dark office whose drapes had been drawn to shut out the light. A thin film of dust coated everything in the room, and I held my breath to avoid coughing up a cloud that would give me away.

A moment later, a single guard blew past the door. I held stone-still as his steps faded down the hallway and into silence.

My gamble had paid off. I was certain Luther would never leave Maura alone with the King, and with only two guards at the door of the royal bedroom, I'd suspected he would only spare one to come after me. And I'd just evaded them with barely any effort.

A self-satisfied grin unfurled across my lips.

Step two, complete.

The confidence I projected was finally beginning to feel more real than pretend. First I'd stolen key documents from a powerful Descended arms dealer, and now I was roaming freely in the royal palace. Maybe I was born for the life of a Guardian, after all.

By some miracle of the gods, I spotted my satchel shoved into a shadowy corner. I slipped into the now-empty hallway and grabbed it, slinging it over my shoulder.

I pulled out the paper I'd concealed beneath my shirt and unfolded it. Over the decades, various Guardians had wormed their way into the palace as servants or tradesmen. Though the movement of mortals on royal grounds was always tightly limited, the rebels had managed to put together a primitive floorplan of the palace's many wings and floors.

Much of the map was still blank or only roughly sketched from stolen glances. The wing I stood in now was nothing more than a rectangle scrawled with the words "Royal Residence." Stairwells were noted, as well as a best guess of where guards would be posted. For the rest, I was on my own.

At the lower corner of the map, several floors down and beyond a maze of turns, a door was marked with a bright red circle.

According to Vance, hidden behind this door was a steep, algae-slicked spiral staircase that would end at an underground canal. Leashed to a pier along the water, I would find a small but heavily fortified boat—the Crown’s personal conveyance when traveling the Sacred Sea.

My task from the Guardians was to search the boat for a place where a stowaway might be able to hide unseen. Vance had refused to tell me *why* he needed this information, only that it was necessary for a mission being coordinated by the rebel cell in Arboros. I had minutes at best to get there, get what I needed, and get back.

It was an impossible ask, but it would have to be enough.

I tucked the map away and set off at a jog in the general direction of the palace’s rear, aiming for a stairwell that had been marked as a servants’ passage. If I could get into the unguarded corridors used by the staff, I stood a chance at—

Footsteps.

Down the hall.

Slow and heavy and coming toward me.

I couldn’t see or hear anything except the drumbeat of *left, right, left, right*, but somehow... Somehow, I knew.

Luther.

Something deep within me hummed at the roll of his tremendous power as it filled the corridor. The hair along my arms stood on end, as if yearning to reach toward him.

I whipped around in search of a room or an alcove, any place I could hide, but two long, smooth walls stretched on either side.

I swore under my breath. Had I really been patting myself on the back for success minutes ago?

My eye caught on a tall stone column. It was a little narrow, and closer than I’d like to the light cast by the glowing orbs that dotted the ceilings. If he walked beyond the column, there would be no way to shield myself from view—but it was all I had. I tucked behind it and held my breath.

His footfalls moved closer, his pace strikingly slow. He seemed in no rush to get where he was going, as if he already knew he had me trapped like a mouse in a cage.

The steps stopped.

“Miss Bellator.”

My chest seized. I willed my body to be as small as possible behind the slim barrier. Had he already spotted me? Could he sense my presence, the way I could sense his?

“Whatever it is you’re up to, I assure you it’s in your best interest to reveal yourself immediately.”

Yeah, right. If my lungs weren’t about to explode with the effort of staying silent, I might actually have laughed.

“If the others find you before I do, there will only be so much I can do to protect you.”

Protect me? How gullible did he think I was? Did he really expect me to—

“Don’t end up like your mother. She betrayed me and lost my trust. You should learn from her mistakes.”

My blood stilled in my veins.

Don’t end up like your mother.

Boiling-hot suspicion flooded my skull and seared away all rational thought. What *mistake* had she made? And what had he done to punish her?

I slid my hand to the blade concealed in my boot. He’d been a fool to let me keep it—a fool that was about to regret all his choices.

My fingers trembled with anticipation, my grip so tight around the handle that its edges nearly sliced into my skin. I pictured the blade puncturing his neck like the Descended man in the alley, imagined the heat of his blood on my skin and the light draining from his blue-grey eyes as I held the knife in place to keep his vein from healing. A sharp twist of something like regret nagged at me, but I angrily shoved it away.

I was about to step into the corridor and accept my fate—and his—when another set of footsteps, this time more hurried, grew louder and stopped.

“Your Highness, we can’t seem to find her. She wasn’t on the main staircase or anywhere near the front parlor.”

The silence that followed was so deep I might have drowned in it.

“I want guards posted on every floor, at every staircase, both inside and outside of every exit. Triple the contingent at the King’s chambers. No one is to leave their posts, no matter what they see or hear.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“If you find her, you send for me and me alone. No one is to engage her. Unless it is necessary to protect a resident of this palace, you *do not*

attack.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“I want her found alive. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Your H—”

“Go.”

The echo of fleeing footfalls skittered down the hall.

For an agonizingly long time, I heard nothing but silence. No footsteps, no more false promises of safety to draw me out. I waited long enough that I wondered if I’d missed his exit, even considered peering my head around to see—until his low voice pierced the quiet.

“You’re playing a very dangerous game, Miss Bellator. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

The rhythmic beat of his gait struck up once more and faded into the distance.

When I’d heard nothing further for what felt like an eternity, I finally let myself take a gulp of air to ease my burning lungs.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

There was no chance I was getting to my target anymore. Even if I made it to the stairwell before the guards took their new posts, I could end up trapped in the room I was seeking out. And being found unchaperoned in the hallway was bad, but being found on the King’s personal boat, or in the secret waterway...

My head rolled back and hit the column behind me with a heavy thump.

Step three... failure.



I’D BARELY TURNED the corner toward the royal chambers when the guards yelled out and bolted toward me with weapons drawn.

I plastered an innocent smile on my lips. “Sorry it took so long. I must have taken a wrong turn.”

In seconds, I was surrounded. Someone slammed my face against the gritty rock wall and twisted my arms painfully across my back. A knife appeared at my throat, the edge of the blade pressing against the soft flesh under my jaw.

Behind me, Maura wailed in distress, pleading my case with the guards. Unsurprisingly, they were unmoved.

I should probably have fought back, if for no other reason than it was exactly what Luther would expect me to do, but the disappointment of my failure had taken the fight out of me.

A guard yanked the bag from my shoulder and slashed the bottom with his blade. Jars of tinctures and powders tumbled out and shattered as they collided with the stone floor. Strips of gauze floated into the mess, instantly ruined. The wastefulness of it all made me cringe.

“What are these, poisons?” a guard spat as he toed the spilled powder.

“Medicines,” I said.

“Prove it.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“That’s your problem, mortal.”

“Fine. Take a spoonful of each of them. If you’re dead tomorrow, come find me and arrest me.”

The guard wrenched my arm until my shoulder pulled unnaturally at the joint. My body jerked in reflex, and beneath the knife at my throat, I felt a sharp sting and a trickle of warm droplets sliding down my chest. I gritted my teeth, a miserable part of me welcoming the pain.

I’d let them all down. I’d been so prideful, so cocky to think I could do this and get away with it.

Even the *voice*, my ever-present companion any time I was provoked, was curiously absent. I waited for it to slither out from whatever dark corner it dwelled in and urge to me to *fight*, to *destroy*, but it didn’t even stir.

I closed my eyes and pressed my face to the cold wall.

Failure. A naive, spectacular failure.

A familiar cadence of footsteps sounded in the hallway. The guards—the ones who didn’t have me rammed against a wall—stiffened. Their fists raised to their chest in salute.

“Your Highness, we found her spying in the hallways.”

“Liar,” I mumbled.

The guard leaned his bent elbow into my spine, and an involuntary cry of pain escaped my lips.

Maura pleaded in a trembling voice. “Your Highness, it was an honest mistake. She’s new to the palace, she doesn’t yet understand the rules. I beg

of you, show her mercy.”

A long pause followed, broken only by Maura’s sniffles.

“Release her,” Luther growled.

The guard hesitated. The knife moved away from my throat, but my body remained pinned in place.

“Your Highness, she—”

“I said *release her*.”

The guard freed his grip on my arms and gave me a final shove as he stepped away. I couldn’t even muster a scowl as I shook out my limbs and rubbed my tender shoulder.

There were so, so many things I would rather have done in that moment than look at Luther. Feed myself to the gryvern. Crawl on my bare hands and knees over the shattered remains of my glass jars.

Slowly, reluctantly, I turned to face him.

Oh, the Prince was *pissed*.

I’d only seen the barest traces of emotion in him before. Worry, when his sister had collapsed. Satisfaction, when his cousin had chastised me on my last visit. Annoyance, when... well, pretty much any time I was around.

But his face now was unfiltered fury. His already severe features had hardened into unyielding steel, his blue eyes glittering with malice. The presence around him was an aura of crackling fire that heated my skin in a very different way from how I’d felt with his hands roaming my thighs.

I swallowed.

“What happened?” he barked.

“I found my satchel, and then I came back.” I cringed at the tremble in my voice.

“Where?”

“It fell off my shoulder in the hallway.”

“Why didn’t the guards see you?”

“I got lost.”

At his side, magic began to flow from the heart of his palms. Sparks of light and wisps of shadow wove between his fingers and up his wrists to form a living glove.

The slumbering *voice* inside me opened a single, curious eye.

Luther’s glare shot to the guards. “I told you not to engage her.”

The man who’d shoved me stepped forward. “We were just holding her until you arrived, Your Highness. We started to search her things, and

she attacked us.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Really? That’s the story you’re going with?”
“*Silence!*”

Everyone stilled at the roar of Luther’s thunderous voice. His fury hung so thick in the air I could almost taste its smoky tang. My gaze met his as the echoes of his command reverberated down the hall.

Don’t end up like your mother...

His eyes narrowed on me. “You—”

“Your Highness, please.” Maura stumbled forward, and though she cried out as guards reached to block her path, her face had a grave resolve to it I had rarely seen. “I can’t excuse what Diem did. She was...” She paused and stared at me. “Reckless. And immature.”

I flinched.

“But I’ve known this girl since she was a baby, and she doesn’t have a bad bone in her body. She didn’t mean any harm by it. I’d swear it on my own life.”

Nausea churned in my stomach. *If she only knew.*

I’d never wanted so badly to sink into the shadows and disappear.

Luther’s boots crunched over the slivers of glass scattered across the floor as he stalked closer, holding my gaze until I gave in and allowed my eyes to break away. Let him win his staring contest, if it got me out of there alive.

From the corner of my vision, I watched his focus drop to my neck. He shook away the magic twining around one arm, then reached for me. I braced in anticipation of being seized by the throat, but what he did unsettled me far more.

His touch was strikingly gentle as he examined the wound. I didn’t even feel pain, only the slow, careful stroke of his thumb beneath my jaw and down the curve of my neck, pausing at an old scar on my collarbone. A shiver rolled through me.

His hand stilled. He pulled it back and stared at the dark crimson blood now coating his fingers.

“Rigorn. Yannick.”

Two of the guards stepped forward. One I recognized as the man who had pushed me against the wall. The other clenched a bloody knife in his fist.

Luther held out his other hand, still wrapped in curls of writhing darkness. “Your weapon.”

As the guard laid the handle in his outstretched palm, Luther’s shadow magic encircled it, infecting the blade with a grim, throbbing energy. The guard’s hand loitered for a moment, like he didn’t want to let it go, and I realized he was shaking.

Fast as a rattlesnake, Luther struck—one moment the knife was in his hand, and the next it was lodged low in the guard’s stomach, thorny black vines stretching out to pierce the skin around the wound.

The healer in me felt a dark admiration at the placement. There was no *good* place to get stabbed, but if it had to happen... fewer veins, no vital organs. It would hurt like hell, but with his Descended healing, he’d easily survive it.

Almost as if Luther had become an expert at this kind of thing.

He turned to the other man. “Take him to the guardroom and wait there. I’ll deal with *you* later.”

The guard paled but obeyed, his colleague moaning and clutching his wound as he was hauled away.

I’m not sure what part of seeing a man viciously speared in the gut loosened my lips, but I suddenly found myself speaking.

“Was that really necessary?”

“Diem Bellator,” Maura snapped. “*Hush.*”

Luther’s head slowly swiveled to me.

As he silently returned my side, he seemed to have grown a foot taller and two feet wider. Those glowing eyes had me transfixed, unable to look away.

“You would defend the man who cut your throat?” he asked, low and soft.

I gingerly touched the wound on my neck, surprised to find it no longer bleeding. “It’s a scratch. Hardly worth stabbing anyone over.”

Something that looked a lot like shock passed over his features, then quickly solidified back into fiery resolve.

“The people in this palace must learn, one way or another, that there are consequences for disobeying me.”

Luther reached down and scooped up my shredded bag, as well as the papers and unbroken jars strewn across the ground.

He unceremoniously dumped them in a pile into my arms and gave me a hard look. “It’s time for you to leave, Miss Bellator.” He leaned in until the smooth skin of his jaw warmed my cheek as his whispered words caressed my ear. “Be grateful it’s with your life.”

Maura didn’t wait for me to respond. She scurried forward and grabbed my wrist, nearly causing my things to tumble out of my grasp. “Yes, of course, Your Highness. We are so grateful for your generous mercy.”

I mumbled something that might have been a thanks, or an apology, or perhaps an expletive. My mind was too consumed with trying to understand how the man before me had gone from protecting me to stabbing his own guard to threatening my life in the span of a few minutes.

Every time I thought I was starting to understand this Prince, he did something to completely surprise me. And that—more than his anger, more even than his magic—was what made him truly a threat.

If he had convinced my mother that he could be her ally, then turned on her as quickly as he had just turned on me...

Don’t end up like your mother.

His words echoed in my head the entire way home.

Chapter Twenty-One

Maura didn't speak to me until long after we'd left the limits of Lumnos City.

At first, I was grateful for the quiet and the opportunity to piece through all the emotions warring inside of me.

Shame. Guilt. Anger. Fear. All cycling on a self-destructive loop.

But the closer we walked toward Mortal City, the more unbearable the silence became. Maura had never been angry with me before. We'd had harmless disagreements, but never anything that had caused a rift between us in any meaningful way.

Now, she couldn't even look at me.

The forest began to thin, the buildings of Mortal City gradually coming into view, and I knew we didn't have much time before we were consumed by the chaos of the healers' center.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out. "I know I made a mistake today. A lot of mistakes."

Maura said nothing at first, only gazing thoughtfully at the road ahead, but she wasn't the type to give the silent treatment. Inside that earnest mind of hers, I knew she was choosing her words with particular care. What I didn't know was whether it was to avoid saying something she would regret or to cut me into a million tiny pieces.

"This was my fault," she said finally. She paused, then nodded her head as if coming to a decision. "I should have trusted your mother. Auralie knew you best, and if she didn't believe you could handle it, I should have respected that."

A million tiny pieces it is.

I bristled. "I can handle it. It was a mistake. It won't happen again."

She choked out a dry, humorless laugh. "No, it certainly won't."

I jogged until I stood in front of her, forcing her to stop. "Next time, I promise I'll obey all the rules."

“Next time?” She gave me an incredulous look. “There’s not going to be a next time, Diem. Even if by some miracle Prince Luther is willing to let you back into that palace, I most certainly am not.”

“I’ll apologize to the Prince. I’ll show him I can be trusted. I have to keep serving as the palace healer, for Teller—”

“For Teller?” Her coffee-brown eyes squinted as she wagged her finger in my face. “Where was this concern for Teller when you fought back against the guards? Or when you took off running from the King’s chambers, or when you mouthed off to the Prince? That boy could have been kicked out of his school for any one of those things.”

My mouth snapped shut, guilt halting my tongue. She had a point.

“I can guarantee your brother would rather lose his education than see his sister arrested and executed.”

More truths. If Teller knew the risks I was taking to keep our mother’s bargain, he would drop out of that school without a moment’s hesitation.

And if my father knew... I shuddered at the thought. His wrath would put even the Prince’s to shame.

“That agreement was between your mother and the Crown,” Maura said. “I should never have told you about it. It wasn’t your place to get involved.”

“I have no choice but to get involved. You know that.”

“If your mother was here—”

“My mother *isn’t* here.”

“And thank the gods for that. It would break my heart to see how disappointed she would be.”

She might as well have taken my dagger and plunged it straight into my chest.

“You put everything at risk today, Diem. Our work at the center, your brother’s schooling, your entire family’s safety, *my* safety. Twice now I’ve had a palace guard’s knife pulled on me because of you. And for what? Tell me, what was so important it was worth risking all that?”

I looked away, unable to bear the judgment in her eyes.

“Does this have to do with whatever’s going on between you and that Prince?”

My jaw tightened. “Nothing’s going on between me and *that Prince*.”

“Oh, don’t give me that bollocks. The two of you can’t keep your eyes off each other. He can’t stop touching you, and you can’t stop provoking

him.”

“There’s nothing there,” I snapped, a harsh tone edging my words.

“Fine.” Her hands folded across her chest as her head cocked sideways. “Then is this because you don’t want to be a healer?”

My gaze shot back to hers. “Of course I want to be a healer. Being a healer is... it’s my whole life.”

“Exactly.” Some of the iciness melted from her features. “I know you never had a real choice in the matter. Your mother decided you would be her disciple before you could even walk.”

“I could have picked a different path if I really wanted to,” I argued, though Maura’s flat stare said she wasn’t buying that any more than I was. I blew out a breath. “So that’s it? I make one mistake and now I’m no longer good enough to be a healer?”

“It’s not about being good enough. You’re extremely talented. You’re a quick study, you work hard, you’re great with the patients. Half our clients make me want to take a scalpel to my ears, but you always find a way to be kind to them, even the ones who don’t deserve it.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Your heart isn’t in it. Or it’s in it for all the wrong reasons. When you were a trainee, you always wanted to be out roaming the forests to gather ingredients or chatting up our most unsavory patients to hear about their lives.”

“You could say the same thing about any of the trainees.”

“No, Diem. When I ask the trainees to do those things, they beg me to give them another task.” Her face softened as she took my hand in hers. “You are like family to me. I want you to be happy. I want you to have a life that fulfills you. And if this isn’t it—”

“It is.”

“Diem—”

“*It is*, Maura. I’m happy. Really. And I’m sorry about today.” I squeezed her hand and gave what I hoped was a convincing smile.

Because I *was* happy. I had people who loved me, a profession I was good at, and a safe, comfortable future most mortals would kill for.

I was happy. Really.

Really...



“I’M HERE for the card game.”

I forced my face into what must have been my twentieth sweet, innocent smile of the day. None of them had worked yet, but my string of failures had to end eventually.

The man on watch—who, just my luck, was the same brawny, obnoxious Guardian I’d tussled with the last time I stood outside this door—grunted. “No card game tonight.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do we have to do this again? You know I’m a member. *You* played a crucial role in that, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten.”

I looked between him and the door, tapping my foot expectantly. “So?”

He glanced around at the empty alley before leaning in closer. “Card games are for meetings. No meeting tonight.”

“Well, I had a mission today and Vanc—”

“The *Father*.”

“Right. The *Father* asked me to meet him here to discuss how it went. So... let me in.” I smirked. “Please.”

He lounged back against the wall and gave me a slow, deliberate once-over. Like last time, he wore a wide-brimmed hat slung low to shadow his eyes. A grin I didn’t like the look of grew on his lips.

“Quiet night tonight,” he said.

Shit. I vaguely remembered this from my first night—some kind of coded message Henri had used to prove his membership—but I couldn’t remember the response. Henri and Brecke had been too busy teasing me over Henri’s “blood rite” prank to fill me in.

“I don’t know your cute little secret handshakes yet. I’m sure there’s something about a tree in there, and probably flames, or burning, or something with fire—”

“No code words, no entrance.”

“Oh, come on,” I groaned. “This must be a joke.”

“Do I look like a joke?”

“Have you seen the hat you’re wearing?”

His smile hardened into something colder. “You could always take off your shirt and show me your tattoo.”

“I don’t have a tattoo.”

“Maybe I’ll settle for you removing the shirt.” The gleam in his eyes was predatory but not aroused—he was toying with me, riling me up for his own amusement.

My fingers drummed against the hilts of my twin daggers. “Or I could stab you and go in anyway, hat-boy.”

“Threatening a Brother? Odd way to prove your loyalty.”

“It worked out well for me last time.”

“*Let her in*, Brother.”

I whipped around to see Vance standing behind me, looking highly entertained.

Once again, I was struck by the familiarity of Vance’s face. I was sure I’d never properly met him before that first night, but there was something about him that called to an old, buried recollection. I tried to pull on the thread that linked us, but the memory remained snagged on whatever unreachable place it lived in.

The man on guard stood and pulled the door open for us. I caught his wink as I walked past.

Vance ushered me into the large room where the meeting had taken place and gestured for me to take a seat. He dragged a handful of chairs into a makeshift circle as two men emerged from a doorway in the back.

“Sister Diem, you remember Brother Brant and Brother Francis.”

I smiled, receiving a wordless grunt from one and a silent nod from the other. Whatever reason they had for opposing my membership, they hadn’t moved past it.

I realized glumly that what I’d come to tell them wasn’t likely to change that.

“You had a mission at the palace this morning,” Vance said. “How did it go?”

I stared at my hands. “Not exactly to plan.”

“Were you able to get away from the guards and move through the palace unescorted?”

“Yes,” I said slowly.

“That’s quite impressive.”

“How?” Brant leaned in closer. “Why would they let you just walk around?”

“They didn’t *let* me. I ran.”

“You ran?” Vance and Brant asked in unison.

I nodded. “We were there to check on the King. When we arrived at his room, I told them I’d forgotten my bag, and I ran out to get it before they could stop me.”

“And they didn’t come after you?” Brant asked.

“One guard did, but I hid from him.” I left out the strange declarations Luther had made in the hallway. I was still determined to find out what role he’d played in my mother’s disappearance, but I wasn’t ready to get the Guardians and their plans mixed up in that mystery.

Vance sat back in his chair and whistled. “You’ve got gumption girl, I’ll give you that.”

“Or a death wish,” Francis murmured.

“Were you able to make it to the boat?” Vance asked.

I looked down again and scratched absently at a small rip in my breeches. “No. They increased the guards before I could get there. I had to turn back.”

I didn’t have the nerve to look at them, but I felt the wave of disappointment course through the room.

“Did you get *anything* useful?” Brant asked.

“No.”

“She got into the palace and got out alive,” Vance said. “That’s still a success.”

I glanced up at him, and an image flashed through my mind—Vance, standing outside the healers’ center, looking in at me through the window.

A patient—*of course*. He must have been a patient at the center at some point. Perhaps I didn’t remember because I hadn’t treated him directly.

I tried to shove the question away now that I had a rational answer, but something about it still tugged at my sleeve, demanding my attention.

“So you ran all over the palace, and they just let you go?” Brant asked.

“They threatened my life,” I shot back defensively. “I’m not sure they’re ever going to let me back in.”

“They didn’t search you and find the map?”

“They searched my bag, but I hid the map in my clothing.”

“They didn’t arrest you? They didn’t beat you? They didn’t do anything at all to you? They just let you leave?”

My temper snapped. “I got my throat sliced open and nearly had my arm broken. Is that good enough for you, or shall I go back and ask them to whip me as well?”

“That’s enough,” Vance cut in, raising a hand to Brant. “Let’s be grateful it ended as well as it did. We’re all well aware of the palace’s trusting relationship with the healers, it shouldn’t surprise us they didn’t assume the worst of her.”

My stomach churned a bit.

“Where were you cut?” This time it was Francis who inquired. His voice was gentle, but he was staring at my neck with a frown.

My hand flew to my throat. I’d sanitized the cut and cleaned the dried blood away at the healers’ center, but I’d been in too sullen a mood to allow any of the trainees to bandage the wound. My fingers brushed along my neck in futile search for the scab.

I glanced down at the dark brown bloodstains on the collar of my tunic. Maybe in the struggle to subdue me, the guard had nicked himself. Maybe the blood was his, not mine.

But I remembered it so clearly—the cold bite of the blade as it pierced my skin. I could still feel the phantom pain where he’d cut me, but when I ran my hand across it, there was only a patch of smooth skin. Almost as if it had just...

Long-buried suspicions bubbled to the surface, sending my heartbeat galloping. *No*, I shouted to myself over the roar of my own thoughts. *It was a mistake. A hallucination, maybe. Nothing more. It can’t be more.*

“Brothers,” Vance interrupted, “this is not how we treat Guardians who risk their lives for our cause. We are grateful for the risk Sister *Bellator* took today, are we not?”

He shot a hard look at his two comrades, who nodded despite their frowns.

Vance leaned forward and took my hands, cupping them in his. “You were very brave today, Sister. We’ll need that in the days to come. We need Guardians who aren’t afraid to do whatever it takes to end the Descended’s rule once and for all.”

I’m not sure what it was that caused the following words to rush out of my mouth—the gentle pity on his face, the unworthiness I felt under his men’s skeptical stares, or simply my own feelings of failure eating me away from the inside out.

“I can try again. I... I know a secret entrance into the palace.”

All three men sat straighter.

“What entrance?” Vance asked.

“A hole in the wall of the palace gardens.”

The second I said it, regret sank in my chest like a stone.

There were children in that palace—and based on my first task, I wasn’t confident these men were above hurting children to get their way.

Vance whispered something to Brant, who disappeared from the room for a few seconds before returning with a large map of the royal grounds.

“Can you show us where it is, Sister?” Vance smoothed out the crinkled paper in front of me, his face bright with excitement. Even Brant and Francis were now watching me with blatant interest, their suspicion temporarily appeased.

For a second, I hoped I wouldn’t be able to locate the spot, and I would be forced to tell them I honestly didn’t know. They would still want me to take them there, but at least I could buy some time to decide just how far I was willing to go.

My eyes betrayed me. The moment I looked, I found it in an instant, just north of a bend in the road I couldn’t forget.

This is what you wanted, I reminded myself. You signed up to help the Guardians take down the Crown and everyone who supports it.

I set my finger down. “There,” I murmured, my throat going dry. “The hole is there.”

The paper was yanked out from under my hand, followed by furious scribbling and hushed discussion I made no effort to decipher.

It hit me that Lana, the trainee healer who had accompanied Maura and I that day, had seen the secret entrance, and she was a Guardian, too. If these men didn’t know about it already, she had chosen not to tell them. Whatever other vows she may have broken for them, she’d kept that one.

And I hadn’t.

I honed my thoughts on all the souls destroyed by the Descended’s disregard for mortal lives: Henri’s mother. The boy Henri had seen trampled by the Descended on horseback. The woman and child in the alley. All the children killed by the progeny laws. Countless neighbors and classmates and patients.

My own mother, maybe.

War is death and misery and sacrifice, my father had warned me. War is making choices that will haunt you for the rest of your days.

“I can go back this evening and try again,” I offered. “I can try to slip into the palace at night. If they don’t know I’m there, then maybe...”

My voice trailed off. I didn’t honestly believe I could get in and out of the palace without being caught, but at least if I went, any consequences of using the hidden entrance would be on my shoulders alone.

“You’ve done enough, Sister.” Vance crouched in front of me and gave my shoulder a light pat. “Your information has once again proven to be extremely valuable.”

My heart raced faster.

“No, really—let me try again. I can do it this time. I can—”

“You’re not ready.” Brant leaned back and crossed his arms. He was still frowning at me, but his demeanor had shifted. “You’re brave, I’ll admit, but your strategy today was amateur. Anyone could have told you that plan wouldn’t work.”

“What Brother Brant means to say,” Vance cut in, “is that you have only recently joined us. We have much we can teach you. In time, you could be one of our best, but for now...”

“You’re not ready,” Brant repeated.

Vance smiled tightly, but he nodded in agreement.

I rose from my chair, feeling the burn of embarrassment color my cheeks. The three men stood, as well. Vance’s hand moved to my upper back and nudged me toward the door. Trying to get rid of me.

“You should be proud of yourself,” he said. “At the next meeting, we’ll let the others know what a great risk you took.”

“No,” I blurted, a little too loudly. “Please—don’t say anything.” Vance’s brows rose, so I quickly added, “I’m not interested in credit. I... I just want to make a difference.”

He gave me an approving smile as he pushed me toward the exit to the alley. “Sister Diem, I have a feeling what you’ve done will make even more of a difference than you realize.”

That was exactly what I was afraid of.



HENRI WAS WAITING for me outside the Guardians' meetinghouse. He evidently noted my gloomy mood, because he didn't say anything at first. He clasped my hand and walked alongside me on the path toward our respective homes.

"How did it go?" he asked after a few minutes.

"The mission or the meeting with them?"

"Either one. Both."

"Badly."

"Which one?"

"Either one. Both."

He lightly bumped me with the side of his arm. "You're still alive and in one piece, so it must not have been too bad."

"I failed the mission. I'm not sure how I'm still breathing, to be honest." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Maura's furious with me. I think I might have gotten the healers banned from the palace. I might have cost Teller his place at his school. Your *Brothers* in there think I'm not ready for any future missions. I'm..."

My voice went rough as the weight of all my disappointments crushed the last fragile pillar of my composure, and I fell silent.

"Well... I'm still proud of you."

I looked up at him, and once again, that wondrous sense of admiration shone in his gaze, that deep, hard-won respect he'd only recently developed.

"If they think you're not ready, they're wrong. You're incredible, D. They'll figure that out eventually. And if Maura knew what you were really doing, she would understand."

"I don't think she would. I broke my healer's vow, Henri. If she knew... gods, if *my mother* knew..."

"If they knew the whole story, they would support you. The point of that vow is to help people, right? To save as many lives as possible?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"That's what we're doing. We're not just saving a life here and a life there. Think about how many mortals are killed by the Descended every year. We're trying to put an end to that. We're trying to save our entire *race*. Don't you think that's worth making a few compromises along the way?"

"But what if..." I couldn't find the words to explain to him the conflict brewing in my heart—the sense that I wasn't just compromising, but

sacrificing a fundamental piece of myself I could never get back. I shook my head and sighed. “Yes, of course. You’re right.”

We walked for awhile, not saying a word, listening to the sounds of the village and the quiet crunch of our footsteps on the pebbled road.

“I have to confess,” he began, “I’m upset with you as well.”

My heart sank. “You are?”

“You stabbed a Descended. And you kept it from me.”

I whirled on him, ready to plead my case, but his expression stopped me in my tracks. It wasn’t judgment on his face, but heat. *Lust*.

“Spying on the royal family, stealing from an arms dealer, stabbing a Descended...” He gave me a carnal grin and ran a knuckle along the inner curve of my arm. “I should have told you about the Guardians sooner.”

I frowned. “Why didn’t you? We used to tell each other everything.”

“Your mother.” He tugged on a loose curl of my hair, twirling it in his fingers. “Auralie is the closest thing I’ve had to a mother. She wanted to keep you away from the Descended, and I had to respect her wishes.”

The words he didn’t say hovered in the air: *But with her now gone...*

“And,” he continued, “you seemed happy enough to stay away from them. You had your own bubble in the mortal world.” He tapped the tip of my nose. “I didn’t want to be the one to burst it.”

I stiffened. “I wasn’t completely sheltered. I know how the world works.”

“I know you do, but you see how it goes. Once your eyes are opened to all the terrible things the Descended do, it can be overwhelming. It gets hard to focus on anything else but stopping them.”

I had seen it happen in him. Over the past year, I’d watched Henri harden and, bit by bit, lose that boyhood joy and light-heartedness that had always defined him.

I had assumed it was the natural progression of adulthood, but looking back, there had been signs I’d ignored. The way his face darkened when the Descended would come up in conversations. Distance between him and his father—and him and *my* father. His push to take on work at the palace or in Lumnos City, something he’d avoided when we were younger.

He pulled my hips against his, his hands rising to cup my face. “None of that matters now. We’re in this together, from this point on.” He laughed, his breath warming my skin. “My pretty little spy.”

As his lips claimed mine, I felt his adoration, the praise in each caress of his tongue. After such a miserable day of failures, it felt nice to be seen as someone valuable again, someone worthy.

He tugged me closer, and my body melted into his arms with a heavy sigh.

“Marry me, Diem Bellator.”

My heart stuttered to a stop.

“Be my wife. Let’s fight this war side by side.”

My muscles locked up. The shred of self-worth I’d been basking in from the afterglow of his compliments vanished in an instant, replaced by the icy grip of dread. “Henri... we only just slept together again. We’re not even courting. We barely... I mean, this is still so new, and—”

“New?” He laughed and shook his head. “Diem, I shouldn’t have to court you for you to know how I feel about you. We’ve been together for damn near two decades.”

“As *friends*—”

“And what we have now could be so much more than friendship. Something better—don’t you agree?”

I couldn’t stop blinking, couldn’t stop stammering. Henri’s thumb was tracing a path beneath my ear, over and over. My mind couldn’t focus on anything but that movement, imagining my skin eroding slowly until it was bleeding and raw.

To be a wife—to be relegated to a man’s side instead of standing on my own, to abandon myself and my own goals in service of a husband’s authority and a wife’s duty. It was the life expected of most women in Mortal City.

Silence. Obedience. Sacrifice.

The idea of it pressed in on me like a clenching fist. Surely Henri did not want that kind of marriage. Surely he would never expect that of me—would he?

“You know me better than anyone,” he said, “and I know you. Yes, the last year has been a little... rocky, but you and I—we’re meant to be. The Old Gods brought us together for a reason.”

I looked down, unable to stomach the tender optimism in his bright, gleaming eyes.

“Henri,” I whispered, swallowing. “This is a really big step.”

“But it’s a good step. You could move in with me and my father. And after the Guardians win the war, you could stop working and stay home so we could start a family. You would be such an incredible mother.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

I reared back violently. The last thing I wanted was to hurt him, but this... I was not ready for this. And if this was the life he wanted—I might not ever be.

Fight.

That Flaming *voice*. Now it finally decided to rear its ugly head?

“Let me think about it,” I managed to choke out. I arranged my lips into a tight, placating smile. “It’s an important decision. Can you give me some time?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Take all the time you need. I want you to feel as good about this as I do.” He pulled me in for a quick, firm kiss, and for the first time, his lips felt wrong against mine. “This is our destiny, Diem. This is where we’re meant to be. I just know it.”

Henri walked me home, beaming the entire way like I’d given him the fervent yes I knew he deeply desired. I buried the growing disquiet in my soul down, down, down, as far as I could dig.

Maybe I could do this.

Maybe I just needed time.

Maybe.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

Maura stayed true to her word. Over the next few weeks, the palace called for a healer several times, and despite my promises to behave, she forbade me from taking the job.

Instead, she continued to handle all visits with the royal family herself, occasionally accompanied by Lana.

My silent tension with Lana had reached a fever pitch. Neither of us could look the other in the eye, and we bumbled around each other so awkwardly at the center that we'd begun to catch curious stares from the other trainees. What they suspected, I had no idea, but the truth was that looking at Lana felt like looking at a reflection of myself I was too ashamed to accept.

Every time she and Maura walked in from a call to the palace, I stood paralyzed in fear that they would bring news of a rebel attack using the secret entrance I'd revealed. The scenario played out in my head every night as I lay tossing and turning on my pillow.

They got in through the opening in the gardens, Maura would say. They slaughtered the children in their own beds. Those poor babes never had a chance. What kind of monster would take part in such a thing?

Had I been smarter—and braver—I might have pulled Lana aside and warned her, or at least confessed my guilt at bringing the Guardians into our world. We'd never been close, due mostly to my own petty jealousy. Lana was the kind of petite, doe-eyed blonde who captured every man's eye and left me feeling perpetually insecure about being tall, muscular, and brash in every way.

But those issues were all my own. Lana was kind-hearted, and she was the only person who might understand the burden I now carried on my shoulders. From her very un-Lana-like somberness whenever she returned from a visit to the Descended, I wondered if that was a war she was waging in her heart, too.

These days, I was short on both wisdom and courage, so instead I spent my time keeping to myself and volunteering for all the patient visits that would keep me far, far away from the healers' center.

Though Maura had banned me from the palace, she'd allowed me to continue serving the Descended of Lumnos City, and I'd taken to those visits with a newfound eagerness. The Guardians had politely declined my help on any more missions, with Vance encouraging me to focus on keeping my eyes and ears open while visiting patients at the Descended's homes.

So I did, and though I had yet to discover information of any real worth, it had allowed me to fall into an easy pattern of deluding myself into thinking I was useful without taking any kind of risks that might jeopardize the lives of everyone around me.

Henri, on the other hand, had all but disappeared. He had been recruited for a highly secretive mission that kept him away at planning meetings nearly every night, and though I put up a half-hearted protest, to be honest, I was quietly grateful for the distance.

I still had not answered his marriage proposal, nor was I any closer to knowing if I was ready to take that step. I hadn't even told anyone about it except for Teller, who had merely raised his eyebrows and told me rather cryptically, "*Whatever makes you happy.*"

As autumn gave way to winter, and the jewel-toned leaves of the Lumnos forests curled, withered, and absorbed into the cold-hardened soil, the frosty air carried with it a sense that something was coming. It was a quiet, dangerous thing, like the crackle in the air that warned of a lightning bolt preparing to strike.

The *voice* inside me could sense it, too. It no longer slumbered—it *waited*. I slept and woke to the endless hum of it in my ear. It had become so constant a presence I could almost ignore it completely. Almost.

But there were times when it grew so loud, so insistent with its calls to *fight*, that it became nearly all-consuming. It had always risen to life when I felt threatened—now a rarity, thanks to my ban from the palace—but I'd also come to realize that its steady chanting grew louder and wilder the closer I came to the palace.

It became so loud, in fact, that as I stood outside a patient's palatial mansion in the heart of Lumnos City and gazed up at the palace's sparkling pinnacles nearby, I didn't even hear the sound of my name being called from across the street.

“Diem! Di-em! *Diem?*”

I snapped from my trance. A group of blue-eyed teenage girls strolled toward me, dressed in what I could only describe as the kind of outfits one might see at a traveling circus. There were outrageously large sleeves made of sheer chiffon, wide-legged pants of smooth silk that trailed five feet behind them as they walked, and bare skin galore. And color—so much color.

In Mortal City, school-aged girls were obsessed with propriety, clothed from neck to toe in drab fabrics and muted tones. The purpose, allegedly, was to convey that they were practical and selfless, uninterested in attention—the makings of an ideal wife and mother-to-be. Even a too-brightly dyed ribbon might be enough to send the town whispering about a girl’s poor virtue.

One look at the girls in front of me would have the gossips of Mortal City tittering into an early grave.

“Diem!”

One of the girls pushed her way through the throng—a beaming, bubbly brunette clad in shades of lavender and mint whose dark waves cascaded all the way to her hips.

It took me a moment to make the connection that the perky girl jogging toward me—in beaded satin slippers, no less—was the same girl I’d watched nearly bleed out on the palace floor.

“Oh—Lily. Uh, hi.” I gave her a short, awkward wave.

Gasps and murmurs erupted from the group behind her. More than one of them scoffed at me in disdain. Lily flashed me a brilliant smile, though I noted the strain in her features as she tried not to wince.

I had almost certainly broken some sacred Descended etiquette rule, but that had become such a constant state in recent weeks that I’d lost all ability to feel bad about it.

“I was hoping I might see you around somewhere,” she chirped. “I’ve been meaning to thank you for everything you did for me that day at the palace.”

My eyes darted between her and the whispering gaggle at her back. “That’s kind of you to say, but it was nothing, really.”

“It wasn’t nothing. You saved my life—I owe you everything.”

“Your healing powers did all the real work. I’m just glad you’re feeling better.”

Lily frowned, the expression looking unnatural on her. “It’s strange how quickly it worked. All of my injuries were healed before you even left the palace.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Very unusual. Small cuts heal quickly, but it usually takes at least a day for bigger injuries. Sometimes even a week.” Her head tilted inquisitively. “Maybe one of the medicines you gave me sped up the healing process?”

It was my turn to frown. “Only the silverworm for pain and an herb mix to slow the bleeding.”

We both stared at each other with matching looks of confusion as voices rang out behind her.

“Can we go yet?”

“Seriously!”

“Come on Princess, it’s too cold out here.”

Lily gave me an exasperated smile and twisted to address her friends. “You ladies go on ahead, I’ll catch up in a minute.”

A svelte redhead tossed a mess of curls over her shoulder. “It’s the palace, Your Highness—they won’t let us in without you.”

“Just flirt with the guards like you always do, Roxie,” Lily answered.

The girl scowled as her friends giggled and bit their lips. The redhead turned in a huff, and the group continued on down the road, throwing me a few dubious looks before they finally disappeared around a corner.

“So why are you in Lumnos City?” Lily paused, then stiffened, her eyes going wide. “Not that you don’t belong here—I mean, of course you do. Anyone is welcome here—you don’t need a reason, I just—”

I raised a hand to put her out of her misery. “It’s alright, I understand. I just finished seeing a patient.”

“Oh. Right.” Her gaze drifted to the surrounding houses. “Which House was it? Maybe I know them. If they’re ill, I should send flowers, or perhaps a note, or—”

“I can’t say. Vow of confidentiality and all.” The words felt like poison on my tongue.

“Right, yes, of course. I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t even have asked.”

She looked so mortified I couldn’t resist a reassuring smile. “How are your cousins, the ones who were also hurt that day?”

Her expression brightened. “Oh, they’re wonderful! All better now, thanks to you and your friends.” She reached out to touch my arm, then hesitated. “Teller always told me you were a gifted healer, but I didn’t quite understand until I saw you work. I was terribly frightened that day, but you were so kind to me and so easy to trust.”

I didn’t know what to say—thanking her seemed like a slap in the face, all things considered.

“My brother thinks so, too,” she added with the hint of a smile.

My eyes snapped up. “What?”

“He was impressed with you. That’s not an easy thing to do, you know. Luther doesn’t give out compliments very often. I mean, he does to me, of course, because I’m his sister, but to everyone else, he’s a bit... well, he’s not *mean*, really, he’s just very—”

“Compliments?” I cocked my head. “What kind of compliments?”

“Oh! Um, he said you were very impressive. And interesting. He kept asking me what I knew about you and what Teller had told me. And I think he went into Mortal City to find you, maybe. A few times, actually, but I suppose you weren’t there, because he—”

“What did you tell him?” I asked, my brows pulling together. If Luther was investigating me that deeply, I very much doubted it had anything to do with him being *impressed*.

She shrugged. “I said Teller always speaks very highly of you. He really admires you. Teller and I always talk about how fortunate we are to have older siblings that set a good example for us.”

The knife in my heart twisted a little deeper.

“He’s a good man, you know.” She looked at me expectantly, her eyes round and full of hope.

I gave her a weak smile. “I know. I’m lucky to have him, too. Teller’s a great brother to me.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean Teller. I mean, yes, he’s a good man—a great man—one of the best I know.” She laughed nervously, running her hands repeatedly through her hair as her cheeks blushed a soft pink. “He’s so kind, and really smart, and he doesn’t ever—um, never mind. I meant my brother. Luther. Um, *Prince* Luther, I mean. *He’s* a good man.”

It took every last drop of self-control in my body to keep my face from reacting. “I’m sure he is.”

“I know he wasn’t very nice to you that day at the palace. It’s just that he was worried about me, and he felt so guilty about the children getting hurt. If someone he cares for is in danger, he goes a little...” She held her hands up like claws, then bared her teeth and growled.

I swallowed. “I thought Elric caused the accident.”

“He did. He didn’t mean to, of course—Elric is a nice guy too, by the way—but you knew that, right? Elric said he talked to you. He said you were also really nice, and—”

“Then why did Luther feel guilty?” I was probably violating another volume of royal etiquette rules by interrupting Lily every time her stream of consciousness took flight, but I had a feeling if I didn’t, we might be here until spring.

“Yes, right—Luther’s the High General of the Royal Guard, so he’s in charge of keeping everyone in the palace safe. If anyone gets hurt, he takes it personally, even if it’s their own fault.” Lily rolled her eyes. “One time, a couple of our cousins were playing and fell down some stairs. I don’t think Luther slept for a week. He kept stomping around and brooding.” She ground her jaw in an impressively spot-on impression of her brother, then covered her mouth and giggled. “He assigned guards to shadow every child in the palace for months until Uncle Ulther—um, *King* Ulther, I mean—told him to stop. Thank the Blessed Kindred for that!”

The fond familiarity with which she talked about Luther and the King set me off-kilter. I’d spent so long thinking of these people as mere figureheads. The Prince, heir to the Crown. The King, ruler of the realm. It was strange to think of them as family—cousins, uncles, siblings—and as people who loved each other and fussed over each other’s safety. It made them feel human in a way that made me deeply uncomfortable.

“Anyway, I know Luther wasn’t nice to you *then*, but he *is* nice. No one ever believes me when I say that. He’s just misunderstood, you know?” Her smile faltered, her features hardening with a sisterly protectiveness I recognized all too well. “Everyone’s always trying to use him to get to the Crown, or they’re trying to win him over because he’s going to be King someday. He can’t trust anyone.” Her head tilted again, her expression going thoughtful. “I think he trusts you, though.”

I snorted. “I’m quite positive you’re mistaken about that.”

“No, really. I think he trusts you because you were mean to him. No one’s ever mean to *him*.” Her eyes twinkled. “I think he kind of liked it.”

“I wasn’t... I don’t think I was mean. *He* was mean. I was just doing my job.” I paused and shook my head. “Wait, what do you mean he liked it?”

“Would you like to come have dinner with us at the palace sometime?”
I blinked at her.

“Maybe you could even, um, bring Teller. You know, just the four of us.” Her smile was dazzlingly hopeful and painfully innocent.

Then the realization hit me. She must know Luther disapproved of her relationship with Teller—her brother had surely ignored my advice to leave it be. Perhaps she thought if she could engineer a forced friendship between Luther and me, he might be less inclined to interfere.

It was a sweet thought. An absurd, impossible thought, but a sweet one.

I started to turn her down, but the optimism in her eyes was so utterly guileless I couldn’t bring myself to break her heart.

I reached forward and took her hand. She startled a little at my touch, but her fingers immediately closed around my own.

“That’s very kind of you to offer, Lily. I’ll, um... I’ll think about it.”

Her expression fell.

“But you’re welcome to come to our home any time,” I added quickly. “It’s no royal palace, but we’ve always got room for one more at dinner.” I gave her hand a light squeeze. “And there will be no judgment or gossip about anything that happens there. That much, I can promise.”

Not entirely true. If Father knew Teller was getting friendly with a Descended princess, he would certainly have judgment—some very *strongly worded* judgment—but I also knew he would never express those thoughts in front of Lily. He would treat her with kindness and acceptance while she was in our home, which was surely more than Teller would get from anyone in that wretched palace.

She beamed, mollified by my offer. “Really? You wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not. A friend of one Bellator is a friend of us all.”

She grabbed my other hand and clutched them both to her chest with an excited hop. “That would be wonderful. I would love to. And maybe... maybe you could teach me about being a healer. I mean, if you want to. If you’re allowed to.”

“You want to be a healer?”

“Blessed Kindred, no,” she rushed out, sounding almost frightened at the thought. “I couldn’t, of course. Not that there’s anything wrong with it—healers are incredible. Helping people like that, it’s so... so...” She sighed. “It’s just that my family wouldn’t allow it. We’re not, um, allowed to work, that is. Outside of the palace or the Royal Guard, I mean.”

Not allowed to work.

I nearly snorted.

“But I’d still like to learn about it. If... if that’s alright with you. It would be nice to know a few things, you know, in case I have children someday.”

The glimmer of pain in her eyes wounded my heart. I knew the words that went unsaid—children with someone other than my brother. Children that wouldn’t be doomed to a death sentence for their mixed heritage.

I squeezed her hands with a smile. “I would be happy to teach you, Lily. Come by any time.”

Luther might actually, finally kill me for it, but that never stopped me before.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

“So, Teller... I saw Lily today.”

Teller’s fork froze in his mouth as his face went sheet-white.

His eyes flew back and forth across the dinner table between Father and me, his expression an equal mix of *what are you doing* and *oh my gods Diem whatever you’re doing, don’t*.

“She invited us over to her home for dinner,” I continued. “I think she’s trying to set me up with her brother.”

He choked on a bite of food.

Father reached over and clapped him firmly on the back a few times. “Who is this Lily person?”

“A mutual friend,” I answered. “She’s around Teller’s age, and she’s a former patient of mine.”

“And her brother? Do I know him?” He peered at me over his reading glasses. “*Should* I know him?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about him, Father. I would rather chop off an arm than court that man. My sword arm, even.” I smiled sweetly at Teller, who was looking at me like he might volunteer to do the amputation personally. “I invited her to come have dinner here instead. *Without* her brother.”

“You invited Lily... here?” Teller asked. “To our house?”

Father beamed, blissfully oblivious to the knives shooting from Teller’s eyes. “What a lovely idea. We’d be happy to have your girlfriend over, Teller.”

“She’s not my—we’re just friends. That’s all.”

“Good friends.” I wiggled my eyebrows. “*Close* friends.”

Father slowly began to grin as he realized the nature of my teasing. “Is she pretty, this Lily?”

“What a good question, Father. I would say she’s pretty. Teller, would you say she’s pretty?”

He was openly glaring now. "Yes. She's very pretty."

"Very pretty," I repeated with a wink at our father.

"I don't think Lily coming here is a good idea," Teller gritted out. "You should tell her you were mistaken."

"What's wrong with our home?" Father asked.

"Yes, Teller, what's wrong with our home?" I echoed.

Under the table, a booted foot slammed into my shin. I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

"Well, you wouldn't invite her, so I did," I said. "She asked me if I could teach her about healing, and I told her I would show her a few things."

Teller's anger shifted to confusion. "She did?"

"That's wonderful," Father said. "Perhaps she could join the center as a trainee. We can never have too many healers in the family."

Teller's face turned so pale I thought he might shrivel up and pass away.

"You never know," I said with a shrug. "Anything could happen."

Father slapped Teller's arm and gave his shoulder a rough grasp. "I'm happy for you, son. Whoever she is, she's lucky to have you. And you know your sister and I will treat anyone you bring home like a member of our own family."

Teller gave me a long look. There was a sad, defeated heaviness to it that wiped my amusement away.

He leaned back in his chair, arms folded over his chest. "Speaking of new members of the family, how's Henri doing?"

I stiffened. *He wouldn't dare.* "Henri's fine."

"I'd hardly call Henri new to the family," Father laughed, once again oblivious. "He and Diem have been friends since before you were born."

"Indeed." Teller smirked. "Good friends. *Close* friends."

Father turned his grin on me. "Did that boy finally pull his head out of his ass and ask you to court him?"

"Oh, he asked her a lot more than that," Teller said.

Father's eyes went wide.

I dragged a hand over my face and slumped down into my chair. I couldn't even be mad at Teller. I'd earned this one.

"Diem Bellator." A hint of the Commander slipped into Father's voice. "Look at me right now."

I groaned but relented, my hand dropping from my face.

“Did the Albanon boy propose to you?”

I nodded.

“And did you say yes?”

I hesitated, then shook my head.

His eyes narrowed slightly, as if my response hadn’t surprised him, but interested him.

“You said no?”

“She hasn’t answered him,” Teller said. “And it’s been three weeks.”

“I told him it’s a big decision, and I need some time to think it over. And Henri *agreed*,” I added, flinging a piece of food across the table at my brother.

Father watched me carefully, his fingertips drumming on the tabletop. I chewed on my lip and became immensely fascinated with one of the many scratches that formed a dull patina over our old, worn dining table.

He took off his glasses, then pushed his chair out and shuffled to a nearby cabinet. He grabbed a bulbous bottle filled with an amber-colored liquid and three small tumblers, then returned to the table. Without a word, he filled two of the glasses, sliding one to me, then added the barest splash to the third before setting it in front of an annoyed-looking Teller.

“Alright, let’s hear it,” he ordered.

I took a slow, deliberate sip and savored the warmth that spread down my throat. I briefly debated whether I could stall long enough for Father to lose interest—or get too drunk to remember this conversation.

“Let’s hear what?” I asked.

“Whatever reason you’ve got for making that boy suffer waiting for an answer.”

My eyebrows lifted. “You don’t think I should take my time making this decision?”

“Of course I do. But you two have been inseparable for years. If there’s anyone you should already know if you want to marry, it’s him.”

I chipped away at the gash in the table, scraping flecks of wood away with my nail. Across from me, Teller gulped his drink in a single swallow and immediately erupted into a fit of coughs. When I opened my mouth to tease him, Father cleared his throat, pulling my attention back. One look at his expression had my lips snapping closed.

I swirled the liquor in my glass and took another measured sip, hoping for some liquid courage.

“How did you know?” I asked. “When you met Mother... how did you know she was the one?”

He studied me for a moment, then reached forward and picked up the decanter, refilling my glass. “You’re not going to like the answer.”

“You hadn’t known her for very long, right?” Teller said. “She told me you had only been courting for a month when you were married.”

A gentle smile curved his lips. “I’d known *of* her long before we courted. Auralie was well respected in the army, and I often heard of her being invited on important missions. People spoke highly of her bravery and intelligence. Even the Descended were impressed by her.”

Though I was unsurprised to hear that my formidable mother had captivated everyone she met, it struck me as odd that anyone would notice these qualities in a healer, even one in the Emarion Army. I’d always imagined that healers only came in when the glory of battle had faded and only the harsh reality of bloodshed was left behind.

“I had only met her a few times. I thought she was beautiful, of course—the most beautiful woman I’d ever laid eyes on. But she had this presence...” His eyes went glassy, lost in the memory. “Even in the army, surrounded by soldiers with dangerous weapons and even more dangerous egos, she commanded every room she walked into. She’s a force of nature, my Auralie.”

His voice slipped, just slightly, and the distant haze of nostalgia left his eyes. He sat up straighter in his chair before knocking back a large swig of his drink.

“I thought about asking her out many times, but I always talked myself out of it. I told myself I was committed to my job and I had no time for a woman or a family.”

“What changed?” I asked.

“She left on a long mission. She was gone for an entire year. It was highly confidential. I didn’t have the clearance to know the details, and those... well, those are the kinds of missions soldiers often don’t come back from. I didn’t know if I’d ever see her again, and the whole time she was gone, all I could think of was how I’d had this incredible woman right in front of me, and I’d let her walk away. I told myself that if she did come

back, I'd walk right up to her and confess my feelings the second I saw her."

"Did you?" Teller asked.

"No," I answered on Father's behalf, grinning. "Mother told me this part. You took one look at her and ran away."

He smiled sheepishly. "I'd never been more scared in my life. I'd taken on every manner of danger you could imagine, but the idea of asking to court your mother... *that* was true terror. I avoided her for damn near a month."

"The mighty Andrei Bellator, finally brought down by a pretty girl," I teased him.

He and I broke into laughter, but across the table Teller's expression had gone thoughtful.

"How did you get the courage to finally do it?" he asked. "How did you know she wouldn't reject you?"

"I didn't. But I eventually decided the chance of her saying yes was worth the possibility of her saying no. To be able to call her my girl—that was worth any risk."

Teller nodded and looked down at his empty glass, frowning as he traced a finger around the rim.

"So you asked her... then what?" I prodded.

"Everything was normal at first. I courted her like any man courts any woman. I took her into town for dinner, brought her flowers and sweets. I was head over heels for her, but I could sense she was holding back. I had a hunch there was something she wanted to tell me but wasn't ready to say."

I gave a dry, sarcastic laugh. "Our mother, keeping secrets? What a surprise."

Father smiled knowingly. "Auralie's always been a private person, even then. *Especially* then. Perhaps that's why she and I got along so well. I always trusted that if there was something she was keeping from me, she had a reason for it, and that was good enough for me. I was happy to take whatever piece of herself she was willing to give.

"Frankly, the same was true for me. Most women wanted to hear stories of war and the battles I'd fought..." A shadow passed over his face. "But I had no desire to relive those moments, and your mother was content with that. We never needed to see all of each other to love all of each other."

I forced down a thick burning in my throat. “You said she was holding back. What finally brought you together?”

“You did.” He gazed at me, eyes gleaming. “One day, Auralie showed up at my door with a beautiful baby girl in her arms. She confessed she had fallen pregnant and given birth while away on her mission. She’d decided to leave the army and go make a new life with you somewhere else. She was distraught, but even in her tears, she had that same Auralie determination. I knew there was nothing I could say to convince her to change her mind and stay.”

“She asked you to leave with her?” Teller asked.

“No—the opposite. She was going to leave without saying anything, but at the last minute, she decided she couldn’t go without telling me goodbye.” He laughed, soft and sad. “Your sweet, selfless mother... she wanted me to have closure so I could move on without her. And something in me clicked. I took one look at the two of you, and I realized there was no sacrifice I wouldn’t make to keep you both in my life.”

I tried to blink away the heat prickling my eyes, only to feel warm tears already rolling down my cheeks. Father reached over and pulled my hand from my glass, clasping it in both of his.

“My darling Diem, you asked how I knew your mother was the one? The truth is that I just *knew*. There was never a decision to make. Whatever path she was on, that was where I belonged. By her side, and by yours. Any other option was unthinkable.”

My stomach felt leaden. His words were beautiful. Perfect. Exactly what a person in love should say, exactly how a person in love should feel.

“Even though you had to give up everything?” I asked. “Your career, your life in Fortos, all your own goals—you weren’t scared of having to walk away from all of that?”

“No,” he answered without hesitation. “It was only the thought of living without her that scared me. Everything else felt trivial in comparison.”

“And you had only known her a month,” I said weakly, more of a statement than a question.

He patted my hand. “Every love story is different. Perhaps for you and Henri, you need...” His voice trailed off, and his eyes dropped away.

The silence, and the words left unsaid, thundered in the air. I dared a look up at Teller, but his mind was elsewhere, his expression clouded with

his own impossible decision.

Father sat upright suddenly. A bright, albeit strained, smile illuminated his face. “What I mean to say is, there’s no sense in rushing to a decision. You should wait and speak with your mother when she returns. She’ll have a wise perspective on all of this.”

Teller and I froze in unison. Our eyes met for a heartbeat before shifting to our father.

“What do you mean, when she returns?” I asked.

“When she comes home,” he said simply, as if that were answer enough. He rose from the table, decanter in hand, and turned his back to us as he fussed with various items in the kitchen.

Teller and I glanced at each other again. He raised his eyebrows, eyes widening in wordless inquiry. I shook my head in silent response.

“Do you know where she is?” My words came out excruciatingly slow, each one halting and unsure.

We had not discussed her whereabouts so directly in months, not since those first horrible days after she’d disappeared. We’d only hinted at it in the vaguest of terms.

Her *absence*.

Our *time apart*.

Since she’s been *away*.

Acknowledging that she was gone forever might make it real, so we’d simply talked around it instead.

“What a ridiculous question,” he said. Again his tone was matter-of-fact, final, like nothing further needed to be said.

I gradually rose to my feet.

“Father, if you know—”

BOOM.

A deafening crack split the air. The walls of our home rattled, the liquid in our glasses rippling outward.

“What in the Undying Fire was that?” Teller muttered.

BOOM. BOOM.

The three of us jolted and crouched low. A frame dislodged from its nail on the wall and crashed to the floor, while bits of plaster shook free from the ceiling. Years of training had all three of us grabbing for weapons.

The sound had been distant, yet deafeningly loud.

“Thunder?” Teller guessed. “I didn’t see storm clouds earlier, but maybe...”

Father shook his head, his brows forming a deep crease. “I’ve heard that sound before. That was an explosion.”

My stomach dropped. “As in... a bomb?”

He rose and walked to the kitchen window, eyes squinting as he searched the darkness. After a moment, he nodded and extended a finger. “There.”

Teller and I scrambled to his side, craning our necks to see.

BOOM.

We jumped again. Teller gripped my arm and pulled me close.

Far in the distance, a billowing swirl of flame leapt into the air. Puffy clouds of smoke glowed from the light of the fires below, an orange smear against the ink-dark sky.

Father frowned. “Looks like it’s in Lumnos City. Must be some kind of accident. Maybe a storage facility caught fire.”

“Or a rebel attack on the palace,” Teller added.

The air felt impossible to breathe, too weighty to pull into my lungs.

I did this. This is my fault.

“I—I have to go,” I stammered. I stumbled backward and knocked into the table, trying to tear my eyes from the red haze rising above the woods.

Father turned sharply. “What? Go where?”

“I have to help. There might be people hurt. I could... I need to....”

“That fire is in Lumnos City, Diem. You know you’re not supposed to go there.”

My mouth opened and closed. Words and thoughts were as inaccessible as the stars in the sky. He had no idea I’d not just broken my mother’s rule on avoiding the Descended, I’d completely obliterated it.

Father reached for me. “Whatever it is, I’m sure the Royal Guard can handle it.”

I recoiled violently from his hand. My body was a bomb of its own, fuse lit and ready to blow at any moment.

I did this.

“I have to go.” My voice was shaky, hoarse.

“Diem, *no.*”

He moved to block my path, but Teller—gods bless him—stepped in the way. “Father, there may be injuries. They’ll need healers there. Diem

could help.”

“There are other healers. Maura will have heard the explosions, she’ll send someone over.”

Maybe. We’d never sent healers into Lumnos City uninvited, only when requested. And now, with our center already on thin ice with Prince Luther, Maura might think it safer to wait for a formal request. And even if she didn’t...

This is my fault.

I didn’t wait to argue any further. I ran to my room and grabbed a large bag that I used for trips away, hastily tossing it across my shoulders before sprinting back toward the front door.

“Diem, stop right there. Your mother forbid—”

As I flew down the front steps, more explosions rumbled through the clearing and drowned out my father’s protests.

Within seconds, I disappeared into the trees.

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Chapter

Twenty-Four

I ran, and I ran, and I ran.

I ran through the shadowy forest, down the alleys of Mortal City, pushing past the crowds of gawkers that had gathered outside to speculate, not stopping until I reached the door of the healers' center.

The two trainees on evening duty immediately descended on me and pelted me with questions, but their words felt muffled and far away.

My brain rifled through possible injuries and catalogued what I would need for each. Silverworm and willowbark for pain, marigold and lavender for burns. Clove to numb, yarrow to speed clotting. Comfrey for breaks or tears. And gauze—so, so much gauze.

With each item I hurled into my bag, a vision of the patients that might await me haunted my thoughts.

If it was the Benette armory I had stolen the blueprints for, perhaps it wouldn't be so bad. It was late enough that only a few evening guards might be on duty.

But if it was the royal palace... if the Guardians had snuck through that secret entrance, planted their bombs around the palace grounds...

The loss of life would be catastrophic. And so many of them would be children—some of whom I'd met.

Elric.

Lily.

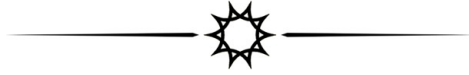
Oh gods, *Lily*.

Bile rose in my throat. I clamped my hand over my mouth and forced a long inhale of air through my nose.

One of the trainees clutched my arm and jerked me from my dark thoughts. "Diem, what do we do? Should we go with you?"

"Stay here in case someone in town needs help," I ordered. "If any of the others come, send them to Lumnos City. Tell them to go to the explosion and come find me."

Without waiting for their response, I hauled my overloaded bag across my shoulder and darted out the door. The second my boots hit the soil, I ran. I ran, and I ran, and I ran.



THE WIND WHIPPED through my hair as I sprinted down the long road connecting the mortal and Descended cities.

My thighs burned with the effort, my lungs going tight with a need for air, but I didn't dare slow even for a second. The same two thoughts blared through my mind again and again, a relentless metronome keeping time with my pounding steps.

I did this.

This is my fault.

I did this.

This is my fault.

The longer I ran, the taller the flames grew and the hazier the smoke-filled air became. If I stopped, maybe I could tell whether the column of fire was coming from the palace or the city beyond, but my body refused to slow its pace.

Ahead, a line of six figures walked toward me towing two large carts. The figures were masculine, wide-shouldered, and strong. Any other night, my instincts would have warned me to hide in the trees and let them pass. A woman alone on a dark path with a group of strange men rarely ended well.

But tonight, my own safety was the furthest thing from my mind. Other than a slight shift in my path to take me around their left flank, I barely regarded the men as they came into sight.

"Diem?"

It took me a moment to register.

The voice was familiar—*very* familiar.

But I couldn't stop, couldn't slow down, not even for—

"Diem? Stop running, it's me!"

One of the men jogged forward and into my path. Under the thick darkness of the waxing moon, I couldn't make out the details of his face. But that voice...

"Can't stop," I forced out through wheezing breaths. "Please—*move!*"

“Diem—it’s me, Henri.”

My steps faltered, then slowed, but I didn’t stop. Couldn’t. I had to keep going, get to the fire, help them—

Henri reached out and seized my arms, hauling me to a stop against my will. “What are you doing out here?”

I pointed a trembling hand toward the distant inferno. “Explosion. Fire. Going to help.” My chest shuddered as I gasped for air.

He gave me a strange look, then glanced over his shoulder at the group assembled behind him, their faces still shrouded by the darkness.

Henri’s hands felt too heavy on my shoulders. His voice dropped low. “Diem, go home. Don’t worry about the fire.”

“You don’t understand. There might be people hurt. I need to go—”

“Diem.” There was a deadly gravity to his features. “Listen to me. Go home and stay there. Forget you saw the fire, and forget you saw us.”

I started to protest, but a muted *boom* interrupted my words. The ground rumbled in response, and the fiery cloud ballooned higher and brighter into the sky.

Quiet snickers rippled through the group. One of the shadowed men clapped another on the back. Even the corner of Henri’s lips twitched upward at the sound.

My body went still.

The *world* went still.

“Henri,” I breathed. “What’s going on?”

One of the men broke off from the group and came up to Henri’s side. With the blaze now burning brighter, faint orange firelight illuminated his face.

A fragment of memory ripped through me. *A man, standing outside the healers’ center, his profile softly lit by the glow of a lantern. Not a patient—a visitor. Whispering with my mother.*

“Sister Diem,” Vance said in greeting. His smile was lazy and triumphant. “The victory tonight is as much yours as ours. We could not have done this without you.”

My gaze flew over the group, spotting Brant and Francis among their numbers, then took in the pair of carts, both piled high and covered with tarps.

“What’s in those?” I asked.

Henri glanced at Vance, who paused, then subtly shook his head.

“Brother Henri is right,” Vance said, kindly but firmly. “You should return home and not speak of this to anyone.”

A horrible sense of dread filled my soul.

“I can’t. People might be wounded—children—I need to go.” I started to move away, but Henri’s hands held me firm.

Vance’s smile faded as he stepped closer. “We can’t let you do that, Sister. It’s best if no mortals are seen anywhere near the target.”

I tried to free myself again, but Henri’s grip tightened on my shoulders, his fingers digging painfully into my skin to hold me in place. I stared at him in shock.

“Diem,” he started.

“Get your hands off me, Henri.”

He didn’t budge.

The other men silently formed a circle around us.

Henri’s expression turned pleading. “We’ve been planning this for weeks. We can’t risk your presence tipping them off. Please don’t make me do this.”

“Don’t make you do *what*?” I hissed.

The circle of Guardians inched closer, surrounding me in a ring of hard, mistrusting eyes. Henri’s hands slid from my shoulders and clamped around my upper arms.

My heart thumped wildly in my chest.

Six men. Six large, strong men.

There was no way I could take them—they would grab me, drag me kicking and screaming back to Mortal City. Even if I could get to my weapons, even if I was willing to stab them, stab *Henri*—

My father’s words pierced my roaring thoughts.

What have I taught you about fighting an opponent that is much stronger than you are?

If you cannot be stronger, be smarter.

He had prepared me for this.

Despite my mounting panic, I worked my face into a mask of false calm. With a long exhale, I nodded and relaxed my shoulders. “Yes, of course,” I said lightly. “I was confused for a moment, but I understand now.”

A look of relief cascaded over Henri’s face. His grip relaxed on my arms, but Vance remained still, eyes trained on me. “You’ll return with us?”

he asked.

I forced a laugh and held my hands up in mock surrender. “I didn’t mean to cause a fuss. I would never want to do anything to risk the mission.”

Vance eyed me, then nodded slowly. “Good. I’m glad to hear it, Sister.”

Henri’s hand found its way to the small of my back, nudging me firmly back toward the path to Mortal City. I kept my eyes forward but noted how the others fell to our flank—blocking my way to Lumnos City.

“That bag of yours looks heavy, Sister. Why don’t you hand that over and let one of us carry it for you?”

I looked over to see Brant staring at me with his hand extended. His voice, like his face, was cold and hard, laced with an unspoken threat.

I didn’t have time to think.

So I ran.

Henri reached out to grab me a second too late, though I felt the snag of my tunic as the hem slipped through his closing fingers.

Vance shouted commands, and two of the men slid together to form a barrier. With my bulky bag, I was too heavy to dodge them, my balance too lopsided for any attempt at agility. All I could do was tuck my chin and throw the force of my weight against their stony bodies.

I yelped as my shoulder collided with muscle and bone. My eyes squeezed shut, and I braced to be thrown back from the force of the impact.

But I wasn’t moving backward.

I was running—*still* running.

Behind me, I caught a chorus of grunting and swears, Henri calling my name, Vance barking orders, and the percussion of footsteps.

I pushed my legs and my lungs until both burned hot enough to catch fire, but the weight of my bag was slowing me down, and though Henri’s voice had faded, the drumbeat of boots on gravel was gaining ground. I felt fingers scrape against my bag and a light tug. Then another tug—harder, the strap across my shoulder yanking my chest backward.

“Stop running, you dumb bitch,” a voice snarled.

If I handed the bag over, I’d have no supplies, and there would be little I could do to help anyone. But if I didn’t—if the Guardians caught me...

Another tug on the bag jerked me back, nearly dragging me to the ground. In one fluid movement, I slid my dagger from its sheath and

hooked the blade behind the leather band securing the satchel to my chest. The strap snapped, and the weight at my back dropped away, right into the path of my pursuer. He groaned as he stumbled over the fallen supplies, his body crashing and skidding across the pebbled road.

And then—silence. No yelling, no scuffling, no footsteps other than my own.

So I ran, and I ran, and I ran.

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Chapter

Twenty-Five

To my guilt-stricken, knee-wobbling relief, it quickly became clear the fire was not coming from the palace's magnificent facade, but from somewhere to the west. The exhale that rocked my body shook me to my core.

However, my next fears were confirmed when I turned onto the streets of Lumnos City and overheard murmurs of stunned Descended discussing an explosion at the Benette armory. Outside of a fleeting glance while raiding Evrim Benette's office, I had never looked too closely at the blueprints I'd stolen before handing them over to the Guardians. Other than the plume of smoke and flame that called to me like a beacon, I had no way of knowing where the building was or what I might find once I got there.

I also had no supplies—not a single jar of medicine or strip of gauze to speak of. I had two useless mortal daggers at my hips, Brecke's blade in my boot, and my own two hands. I was better equipped to take a life than to save one.

To make matters worse, it quickly became evident I would have no backup from the other healers. The Royal Guard had formed an expansive perimeter around the site of the attack, and no matter how many guards I pleaded with to let me through to help, not one of them relented. If Maura or any of the trainees showed up, they would be turned back as quickly as they'd come.

I might have accepted defeat and returned home myself had I not just acquired six enraged Guardians on my tail. Whether they would risk following me here, or whether they would simply wait for my return, I had no idea. Either way, I was eager to give them time to cool off before facing those particular consequences.

And, of course, there was the small matter of all of this being entirely *my fault*.

My only path was forward, with empty pockets and open hands. I'd come this far, risked this much—I couldn't walk away without trying everything.

As I fought to catch my breath from my frantic sprint into town, my legs feeling like jelly for more reasons than one, I edged along the cordoned-off perimeter and studied the guards holding the line. Somehow they had linked their magic, each of them connected by a thick rope of glowing pale blue light. I suspected any effort to break through would leave me with my own burns to tend to.

The armory itself was almost entirely destroyed. Fire raged along the back wall, and though the front of the building was still intact, the flames were spreading quickly. Whatever the Guardians had done, it had been brutal and horribly efficient.

I fell back into the throng of spectators and circled the site, pausing near the front where a group of Descended were tightly gathered. Occasionally, one of them would break away and disappear into the building, only to emerge empty-handed moments later.

Then, I spotted him.

With his raven hair and night-black clothes, he cut an ominous silhouette against the raging wall of flickering orange. I couldn't make out the details of his face, and his imposing body was shrouded by the crowd clustered around him, but somehow, even among the pandemonium, I knew him. More than that—I *felt* him, his strange aura sweeping across my skin.

Luther.

As if he'd heard my thoughts, his head snapped in my direction. Even tucked as I was among a sea of onlookers, his glowing blue eyes found mine in an instant.

I shoved my way forward until I was nose to nose with the nearest guard. "I'm here to help," I shouted over the noisy crowd. "Get Prince Luther—he's right there, he knows me."

"I don't care who you know," the guard said blandly. He appeared wholly unconcerned with the bedlam occurring behind him. "No one in or out."

"Just get the Prince, he'll tell you—"

"No."

"I'm a healer. If people are hurt, I can help."

"No."

“You’re really going t—”

“If I have to tell you no again, I’ll do it with my sword.”

I glanced over his shoulder—Luther was still watching me, though he hadn’t moved from his position.

His face was typically devoid of emotion, but I caught the hint of tightness in his steely eyes and the set of his jaw. There was something harsh in his expression, something akin to...

Suspicion.

A tremble ran down my spine.

Did he think I was responsible for this?

Shit—I *was* responsible for this. All of it. Perhaps not in the way he suspected, but the blood stained my hands nevertheless.

Guilt would come later—*gods*, would it come—but for now I still had a chance to stop the hemorrhaging. Literally and figuratively.

“Luther,” I yelled, waving my arms in the air. “Over here.”

He made no move toward me, not even a glimmer of a reaction.

“LU-THER!”

He shook his head and mouthed *go home*, then began to turn away.

“*Luther, you arrogant prick, come over here and talk to me!*”

In the crowd, a hundred eyes turned on me like a mouse that had just awoken a lion. Luther’s shoulders rose and fell abruptly in what I had no doubt was some kind of irritated sigh, but he finally stalked over to meet me.

I had forgotten how tall he was, the way he towered above me with that perennially frozen glare. His hair was unbound and hung in a loose black curtain around the sharp angles of his face, his olive skin glistening from the intensity of the inferno’s heat. Beads of sweat trailed along his scar and dripped down the column of his throat. My hand flexed with the insane and wildly inappropriate urge to brush one away.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he warned.

“I heard the explosion from my house. I thought if anyone was injured, any children, maybe I could help.”

“There are no children here.”

Thank the gods. I nearly collapsed.

“Still,” I insisted, “maybe I can help with the wounded, at least until they can heal themselves. I’ll follow the rules this time, I swear it on my life.”

He studied my face, saying nothing.

“I made a mistake. One that I regret more than you know. Let me at least try to make it right. *Please.*”

I wondered if he could hear the sincerity in my words—if he knew that the truth of them meant so much more than he could possibly understand.

He raised a palm, and a sphere of pale blue light shimmered into place around me. He jerked his chin in a silent invitation to follow and turned away. I held my breath as I passed through the glowing ropes of the boundary, marveling at the way they fizzled and disappeared where they hit the glittering dome.

I scurried to keep up, and the shield around me vanished as I joined his side with a softly mumbled thanks.

“Stay out of the way, and stay away from the fire,” he ordered. “And do not take off running anywhere. If you do, I’ll throw you in the dungeon myself.”

“Understood.”

He looked far from convinced. “Where are your supplies?”

“I don’t have any.”

“You came all the way here with no medicine or supplies?”

“Well I left Mortal City with all the supplies I could carry, and then I was attacked on the trail by a group of jackasses who stole my bag. So, technically, I only came *halfway* here with no medicine or supplies.”

He stopped. His eyes darkened as they unapologetically roamed my body. “Did they hurt you?” he growled.

I shifted my weight under his sudden scrutiny. “No. I was able to escape.”

“Were they mortal or Descended?”

“I, uh... I couldn’t tell. It was too dark.” I scowled. “Can we focus on this right now?”

He shot me a look that suggested my lies were even less believable than they sounded, but he didn’t push it any further, leading me over to where a group of bodies were sprawled across a patch of grass.

As we approached, the reek of burnt hair and charred flesh wafted to my nose, drawing a wave of nausea heightened by the sound of tormented groans. Burns of concerning severity littered the prone figures, their guard uniforms tattered and scorched—some still smoking like a blown-out candle. At least a few were missing limbs. One was unnaturally still.

“These are the worst of them,” Luther said quietly. “I don’t know if there’s much you can do. We’re gathering carriages to send them out to the Descended healers in Fortos.”

I could only nod, words proving too difficult to form.

Gradually, I walked into the group and sank to my knees between two of the injured. On my right, a man writhed in pain and clutched his face, screaming strings of mangled words I couldn’t make out. I reached for his hand and gently pulled it toward me.

“Hello, I’m Diem. I’m a healer, and I’m here to h—”

My throat closed up as his hand dropped away. His face—what had been his face—was now a mess of gleaming flesh, broiled and bloody.

His hand, still hot from the fire’s touch, tightened around my wrist.

“H-hel... m...” His lips were gone, his tongue a blackened stump, rendering his speech a slow, garbled tangle of blood and pain. Still, there was no mistaking the words he was fighting to say.

Help me.

There was nothing I could do. If I’d kept my bag of medicine, I could at least ease his pain or soothe him into sleep while his body healed, but I’d surrendered it all to the Guardians.

Why hadn’t I fought harder? Why hadn’t I run faster?

A choked sob caught in my throat.

I did this. This is my fault.

I took the man’s hand in my own and leaned in close. “You’re going to be alright,” I whispered. “You’re going to heal in no time. Soon, this will be a distant memory.”

“Hel... m...” he moaned again. His fingers trembled against my arm—or maybe I was the one shaking.

“We’re going to get you to someone who can help you. Just hold on, be strong for a little longer.”

His shoulders began to shudder, his attempts at words turning into long, desperate wails. I spotted a patch of unburnt skin along his ribs, and I laid my other palm on top of it, grazing my thumb in light brushing motions.

“You’re not alone. I’m here with you. You’re going to be alright.”

In the back of my mind, I felt the weight of Luther’s eyes watching my every move, even as the group once again enveloped him into its fold. His voice carried over to me as he issued orders, calm but firm, his confidence

steadfast despite the madness around him. The sound of it was oddly comforting.

I sat with the man and whispered reassurances until his sobs eased, then turned silent. His hand went limp and fell away from my wrist. For a moment I feared the worst, but the beat of his heart under my palm remained steady and strong, if concerningly fast. The pain had pulled him into unconsciousness—a small mercy.

On my other side, a female guard convulsed with the effects of shock. I followed the same pattern, clutching her hands and offering a promise that help would arrive soon. Another lie—something I'd become all too practiced at doing these days—but it seemed to offer enough solace to still her trembling body and slow her heaving gasps.

I made my way from Descended to Descended, offering these insignificant gestures in whatever way I could. Occasionally I was able to offer more—Luther directed a guard to bring me fresh water and alcohol, which I used to clean some wounds, and I cut off a leather belt to use as a makeshift tourniquet for a man whose leg was missing from the thigh down.

I came to the final guard, whose body had remained motionless since my arrival. I'd been avoiding looking too closely, convincing myself it was better to focus on the patients who were awake and more consciously suffering, but the truth was I was terrified of what I might find—and now my cowardice could wait no longer.

The guard was female... or so I guessed. Her entire body was burned, hair singed to ash. The fire had claimed both feet and her entire left arm. It was difficult to tell whether her clothing had burned away or merely melted to her skin.

For a long time, I watched her chest, begging any god who would listen that I might see even the weakest of movement.

But there was only stillness.

Terrible, eternal stillness.

I did this. This is my fault.

Tears spilled in freefall as I leaned forward and closed what was left of her eyelids. I held her remaining hand and whispered the Rite of Endings, with a prayer to the divine to take mercy on her soul.

I didn't bother asking the same for my own.

Eventually, the awful quiet in my head began to subside, and the voices of the crowd that had gathered around Luther edged into my

thoughts.

“...thought we got everyone out...”

“...still a few trapped...”

“...undetonnated rebel bombs...”

“...opening could collapse at any moment...”

I turned my attention back to Luther. His eyes were still on me, some clouded expression that I couldn't read etched into his features. He blinked, as if meeting my gaze had shaken him from his own tempestuous thoughts.

Two Descended crowded near his side—a bison of a man with messy golden waves and a slim, stern-faced woman whose midnight blue bob came to a knife-like point at her chin. Both stared at him with grim resignation.

“If we surround the building with shadow magic, we can extinguish the fire, but it might kill any survivors left inside,” the man said, wearing a deep frown that didn't quite seem to fit his face.

“The armory was built with only two doors for security purposes,” the woman added. Her myriad piercings glittered in the firelight as she shook her head. “The back entrance just collapsed, and the front is in such bad shape, no one can fit through it. We could burn a new one open, but the integrity of the building is badly compromised. It could bring the whole building down.”

The man nodded bleakly at her assessment.

Luther gave them both a furious glare that had even me shrinking back—though, to their credit, neither one so much as flinched. “You're asking me to leave people inside to burn alive?” he snarled.

“We're not sure anyone's still alive in there,” the man argued. “Even if we can get someone inside, we could be asking them to risk their life for a corpse.”

“I'll do it.”

Luther's eyes shot to mine.

I rose to my feet and looked at the building, now almost completely engulfed. The large iron door of the entry had been ripped from its hinges by an explosion, and fallen debris had reduced the portal to little more than a crawlspace of flaming, blackened wood. It was narrow, but...

“I can do it,” I repeated. “I'm smaller than all of you. I can fit.”

The man and woman beside Luther glanced at each other, then at me. “You're willing to go in?” she asked.

“No,” Luther snapped. “It’s too dangerous.”

“You’ve been sending your guards in for the past hour,” I shot back. “That wasn’t too dangerous?”

“You’re not one of my guards.”

“So?”

“So it’s too dangerous. You’re mortal, remember?” His tone was dry, almost sarcastic. “Your body is too fragile.”

I glared. “First of all, if you ever call me *fragile* again, I’ll slice your precious royal balls off and shove them down your throat.”

The group went dead silent. The corner of Luther’s lips twitched—just slightly.

“Second, why should it matter to you if I get hurt?” I smiled bitterly. “I’m just a mortal, after all. Our lives are so disposable compared to yours.”

The muscles along his throat strained with the effort of not responding. The blond man looked at Luther, then tilted his head at me curiously, a smile slowly growing across his face.

“It could work,” the woman mused. “If you can get in and get any survivors to the opening, we could push the beams up long enough to get them outside. But we’ll only have one chance—the whole thing will collapse as soon as we move it.”

I shrugged. “I can do it. I’m not afraid.”

“Clearly,” the blond man said, grinning at me.

“No.” Luther crossed his arms, shoulders high and tense. “She’s not going in. It’s not up for discussion.”

I shot him a look. “Oh come on, Luther—”

“*Prince* Luther.”

I couldn’t roll my eyes hard enough. “People are dying and you’re concerned about your fancy fucking title?”

He started to snarl a response, but I interrupted him with a palm shoved into the immovable wall of his chest. “You’re really going to tell their families you had a chance to save them and you didn’t take it? *That’s* the kind of leader you’re going to be?”

It was a calculated blow to his pride—but an effective one. A spark of fury blazed behind his glare, but more important were the probing stares of the crowd around him.

Luther was stuck. I knew it, and he knew it. To forbid me would be to prioritize a mortal over his own kind, a display of weakness the future King

of Lumnos couldn't risk.

"Fine," he gritted out. "Get yourself killed. But don't expect me to send in my guards to rescue you."

"Fine," I bit back. I turned to the woman at his side. "Can you tell me where to go once I'm inside?"

She nodded and walked alongside me as we moved closer to the building. I kept my gaze focused on the burning structure while she described the room where survivors had last been seen. They were further in than I'd realized—*much* further. It was only my own puffed-up pride that kept me from turning tail and backing out.

I glanced over my shoulder at where the injured guards were resting, my eyes falling on the motionless woman. I wondered if they would even be able to determine who she was under all of her injuries. Gods only knew how many others like her were inside, dead or dying a slow, horrific death.

Because of me.

"If you want, I can try to find a smaller guard to go with you," the woman offered, perhaps sensing my courage had suddenly taken flight.

I waved her off. "There's no time. I'll be fine."

She nodded. "Get them as close to the exit as you can. When you've got them all, we'll raise the beams and help pull them out."

I had to admit, I was impressed by her singular focus. She didn't try to talk me out of it, nor did she treat me like my mortal blood made me too weak or too ignorant to understand the risks I was taking on. Unwise as my choice might be, she was determined to respect it.

I unlatched my weapons belt from my hips and passed it off to her, knowing I would need to be as streamlined as possible to squeeze my way through. "If I don't come back, tell that Prince of yours..."

I looked over my shoulder for Luther, but he had already disappeared from sight.

A twinge of hurt tugged at my chest, leaving me feeling embarrassed and naive. Of course my certain death wasn't entertaining enough to hold his attention. Why should I have expected anything different?

"Never mind," I said quickly. I tucked my hair into the back of my tunic, dropped to my knees and took a long, final breath. "Time to find out if Grandma Lumnos likes me after all."



HOT WAS a piss-poor way to describe what the inside of the armory felt like. The word was so mild, so wholly inadequate.

A cookpot of sizzling, steaming oil.

Red-hot iron liquefied over a blacksmith's forge.

The Flaming surface of the gods-damned sun.

The armory's walls and floor were made of stone—likely the only reason any part of the building still remained upright—but the tall wooden rafters had become one giant, billowing cloud of fire. The heat of it pressed down with near-physical force, the air so impossibly thick any movement felt like wading through liquid warmth.

The ground ahead was mostly clear, albeit dotted with fallen chunks of flaming wood, but high above, the remaining beams crackled like a winter fireplace. A sound that had once brought me such nostalgic comfort now served as a warning of what could come crashing down on my head at any moment.

I crawled along the floor as quickly as I could, the collar of my tunic pulled over my mouth to filter the blackened air.

"Hello?" I screamed, my voice already hoarse from the effects of the smoke. "Can anyone hear me? Call out if you can hear my voice."

Silence.

It was a struggle to keep my eyes open, even harder to see more than an arm's length ahead.

"Is anyone out there?" I yelled. "I can help you."

Silence.

On hands and knees, I dragged myself down the path the woman had described, feeling along the walls of the main corridor. At the entrance to a massive storeroom, a golden plaque engraved with the word *Blades* had fallen to the floor. The roof had partially given way, allowing the night air to flush out some of the blinding smog. The shelves lining the walls were strangely bare, and several wooden crates sat overturned and empty on the ground. A handful of knives lay scattered on the floor, the pale gemstones in their dark wood handles glimmering in the dancing firelight.

My eyes snagged on a pair of boots sticking out from behind a crate. I rushed toward the body that lay hunched on its side, heart racing, my silent

prayers on a ceaseless loop.

I grabbed at his shoulder and tugged him over to his back—then lurched away with a startled cry. His blue eyes were bulging and vacant, mouth stuck open in an unanswered plea for mercy. Blood coated his chest, his throat slit with a gash that ran nearly to the bone.

Not burned, not suffocated from smoke.

Murdered.

My thoughts flashed back to the Guardians I'd met on the road and the two carts they had been pulling. I looked again at the vacant shelves and overturned crates, piecing it all together.

What did you think would happen, my conscience scolded me. That the Guardians would knock on the door and ask nicely?

I crawled around the room, my search for survivors turning up only corpses—two more guards, one beheaded and the other blown apart by an explosion.

At least four guards, dead. Four lives ended in cruel, violent ways.

Killing had seemed so easy when I'd faced the Descended man in the alley. After watching him murder the mortal woman, I was ready to take his life in a heartbeat, my rage so fierce that ending his existence barely warranted a second thought.

It was the same fury Henri had felt after watching the mortal boy get trampled by the Descended man on horseback—a need for vengeance, for *justice*, that burned so hot it seared away everything else.

I had believed that day in the alley had made me ready, like it had for Henri, to become a Guardian, to join the war, to do whatever it took to protect my people.

To kill, if necessary.

But the man I faced that day had earned his fate when he murdered two innocents. As far as I knew, these guards had committed no crime worse than being Descended in the wrong place at the wrong time.

War is death and misery and sacrifice. War is making choices that will haunt you for the rest of your days.

If this was the kind of killing that war required—I wasn't ready.

And I never would be.

I collapsed on the floor beside the dead guards as the smoke and the heat overwhelmed me. For a moment, it felt like the burning roof had

indeed caved in, as the enormous weight of everything I had been through these past months came crashing down on my head.

Even if I survived another dawn, my career as a healer was over—there would be no going back now that I'd seen firsthand the bloody cost of breaking my vow. My mother was likely dead, my life now bound in service to the wicked King and his miserable heir. Henri probably hated me, and even if he didn't, would the Guardians force him to choose between us? Would I win that fight, when he was so passionate about the cause he'd inked it permanently into his skin?

Was that a fight I even wanted to win?

Smoky coughs turned into broken sobs as they racked my throat, the oxygen feeling dangerously thin. My brain was as hazy as the air, each new thought feeling like it was being dragged from a pit of sticky, bubbling tar. I tried to push back to my feet, but every time I clawed for the dregs of my energy, my gaze locked on the lifeless eyes of the body beside me, and I remembered how much blood was on my hands.

Maybe it would be best to just... stay here. Curl into a ball and wait for the inevitable.

Henri could move on. Maura and the healers would be safer. Father and Teller would be heartbroken—but better off, perhaps. My choices had already put them at so much risk.

It would be an excruciating end. But maybe that was exactly what I deserved.

I did this. This is my fault.

The fight drained from my body. I collapsed against the floor, a tear streaming down my cheek as I closed my eyes and surrendered to the darkness.

Chapter
Twenty-Six

Fight.

My eyes flew open.

How long have I been lying here?

Am I dead?

My exposed skin was swollen and tender, nearly sizzling against the blistering stone floor.

Fight.

“No,” I whispered weakly.

I’d made my choice. This was the end. There was no point in fighting it, no point in—

Fight.

Energy blasted through my veins, filling them with an icy gust that soothed my aching skin and sent me recoiling from the scalding tiles beneath.

“By the Undying Fire,” I swore as I sat upright. “I can’t even die in peace.”

The *voice* paced like a predator inside me, snapping its jaws and urging me to action. It wanted me to move, to leave, to save myself, to *fight* for myself—all the things my own head and heart had willingly abandoned.

I pulled in a deep gulp of air, surprised to find my lungs clear and unscathed. The room was still swirling with black, noxious smoke—surely I should have fallen unconscious by now.

Fight. Fight. Fight.

“*Fine*,” I growled, dragging myself to my feet. “Leave me alone. I’m up.”

At full height, the air felt molten, far hotter than it had been on the ground, but for some unexplainable reason, it no longer bothered me. A frigid tingling sensation had spread from my chest up into my head and down through my arms and legs, numbing me to the surrounding inferno.

I've gone insane, I thought. It only took two months off of the flameroot powder, and I've really, truly lost it.

I lumbered out of the room and wavered in the corridor while my smoke-fogged brain tried to orient itself in the smoldering darkness.

The way out was to the right.

But the people I'd come to save were to the left, if they were even still alive to be saved.

As if the gods themselves were listening, a flaming chunk of the crumbling wooden rafters crashed to my right side, narrowly avoiding a direct collision with my head. Another, larger piece fell beside it, and I lurched to the left and swore.

A quick glance up confirmed I didn't have much time before the rest of the roof came crashing in. If I was going to do this, it was now or never.

I broke into a jog down the hall. "Hello?" I called out. "Anyone still alive?"

Soft and weak, nearly inaudible over the crackling flames and tumbling debris, a voice cried out in response.

"Hello?" I shouted. "Can you hear me?"

"Please... help."

My heart kicked into a sprint.

"Keep talking! I'll find you."

"H-help me... Blessed Kindred, please... I don't want to die..."

In a room just off the main corridor, I spotted two men—one in a heap on the ground, the other trapped beneath a fallen beam. Under the heavy wood, his hips appeared flattened in a way that turned my stomach, his legs bent at an unnatural angle.

His eyes found mine, dark and hopeless. I didn't need to tell him the grim reality of his situation. "Please don't leave me," he begged. "Please... save me."

"I will, I promise. You're going to be fine." The words tasted sour on my lips. The massive beam was far heavier than anything I could possibly lift. Maybe I could go back and get one of the Descended guards, convince the others to hold the opening long enough for us to—

A hailstorm of rubble rained down into the hallway, sending a wave of flame surging through the corridor and flooding into the room. On instinct, I threw myself over the injured man to block him from the fiery blast.

Fight.

Again the *voice* pulsed, and a cold burst crested over my skin. I heard a hissing sound and looked up to see a cloud of steam rising toward the ceiling.

Definitely going insane.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Perthe.”

“Alright, Perthe—can you push this beam off of your leg?”

He shook his head, despair pooling in his azure eyes. “Can’t. Too weak.”

I shifted to the man sprawled beside him. A quick check of his pulse confirmed he was alive, but several firm slaps to the face did nothing to rouse him back to consciousness.

Not good. Even if I could free Perthe, I would have to carry them both through a fiery gauntlet of raining debris. I doubted I was strong enough to carry *one*.

Hopelessness began to set back in. *I can’t do this, they’re both going to die here and it will be all my f—*

Fight, the voice snapped.

Right.

No time to wallow.

I wrapped my arm around the wooden beam trapping Perthe, wincing as my skin blistered on still-glowing sparks along its splintered edge. With a loud groan, I heaved my weight against it in a desperate bid to shift it loose.

In my days as a healer, I’d heard stories of mortals digging into some hidden well of inhuman strength in times of crisis—frantic mothers who single-handedly lifted overturned carriages off their children, delicate ladies hauling a fallen horse away from their beloved trapped beneath. There was something about the imminent terror of losing a loved one that coated our bones in steel and injected our veins with fire, giving us the will to face Death with defiance and push our bodies beyond anything we ever thought ourselves capable of.

Perthe was the furthest thing from a *loved one* to me, but that was the only explanation for the way the mammoth log, five times my size and at least ten times my weight, slowly dislodged and slid free from his crumpled legs. Glowing embers swirled around us as the charred wood collapsed in a thunk to the ground.

Perthe cried out at the movement—in pain or relief, I wasn’t sure.

“Can you put any weight on your legs at all?” I asked him.

He tried to push himself upright, but his chest barely made it off the floor before his face contorted in agony and his arms gave out. “I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes guttering with a defeat I recognized painfully well.

“It’s alright. You’re going to be fine.” I glanced between him and the other guard, a plan taking shape. “We’re getting out of here—all three of us.”

Hope sparked in his expression. “We are?”

“We are. But—” I winced. “—this is going to hurt like hell.”

Perthe nodded, undeterred, and pushed himself upward again. Though a tormented cry ripped from his chest, he was able to prop himself up on his elbows. “I can take it,” he said, panting.

“Good.” I took the arms of the unconscious man and laid him out lengthwise, dragging his body as close to Perthe as I could manage. “I can’t carry you both, but maybe I can drag you. We’re going to use your friend here like a stretcher. Can you lay on top of him?”

Perthe nodded again, a hard focus honing his features. He gritted his teeth and let his screams die in his throat as I wrapped my arms around his chest and hauled his body across the other man’s back. I cringed as I gingerly arranged his mangled legs and shattered hips until the two men were layered together.

“Hold on as tight as you can,” I ordered, taking the unconscious man’s limp arms and clasping them at my waist.

I dug my heels into the stone and threw my weight ahead of me, straining forward with a labored grunt. My heart hammered in cautious hope as the men behind me slid forward—then sank as we ground to a stop.

I took a deep breath and tried again. A few more feet—then another stop. I screamed as I barreled as far down into myself as I could, scraping the edges of my soul for whatever shred of strength I could find.

Another foot, then another—and stop.

We continued like that for what felt like an eternity, progressing inch by grueling inch. Even Perthe, with his body brutally decimated, did his best to help by shoving at the stone floor with his palms.

After every push, I felt deflated and entirely drained, convinced I couldn’t possibly give it another try, couldn’t possibly find one remaining ounce of effort in my weary, exhausted soul—but each time, the *voice* inside of me roared to life and unlocked some new cavern of defiance deep

within. Flames licked at the walls as we passed, flecks of falling debris speckling my arms with blisters and burns, though I barely felt it. I felt only the pound of my heart and the call of the *voice* as it urged me on.

When a cool breeze finally brushed my cheek, it felt like a splash of spring water in the Ignios deserts. Through the smoke and the flames, I spotted an opening to the starry night beyond, and in that opening, a face. Bright blue-grey eyes.

“Diem!”

Luther.

His voice sounded hoarse, almost panicked. So unlike the frosty calm I had come to expect.

Like a candle snuffed into darkness, the last of my energy vanished. I sank to my knees with a painful, heavy thud.

“Luther,” I croaked out. “I can’t...”

“Stay there. Stay strong. I’m coming.”

There was shouting. Shuffling feet. The groaning of shifting metal and wood.

“I’m coming for you,” he shouted again.

Twin ropes of blinding light unfurled from the entrance and slithered across the floor. The haze of the smoke gave them an eerie halo that surrounded me as they curled around my ribcage and tugged me forward. I grabbed for the two men, but my muscles were too weak, my grip unable to hold on.

“No,” I panted. “Not me. Them—get them out first.”

Again, the glowing cords attempted to yank me forward, leaving the two men behind. “No, Luther,” I growled, louder. “Save *them*.”

I grabbed one of the luminous tendrils and peeled it off my body. As my hand brushed against Luther’s magic, the sensation that thrummed along my skin was unlike anything I’d ever felt—like starlight made solid, like holding a shaving of the moon in my hands. It seemed almost to flow into me and coat my body in a shimmering, silvery sheen.

A tingling burst of energy exploded up my arms and bloomed through my chest, dulling the bite of my fatigue and renewing my focus. I took the strands of light and wrapped them like a binding around the wrists of the unconscious man. Luther’s magic hummed at my touch, and I swore I heard a distant harmony that went silent the moment I let them go.

“Pull—now,” I yelled. “*Pull!*”

The cords went taut. I collapsed on my side as the two men slid as one, slowly but surely inching toward the opening until they could move no further.

The fallen beams barricading the door began to lift, bolstered by a dome of sparkling blue light. It was excruciatingly slow, and the nest of logs was so splintered I was sure it would give way at any second, but I watched with awe and exquisite relief as hands reached through the smoke, and the two injured guards disappeared out into the night.

An absurd, exhausted laugh bubbled from my chest. I'd done it—they were safe. Severely wounded and possibly forever scarred, but alive.

Maybe they were terrible men. Maybe they'd tortured mortals, or executed children under the progeny laws, or done any number of other horrific things. Maybe someday I would regret giving them a second chance.

But at least for today, I'd saved their lives. In a way, they'd saved mine, too.

The rustle of shifting wood warned me the opening wouldn't hold much longer. I struggled to my feet and staggered forward, my bone-tired legs swaying precariously.

Luther strode through the now-widened entrance, his fearsome profile haloed by the bright city lights beyond, and our eyes met in the darkness.

We both froze in place as something ancient, something profound passed between us. It was a primal force that transcended word and thought, as powerful as a crack of lightning, a child's first breath, the endless depth of the sea. It was not of this world but entirely woven within it. It warmed my blood with a calming peace I'd never known, yet filled me with the terrible dread of a fate I could not avoid.

A vision came to me. The same one I'd had before—a battlefield drenched in silver flame and strewn with dead bodies in a circle at my feet, my body clad in glittering onyx armor and a gilded, night-black blade in my hand. Only this time, I wasn't alone.

The shadowed figure I'd seen before was now visible, as if he'd thrown off a great cloak of darkness, the jeweled sword in his hand dripping with crimson blood. When I looked into those familiar eyes, the most beautiful, heart-wrenching ache burned against the left side of my chest. I covered it with my palm, and on the other side of the field, the figure mirrored the movement.

The vision ended, twinkling in the air as it faded like mist in the sun. The battlefield became a burning warehouse, its silver flames darkening to an angry red-orange, and the scattered bodies dissolved into fallen rubble, but the figure I'd seen remained. His pale gaze was still locked on me, his palm still flat against his chest, as was my own.

"Diem," he whispered.

"Luther," I answered.

He reached his other hand out and took a single step in my direction.

Crack.

The sound came from above.

I broke his stare and looked up to see a massive beam, then another, detach from its joist.

Everything moved in slow motion.

Wooden rafters drifted toward me.

Luther's mouth opened, lips forming my name, eyes wide with horror.

My trembling hand stretched for his.

The sky was falling.

And the world went dark.

Chapter
Twenty-Seven

Everything hurt.

My skin, my bones, my brain.

Every inch of me *hurt*.

Strong hands cradled my legs and shoulders and pulled me against some hard, warm wall. A wall that trembled and throbbed like a pounding heart.

I whimpered, and the wall went still.

“Your Highness—”

“Get out of my way.”

“There are still bombs around the building, how should we—”

“Find the Vice General, she’ll handle it from here.”

“But Your Hi—”

“*Get the fuck out of my way.*”

Then I was moving, bouncing, each jarring impact rattling the inside of my skull.

I tried to open my eyes, but nothing happened.

Everything hurt so, so much.

“I’ve got you,” someone said, softer. “You’re going to survive this. I promise.”

For some reason, I believed them. Their voice was familiar in a way that felt like more than a memory, like it wasn’t my mind that knew them but something deeper, something far more intimately ingrained. Its steadfast resolve soothed the limp of my heart, but there was a tone in it that was... shaken.

Lost.

A shiver rippled through me as a chilly breeze kissed my skin in unexpected places—my ribs, my thighs, my hips. I tried to speak, but only a weak, broken sound rose from my lips.

The hands clutched me tighter, their grip as desperate as it was tender.

I felt safe. So very safe. I wanted to fall asleep in those arms and never, ever leave.

Sleep...

“Stay with me, Diem. Please... stay here with me. No, wait, don’t—”

Darkness.



“WHO IS SHE?”

“It doesn’t matter. I need you to help her.”

“Help her? Look at her. She doesn’t need me, she needs a healer.”

“Just do what you can.”

“How am I supposed to—”

“Help her, Eleanor. *Please.*”

“Alright, alright. Tell me what happened.”

“The Guardians attacked House Benette’s armory. She went in to pull two guards from a fire. The roof caved in before she could get out.”

“Blessed Kindred... why in the nine realms was this girl doing a rescue mission?”

A low growl. “Because I’m a damn idiot.”

Silence.

“Alright. I’ll just, um, go get a dress for her.”

“*Pants.* She—she normally wears pants.”

“Pants? I don’t have any—never mind. I’ll see what I can find. You’ll stay with her until I’m back?”

“Lumnos herself couldn’t pull me from her side.”

More silence.

“Cousin... who is this woman to you?”

A pause, and a long, heavy sigh.

“Eleanor, I... I think she...”

Darkness.



COMFORTABLE.

I’d never been so comfortable in my life.

My entire body was enveloped in warmth—not like before, in the armory, where I’d felt like I was slow-roasting on a spit. This was a pleasant warm, a warm I could happily be cradled in and never escape.

And soft. I was surrounded by softness. A nest of it, tucked into me on all sides.

It smelled heavenly. Masculine. Fresh, earthy moss and damp cedar. Old, tanned leather with a peppery musk.

It smelled like my beloved forest. It smelled like *home*.

Someone was holding my hand, our fingers interlocked. A tingling thread of energy crept up my arm where our skin made contact. And they were talking to me.

They sounded kind.

I couldn’t make out the words—my head was still fuzzy, and that cursed *voice* inside me wouldn’t stop *humming*.

But it felt... nice.

Safe.

Right.

Darkness.

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

Light.

My eyes cracked open to a brightness so blinding my head immediately began to spin. My body lost its sense of direction and dropped into a feeling of freefall. I clutched at the bedsheets as the world tilted and tumbled in a wild, disorienting churn.

My fingers brushed against skin. The realness of it centered me, slowed my descent until I stopped falling and the room came into view.

I heard breathing, slow and deep. And a fireplace.

My throat tightened at the first snap of a burning log. For a second, I was back inside that armory, my lungs and nose choked with putrid smoke, watching helplessly as the inferno closed in around me. I stretched my fingers again until skin grazed skin, and the panic subsided.

I blinked a few times to clear my vision.

I was in a bed. Large and exceptionally cozy, but unfamiliar. The silken sheets caressed me like a lover's touch, nothing like the old, rough-worn linen of my bedding at home. Downy blankets piled atop me, my head cushioned by a mountain of pillows.

My eyes roamed over the room. Spacious, yet homely, appointed with simple but elegant furnishings—the kind that worked so hard to seem unassuming, but you knew just by looking at them, they cost a small fortune. The stone ceiling, vaulted high above, held a tiered chandelier of dimly glowing orbs, but the light that had so blinded me a moment ago had come from my left.

My head swiveled slowly in that direction, the movement straining my stiff, tender muscles. Along a row of arched windows, cascading swaths of burgundy silk had been drawn back to reveal sunrise over a fog-draped garden. The sky was splashed with creamy pink and hazy lilac, but it was the vivid orange glow of the dawn sun that bathed the room in its brilliant glory.

Rimmed in a corona of morning light, a man slumped against a high-backed armchair, head lolled to the side. Eyes closed, lips parted slightly, chest rising in the rhythm of slumber. Loose strands of ebony hair framed a face that had somehow become even more handsome in sleep, all its sharp edges sheathed for the night. Only a wrinkle between his dark brows hinted at a ripple beneath the still calm.

His chair had been pulled close to the bed. One arm draped across the blankets, his fingers grazing mine. His palm was open and upturned, as if awaiting my hand, just as it had been in those final moments in the armory.

Luther.

His eyes opened, our gazes already matched. For a heartbeat, his expression didn't change, and I marveled at the softness of it. I'd never seen him like that. I'd seen him angry, annoyed—even terrified, I remembered with a shiver—but never quite so... peaceful.

"You're awake." He sat up abruptly. I waited for the frosty indifference I was so used to receiving from him, but he only frowned. "How do you feel?"

I pushed myself up and shook my head to clear my thoughts, but my brain was still mired in a fog. "What happened? Where am I?"

"The armory collapsed, and you were..." He paused. "...knocked unconscious. I brought you back to the palace to recover."

My thoughts flashed with terrifying snippets of jumbled memories. The explosions, the Guardians on the road, the dead guards, the flaming building, Perthe—

"Perthe," I rasped. "Is he alright? Did they make it out? And the other, is he—"

"They're both going to be fine. Perthe was sent to Fortos to see an army healer. The other is already recovering at home."

I released a deep exhale, one I thought I might have been holding in for the entire night. I sank back against the pillows, closing my eyes as relief burned the burst of panic away. "They made it," I murmured.

"Yes. Because of you."

Because of me. Guilt wrapped a talon around my chest and squeezed, its sharp claws sinking into my flesh.

"The others—the ones that were laying outside. Are they...?"

"A few were sent to Fortos for treatment, but most were able to return home to heal on their own. Except..."

The woman.

I nodded in silent understanding. Her battered, gruesome body was a sight I would never forget—would never allow myself to forget.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “For those who didn’t make it.”

He wouldn’t understand, *couldn’t*, how deeply I meant those words. How heavy their lives would weigh on me for the rest of my days.

Or maybe he did. I remembered the doubt etched on his face when I first arrived last night. Did he know? Did he suspect?

If so, he no longer showed it. He yawned and rubbed sleepily at his eyes. His hair was mussed where he’d laid on it, his normally shrewd features bleary with the signs of exhaustion.

“Were you sitting there all night?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He gave me a solemn look, but he didn’t respond.

A piercing cry rang out. It sounded inhuman and restless and unnervingly nearby, rattling the windows with its force and jolting me upright.

“What was *that*?”

Luther sighed and rose to his feet. “*That* was Sorae, King Ulther’s gryvern.” He strolled to the window and leaned a shoulder against the wall, eyes turned upward. “She’s been agitated all morning. I was worried her antics would wake you up.”

I thought of the magnificent creature I’d witnessed on my last two visits. She’d seemed distressed then, too.

“Is she ever *not* agitated?”

“She’s normally quite docile. Disturbingly so.” His expression warmed. “I’ve tried countless times to use her for battle training the Royal Guard, but no matter how much I bribe her, she insists on sleeping through the whole thing.”

“You talk about her like a family pet and not an absolutely terrifying wild beast.”

“Oh, she’ll attack if she needs to, and Kindred help anyone unwise enough to provoke her. The problem is she’s too clever. She can sense intentions, so mock battles don’t interest her. When she knows her opponents don’t mean any real harm, she’d rather take her treats and go have a nap.”

I smirked. “Sorae and I have that in common.”

He laughed—*laughed!*—and I had to steady myself to keep my jaw off the floor.

I couldn’t stop staring at him. His relaxed, almost lazy posture. His full, upturned lips and the tenderness that crinkled his eyes at the mention of the gryvern. His loose wool trousers and his untucked, slightly rumpled shirt, hanging open partway down his chest to reveal more of the scar that slashed his body in two. It was casual, unpretentious, and entirely incompatible with the hardened royal heir I’d come to know.

It felt like I was seeing Luther—not His Royal Highness Prince Luther Corbois of Lumnos, but just *Luther*—for the very first time, and I had no idea how to feel about it.

His eyes slid to mine. I quickly looked down, my cheeks burning.

“Why is Sorae upset?” I asked.

The amusement vanished from his face, and he was once again that icy, unknowable Prince. He straightened to his full height and walked back to the bed.

“When the King dies, Sorae will pass to a new master. I suspect she feels it coming.”

“You think she’s sad?”

“Not exactly.” He paused and eyed me, seemingly debating whether to continue. “She’s served him loyally, but Sorae and my uncle were never close. Not in the way some gryverns and Crowns become.”

“Then what’s her concern?”

“Gryverns are exceedingly smart, with minds and opinions of their own, yet they are magic-bound to obey only the Crown. I imagine she’s wary at being forced into service to a stranger whose goals she might not share.”

My jaw tightened. “It seems Sorae and I have that in common, as well.”

His brows furrowed, not understanding.

“The agreement you negotiated,” I reminded him. “Life service to the Crown. My mother’s bargain—the one I agreed to fulfill in her place.”

A shadow darkened his features, and he looked away.

We sat in silence so long that the awkwardness began to grate on me. I huffed and shoved the blankets off. Luther stepped forward and raised a

hand to stop me, but I ignored him and swung my feet over the edge of the bed—then stiffened.

I blinked down at my body.

“Whose clothes are these?”

“Yours were destroyed. I—my cousin changed your clothes.” He at least had the wisdom to look a little mortified. “She’s a woman—my cousin, that is. *She* helped you.”

A glimmer of memory surfaced.

Pants. She—she normally wears pants.

Luther had asked some cousin to strip me down and dress me. Worse, they must have bathed me—there wasn’t a speck of dirt to be seen. My hair was clean and soft, falling free in milk-white waves. Even my nails had been scrubbed and filed to a delicate arch.

And I was indeed wearing pants. Sleek and darkest blue, made of some thick, stretchy fabric I’d never worn before, with hard armor sewn into the thighs and hips that reminded me of the Royal Guard’s uniform. On top, a tunic three sizes too large hung off my bare shoulder, smelling of that same woodsy, musky scent I’d caught earlier.

“Are you still hurt?”

My gaze snapped up. “Hurt?”

“It was difficult to tell if your injuries were serious. I’d planned to call for Maura when you woke.”

I frowned. “Injuries?”

I flexed each of my limbs, pushed up my sleeves to examine my arms, ran my fingers along my neck and face—no wounds, no swelling. Other than some soreness and a lingering stiff neck, I felt no worse than after a night of hard drinking.

“I... I think I’m fine. I made it through the night, so probably nothing internal.” I shot him a good-natured scowl. “You shouldn’t wait to call for a healer for a mortal, you know. We aren’t like you Descended. Our bodies don’t always heal just because an injury didn’t kill us.”

He gave me a strange look. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Believe what?”

“That you’re not...” His voice trailed off with an awful sadness, something that seemed too close to pity on his face.

A furious buzzing filled my head—a war of whispers and memories, questions and accusations. I avoided his eyes, tucking in the tunic as I

fought the invasion of unwanted suspicions threatening to break through my carefully constructed walls.

My feet shuffled awkwardly. “I should get home. My father must be out roaming the streets looking for me by now.”

“I sent a message to your family.”

I stilled. “You did *what*?”

“I suspected they would be concerned if you didn’t return, so I spoke with the palace courier. He said he was familiar with your family. I had him send them a message that you were safe and staying here for the night.”

I groaned and rubbed circles into my temples. The palace courier—Henri’s father. The only thing worse than my father knowing I’d spent the night at the palace was my father *and* Henri knowing I’d spent the night at the palace. I had no idea which of them would be more furious.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

I sighed, shoulders slumping. “No, it... it was a thoughtful gesture. Thank you.”

I spotted my boots lying beside the bed, but I didn’t move to grab them. Suddenly I had no desire to leave this room and face the world beyond.

Sorae’s shrill cry rang out again. Luther was right, she didn’t sound sad—but she didn’t sound worried, either. Her drawn-out trill sounded urgent, impatient.

“Before you go,” Luther said, “would you mind tending to the King? He’s been acting strange since last night.”

I hesitated. “I really shouldn’t...”

“Not even a brief look?”

“I—I don’t have my supplies. And Maura, she... I’m not—”

“Just see him, and tell me if you think I should send for Maura. Will you at least do that?”

Saying no would require explaining too much. Explaining that I’d been forbidden from seeing patients at the palace, that I couldn’t be trusted with Descended patients, especially not the King.

I forced a stiff smile. “I can take a quick look.”

He gave me a moment to secure my boots—and, to my shock, my weapons belt, which he’d recovered from the woman I’d shoved them off on last night. Even Brecke’s knife had been strapped back to its place on my

calf. I stared at it, wondering if Luther had put it there himself, and a burst of heat ran up my leg.

I debated a myriad of snarky comments about his rules on weapons in the palace, but there was such a quiet earnestness in the way he watched me, his hand shooting out to steady me every time my balance wobbled, I couldn't bear to break the easy peace that had somehow formed between us.

I followed him down the hall and through the iron doorway of the Crown's suite, where two guards bowed to him and glared at me, undoubtedly remembering my eventful last visit. I threw them a syrupy-sweet smile, though it lacked my usual bite. They reminded too much of the guards I'd tended the night before, those anguished sobs still ringing in my ears.

As soon as we entered, Sorae's high-pitched howl reverberated through the room, now so much louder and nearer than before.

My gaze caught on a far wall lined with a row of wide arches. Their doors had been closed on my prior visit, but today they stood open, their gauzy drapes billowing in the morning breeze and revealing slivers of feathered wings and a powerful, fur-covered body sprawled on a stone terrace.

"Is that...?"

Luther followed my eyes and nodded. "Sorae has a perch outside so the Crown always has access to her if needed."

As if she'd heard her name, a spiky, draconic head poked through the gossamer curtains. Her black-slitted pupils dilated at the sight of me.

Almost subconsciously, I started walking in her direction, drawn by the same odd tug as before. Her nostrils flared as she stretched her neck and sniffed at me. My hand rose toward her snout, her fanged jaws cracking open with a low rumble, and—

"Diem, *no!*"

Luther shot toward me, arms locking around my waist. He spun me in his grasp, clutching me against him as he shoved his body between me and the gryvern.

"Don't," he warned, a little breathlessly. "If she attacks, only the King can call her off."

I wanted to protest, but the words dissolved under the urgent grip of his hands, the heat of him against my skin, the sudden nearness of his face to mine, the desperation on his features. It was the same way he'd looked at

me as the armory's roof was caving in—like he might have just lost something important. Something he valued more than he, or I, could fully make sense of.

His arms loosened, but didn't let go. "Blessed Kindred," he swore, his eyes lighting up as they studied my face. "You aren't scared of anything, are you?"

I was *very much* scared of the way all my nerve endings were aflame, my blood rushing to all the many, many places where our bodies touched.

And even more scared of how I couldn't seem to talk myself into pulling away.

I looked over his shoulder at the gryvern, whose golden eyes had dropped to Luther's back—where, I realized suddenly, my hands were holding on to him as tightly as he held on to me. The creature's head cocked to one side, and the soft whirr that floated from her throat sounded almost like an accusation.

I scraped together enough self-control to pull myself out of his arms, face burning hot, unable to look man *or* beast in the eyes.

King Ulther looked much the same as he had on my prior visit, motionless and peaceful under the high canopy of his four-poster bed. Out of habit, I took command of the room and strode toward my patient's side, nearly tripping over Luther as he stopped to kneel in respect. I caught myself in time to clumsily mimic the movement, though I didn't miss the hint of a smile on Luther's bowed face.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "Usually my unconscious patients aren't so concerned with formal greetings."

"There's a purpose to the protocol, you know," he said as we both stood. "It distinguishes between a role of public service and the person who currently occupies it. It's about understanding that His Majesty King Ulther of Lumnos and Ulther Corbois, uncle and brother and mate, are two very different people. It's not just—what were your exact words last night?—a '*fancy fucking title*.'"

I threw him a look. "Keep telling yourself that, *Your Highness*."

"It disturbs me how unusual it feels to hear you call me that," he muttered, drawing a loud, genuine laugh from me. His posture tensed at the sound, an unreadable look sparking on his expression.

I walked to the King and perched on the bed beside him, watching his chest struggle to rise in quick, uneven bursts. Now that I was closer, it was

startling how much his condition had deteriorated—his skin grey and paper-thin, his body jerking with the occasional spasm.

I gingerly laid my palm against his cheek, disheartened to find it clammy despite the thick warmth of the firelit room. A touch to his neck confirmed a weakened pulse that felt like it was being reluctantly dragged through every beat.

“It’s almost time, isn’t it?” Luther asked quietly.

I nodded. “I think it is. I wish I had better news, but there’s not much Maura or I can do for him now.”

He walked to the other edge of the bed and sat at the King’s side, laying a palm on his uncle’s chest and staring at him with a troubled look I couldn’t quite understand.

“Were you close?” I asked.

“That is... a difficult question to answer.”

His jaw locked up as his usual stony mask slammed into place across his features. Any other day, I might have given up, muttering beneath my breath at his rude method of ending conversations he disliked.

But today, the armor he wore seemed crafted of glass rather than steel. If I looked long enough, deep enough, focused my stare not on the illusory indifference he projected but the truth hiding in the shadows beneath...

I laid my hand on top of his where it rested over the King’s chest.

“Tell me,” I urged.

His fingers spread just enough to let mine fall between them, curled just enough that it might be less a touch than an embrace.

“My father and uncle were quite close,” he started slowly. “When Ulther became King, my father devoted himself to his reign. I was even named in Ulther’s honor. But then things... changed.” A crease carved into his brow. “My uncle took me under his wing from a very young age. He became more of a father to me than the man who sired me. That drove a wedge into our family, but it never kept Ulther away. He might have been the only person in the realm who had nothing to gain from me, and yet he showed me more kindness than any person ever has.”

Though his stoic veneer held firm, a heart-wrenching loneliness threaded through his voice. How isolating it must be, I realized, to be the heir, to always wonder if any relationship was genuine or simply someone positioning themselves for future gain.

“But?” I prodded.

“But... we did not always agree.”

I waited for him to continue, but this time, his words ran dry, tangled up in that turbulent, too-heavy expression. His thumb brushed across my hand, though his eyes were so distant, I wondered if he even realized he was doing it.

“When he dies, the Crown passes to you?” I asked.

His gaze rose to mine, a bit of the darkness clearing from his features. “It’s impossible to know.”

“But everyone thinks it’s you, don’t they? It goes to the most powerful, and you’re the most powerful?”

“Our power is not easily measurable.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m a powerless, insignificant mortal Luther, you can spare me the false modesty.”

He laughed again, his fingers tightening on mine. “Yes, it’s expected to pass to me.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine Luther stepping into his uncle’s opulent shoes. He already carried himself with the authority of a monarch, his imposing presence demanding obedience before he ever uttered a word. And he was certainly terrifying in his anger, when crossed. I couldn’t imagine many would be bold enough—or foolish enough—to risk provoking his wrath.

Present company excluded, of course.

But there was also kindness in him, loathe as I was to admit it. He’d never punished me for my defiance, and he treated the healers with more respect than any Descended ever had. He’d even offered to send assistance to the needy families of Mortal City—an offer I had rejected out of petty spite, I remembered with a flush of shame.

“And what kind of king do you intend to be?” I asked him. “A king like Ulther?”

His head tilted slightly. “Do you think him a bad king?”

I bit down hard on my tongue. Probably best not to launch into a tirade about the horrors of King Ulther’s policies to the man who’d just called him a father figure.

I shrugged. “I’m a powerless, insignificant mortal, remember? What do I know of the world of kings?”

“Tell me,” he said, echoing my earlier nudge.

His fingers knotted into mine, and this time, there was no question it was intentional.

“Be honest,” he said.

My sigh bordered on a groan. This was a *terrible* idea, the kind that very likely could get me killed. But there was such an honest interest in his eyes, a willingness to listen that felt born of true curiosity rather than accusation. And would I ever again have the ear of the future King of Lumnos?

“He did bad things,” I said finally. “Passed bad laws.”

“Such as?”

I shifted my weight. “Laws that hurt children.”

“The progeny laws,” he guessed.

I nodded.

“You think those laws should be abolished?”

“I think no child should have to die because of who or what their parents are.”

“Even if that’s the cost required to keep our realm powerful?”

“If the death of innocents is a cost we’re willing to pay, then we don’t deserve to be powerful.”

Pale blue light flared bright behind his eyes, but Luther didn’t answer. In the ensuing quiet, we both turned our attention back to the King.

Despite my feelings toward him, Ulther’s looming death struck a chord in my heart. I wondered if he had children or grandchildren. If they sat with him sometimes, as I did now. If they held him close and anxiously awaited the grief of his loss. If their cruel Descended hearts were even capable of such things.

I pulled my hand out of Luther’s, trying not to think about how much willpower that simple act had required. My fingers felt too cold, too alone, so I busied them brushing hair back from the King’s face and smoothing the edge of his nightshirt where the fabric bunched and cut into his skin.

“You haven’t been joining Maura on her calls to the palace lately,” Luther said.

“I took a break.”

“Why?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Need I remind you what happened the last time I was here?”

“Fair point. You do seem to be impressively bad at following orders.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly.

He smiled. “But you’re very good at your job.”

A blush rose to my cheeks, and I despised the lie it told—a humble girl, too modest to know her accomplishments. I was far from humble, and I *did* know I was a good healer. I just didn’t deserve to be.

“You are,” he insisted. “I saw the way you calmed my sister down when she was scared, and the way you made my young cousins laugh when they were hurt. You were kind to them even when their mothers were impolite.” He nodded down at his uncle. “The way you’re being with him now, even though you dislike him. My guards assaulted you on nearly every visit to the palace, and yet you scolded *me* for wounding *them*. You tried to fight me to run into a burning building to save them.”

I turned my face away, unable to stand the way he looked at me with such respect—the same way Henri had the day I’d stolen the documents from House Benette.

The day I’d doomed those dead Descended guards to their fate.

He craned his neck, trying to catch my eye. “I think you have a rare gift for seeing a person for *who* they are, and not just *what* they are.”

My voice went quiet. “If you knew me better, you might have a different opinion.”

It was the most I dared to reveal.

A long silence passed as Luther’s focus held steady on me.

“Diem... the last time you were here, the day you ran from this room—what were you really looking for?”

My shoulders tightened, but I forced my hands to keep moving, forced my face into indifference. “I told you, I forgot my satchel.”

“Was it for the Guardians?”

My blood froze solid in my veins.

“I know who they are,” he said. “It’s my duty to know what goes on in this realm, and they aren’t nearly as covert as they believe themselves to be.”

My eyes slowly lifted to his. The hairs on my neck rose—all softness was gone from his expression, replaced by a brutal, unflinching stillness. This was dangerous ground.

“And I know they were responsible for last night’s attack,” he said flatly.

Dangerous, *deadly* ground.

And because the air in the room now felt explosive, ready to blow at the strike of a match, I clenched my jaw and finally asked the question that had been festering in my heart since that fateful afternoon.

“Where is my mother?” I ground out.

He gave me a grim, humorless smile. “I wondered how long it would take you to ask me that.”

“What did you do to her?” I hissed.

“I didn’t *do* anything to her,” he said, sounding almost insulted at the accusation. “What were you looking for in the palace?”

As my temper rose, so did I, my fists balling at my sides as I stood. “Don’t try to deny it. I saw you two arguing the day she went missing. I know she was threatening to reveal some secret about you, and you said—”

His eyes narrowed. “Then you don’t know what the secret was?”

“If I did, would you make me disappear, too?”

Something dark flashed across his face. He stormed around the bed and aimed toward me. My hand flew to the dagger at my hip as I staggered backward, bumping against a large wooden dresser.

Luther stopped and raised his palms. “I assure you, whatever you think happened between me and your mother, it didn’t.”

“Then what did happen?”

He stared at me, silently working his jaw.

“*What happened*, Luther?” I was nearly yelling now.

A loud knock rapped on the chamber door.

“Enter,” Luther barked, his eyes still locked with mine.

Two guards walked in, both eying me warily as one walked to Luther and whispered something in his ear. He swore softly and turned fully to the guard, exchanging some inaudible words.

Luther stalked toward the door, the other guard following behind. “I need to handle a situation. Stay here. Do not run this time, Miss Bellator, do you understand?”

Miss Bellator. For some reason, it stung.

“You’re going to leave me alone with the King?” I called out.

The two guards gaped at him like they were about to ask the very same question.

Luther didn’t stop walking, didn’t even take a final glance. “I’m giving you my trust. Don’t make me regret it.”

The door slammed shut, leaving me and my knives alone with the King of Lumnos.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

I stared at the closed door for a solid minute.

I debated waiting for Luther in the main salon or convincing the guards to escort me to the front parlor, or even offering up my weapons to them until he returned.

By the Flames, was I truly that desperate?

It was an odd thing, to feel so distrustful of my own heart. I wasn't sure I was even capable of killing the King. If last night had shown me anything, it was that I had little stomach for murder.

The truth was I no longer knew how I felt about anything.

A month ago, I had been focused. I had clear, attainable goals.

Find my mother. Keep Teller in school. Serve as the palace healer. Help the Guardians.

I may not have loved my place in the world, but at least I knew where it was.

Now, though, my future was smoke, opaque and foreboding, threatening to suffocate me alive if I didn't find some way out.

Now, my future felt... empty.

When I was upset as a child, my mother would wrap me up in a blanket and we'd sit by the hearth clutching clay mugs of steaming, sweetened tea. She'd tell me stories of old Emarion, a time before the Kindred and their devastating rule, stories that had passed down in oral tradition through generations after the Descended had burned every mortal-penned book they could find.

She had the most beautiful voice. Melodious and strong, brimming with confidence and edged with the mystery of all her hidden secrets. Even silent, she could captivate a room.

But as formidable as she was, she was still just my mother. The woman who soothed me after a nightmare, who fed me soup and stroked my hair

when I was sick. She was my constant lantern when, like now, the world was dark and I didn't know which way to go.

To the world, she was Auralie Bellator, but to me she was just... Mother.

And I missed her. *Gods*, did I miss her.

I wiped away the wetness on my cheeks, grateful for the small mercy of avoiding an audience for *that*. I cautiously edged my way back to the King's bedside like a wild animal approaching another in the woods, not quite sure which of us was the scarier predator.

Like Luther, the King's power radiated in his presence. Weakened, yes, but impressive still. What must it feel like, to be the most powerful person in the realm? To know that you had not just the authority, but the ability, to wield life and death with the curl of a finger?

But today, he was no fearsome child of the gods.

Today, he was just an old, dying man. Alone.

A spasm rippled through his body, then another. His eyelids flickered delicately, as if lost in a dream. His breathing was so fast—far too fast, and far too shallow. It wouldn't be much longer now.

I took his hand, laying my palm against his wrist until our pulses aligned. It was an old healer's trick—when all medicine failed, sometimes a cherished touch could persuade a fading heart to match the stronger, faster beat of its beloved. I might not be Ulther's nearest and dearest, but at the moment, he and I were all each other had.

I gave his wrist a gentle squeeze and softly whispered the sacred Rite of Endings:

*“End be your time, a trade in kind,
a life well-lived for peace to find.*

*Be not afraid, as shadows fade,
all pain and woe shall be unmade.*

*Now fate well-sealed shall be revealed,
for those whose worthy souls shall yield.*

*In love and calm, this holy psalm,
shall guide your soul to realm beyond.”*

As the final word fell from my lips, a crackle of energy passed between us, a static shock that made every hair on my arms stand on end.

The King's knobby fingers seized mine. No longer was he feeble and frail—his grip was an iron shackle that chained me at his side.

His eyes flew open, already on me, like he'd been watching me even in sleep. Dark, deep-sea blue. Startlingly clear. Lucid.

No—something more than lucid. Seeing more than me. Seeing *into* me.

"You," he croaked, voice hoarse from months of atrophy. "You've finally come."

I jerked backward, yanking my arm as I tried and failed to escape his hold. "No—I'm sorry. I—please, let me go."

"They told me you would come for me."

"What? Who?"

"They told me your blood would shatter our stone and lay waste to our borders."

I shushed him, trying to soothe his outburst. The poor man was delusional—lost to hallucinations. "Everything's alright. I'm not going to hurt you."

His skin began to light with an unnatural glow. Floating an inch above his head, a circular form took shape—a wispy black ringlet of thorny vines, speckled throughout by twinkling stars, rising to a single peak above his brow. It was a stunning, ethereal thing made not of tangible materials, but of light and shadow itself.

The Crown of Lumnos.

The King gasped, his grip on me tightening. "I am not afraid, Devourer of Crowns. Ravager of Realms. Herald of Vengeance."

Oh, he was definitely delusional.

I stroked his arm, cooing softly. "Your nephew, Prince Luther—I'll go get him. Just—let go of my hand, alright?"

"*Luther*," he breathed. Brighter and brighter he blazed, like the final flare of a dying star. His eyes bulged wide, the vivid color of his irises dulling to a muted, dusky smoke.

His throat made a strangled noise, and his voice abruptly changed. It sounded older—so much older. Impossibly older.

Unearthly.

And unmistakably... female.

“Give him our gift, Daughter of the Forgotten. When the end has come, and the blood has spilled, give our gift to my faithful heir, and tell him this is my command.”

The King’s back arched, his chest rising at a sharp, unnatural angle before collapsing back onto the bed. His hand went limp, finally releasing me from his grasp.

My heart thundered with foreboding unease. I staggered backward and tripped over a nearby chair that sent me crashing to the ground and Brecke’s blade tumbling out of its sheath and clattering across the stone floor. I grabbed it and clutched it defensively in front of me.

The King took a shuddering breath—a rattling, punchy exhale, the kind I’d only ever heard when death was imminent.

The glow faded from his skin, along with what little color he had left. His pallor turned ashen, his expression contorted in agony, mouth fixed wide in a silent scream.

“Blessed Kindred, what did you do?”

One of the guards now stood in the open doorway. His horrified gaze jumped between me and the King.

Oh, this is bad.

“Nothing,” I said quickly, scrambling to my feet. “It—it happens sometimes. When death is near, they can—”

“What’s going on here?”

Luther’s voice.

So bad. So, so bad.

He and two more guards appeared in the main salon, staring at my hands.

My quivering hands, clinging to a Fortosian steel dagger with white-knuckled fear.

To someone who had just walked in, it surely looked like I’d been about to do something evil. Something treasonous.

“Nothing happened,” I protested. “*Nothing*. He just—it was nothing.”

Luther pushed his way past the guards to Ulther’s side. He took one look at the King’s pained expression, then yanked back the blankets and searched his body for wounds.

“I didn’t hurt him,” I blurted out. “Your guard surprised me, that’s all.”

“I heard voices,” the guard cut in. “There was yelling and a struggle.” He pointed to the overturned chair at my feet and glared at me.

“A struggle?” I shook my head frantically. “I swear, I didn’t do anything!”

I shot Luther a pleading look, but the dark suspicion I’d seen the night before at the armory had reappeared in his eyes.

The worst part of it all was that it *hurt*. He had no reason to believe me—plenty of reason not to, in fact—but in that moment, seeing Luther glare at me like I’d murdered a defenseless, dying man felt like he had been the one to drive a blade into *my* chest. For a moment, just a moment, I’d stupidly believed we might have been something like friends.

My throat burned, and I hated myself for it.

I channeled my hurt into ire, hiding my wounded heart behind a scowl. “I didn’t even want to be here. You begged me to come, remember?”

No one spoke.

Luther silently finished checking the King’s body as I glared at the wall, blinking rapidly to fight back the emotions squeezing at my chest. Once satisfied the King was unharmed, Luther paused. His features pinched as he started toward me.

“Dien—”

“That’s *Miss Bellator* to you,” I snapped, still refusing to meet his eyes. “Arrest me or let me leave. I don’t want anything to do with this palace or anyone in it ever again.”

A long beat of silence passed.

“You’re free to go,” he said quietly.

I shoved past him and out of the room, storming through the long corridors. At the sound of his footsteps echoing behind me, I had to fight the instinct to run, settling for a hurried jog down the winding staircase of the foyer, two steps at a time.

As I approached the main entry, I caught the eye of the guard I’d brought to his knees on my first formal visit. He took one look at the knife still clutched in my hand and stepped toward me with a vengeful sneer.

“Touch her, and I’ll rip off your fucking arms.”

His face paled at the boom of Luther’s voice across the marble foyer. The guard’s gaze flicked over my shoulder, then back to me. He shrank back to his post, but if his glare had been a weapon, my entrails would have been decorating the chandelier above our heads.

My furious pace continued outside and down the entryway steps. Even the splash of crisp morning air couldn’t soothe the simmering eruption

barely contained beneath my skin.

My heart felt raw in a way I didn't understand. Why should I care what Luther thought of me? He was a Descended, and the Descended were my enemies. Just because I wasn't ready to slaughter them in cold blood like the Guardians didn't mean we could ever be allies.

It certainly didn't mean we could ever be something more.

I slammed the door on that thought as hard as I could. I needed to get far away from here and never, *ever* come back.

I broke into a run, flying past the palace gates and down the secluded pebbled path that led along the walls of the royal grounds toward Mortal City. I was nearly to the main road when Luther's voice rang out behind me.

"Diem, wait."

"You don't get to call me that," I snapped, refusing to slow.

"Will you please stop running?"

"Go freeze in hell."

A hand closed around my wrist and pulled.

The abrupt change in momentum jerked me back, crashing me into his chest as our paths collided. My muscles moved in a contradiction of training and instinct, one hand raising the knife between us while the other clutched onto him as my balance wobbled backward. Luther's arm curled around my waist, tucking me securely against him.

A million angry words shot to my lips, then vanished at the press of his hand low on my spine.

"Five minutes, Diem. Give me that much."

He was breathing too heavy—we both were, our chests brushing with every rise.

I masked my fluster with a withering glare. "I said you don't get to call me that."

His lips hooked up. "Then I guess we're both bad at following orders." He glanced at the dagger hovering near his neck. "Are you going to put that away?"

"Oh, I think it's fine right where it is." I matched his smirk, mine considerably colder. "A girl can't be too careful. There's all manner of monsters in this part of town."

His eyes gleamed. "You have no idea."

I tried to pull away, but he matched every step I yielded until my back flattened against the high stone wall. He arched his neck forward, jaw rising

to allow the blade's edge to brush the vulnerable flesh of his throat as the thrill of a challenge lit up his face.

I scowled and forced my hand to hold its ground. "If this is your apology, it's a strange way to do it."

"I didn't come here to apologize. *Of course* I suspected you. Can you blame me?"

No, I couldn't—not really. Not when I'd even doubted myself.

"It would be an insult to dismiss you so easily, and I wouldn't dare do you that disrespect. I recognize a threat when I see one." His gaze roamed a languid path down my body, his assessing stare making me feel as thoroughly touched and as intimately exposed as the day he'd searched me for weapons. "And you're as dangerous as they come."

"Then why *are* you here, Luther?"

His eyes snapped back to mine, his lips parting, but he didn't answer.

I could take his life in an instant. A single twitch of my wrist, and three inches of Fortosian steel would slice his most crucial artery wide open. A gruesome, messy death, but a quick one. Too quick for even his Descended healing to save him. On this isolated path where few had reason to travel, his body might not be found for hours, maybe days. By then, all trace of me would be long gone.

And yet...

The way he studied me with such fixation, riveted by my every movement, my every breath. The way his hold on me greedily tightened, even though the muscled barrier of his body left nowhere else for me to go. The way every time I blinked, his face seemed closer. Closer. *Closer*.

Even holding his life in my hands, I felt less like the predator than the prey.

"If you think I'm such a threat," I said, the huskiness of my voice revealing more than I'd intended, "perhaps I should take you out now while I have the chance. Kill you before you kill me."

"Do it," he said, no trace of hesitation.

He lowered his head, forcing the knife's honed edge into his flesh before I could stop it. My breath hitched as a trickle of warm liquid slid over my fingers.

Luther didn't even flinch.

"You think I fear my own death?" he whispered in my ear. "Every day I draw breath is as much a curse as a gift. I've been living on borrowed time

for longer than you can imagine. If you're the way my fate finally catches up to me, I can't fathom a more beautiful end."

Though his tone was harsh with challenge, there was a raw kind of pain beneath his words, a wounded beast howling to be seen.

"Do it," he said again. "Kill me, if that's what you think I deserve. But if you do, give me one favor before I go."

His pulse throbbed against my blood-soaked hand, his heartbeat racing to match my own.

"Favor?" I managed to ask, despite the heady fog clouding my thoughts.

Without pulling away from my dagger, he turned his face, hot breath spilling over my cheek as his mouth trailed the line of my jaw. His eyes rose to mine. "Let me die with the taste of you on my lips."

Our lips collided, and I was lost.

Lost in the grip of his strong, rough hand as it rose to gently cup my face. Lost in the palm skating down my back, over my hips, along my thigh. Lost in the rumble that vibrated from his throat, rippling through the blood that slicked my fingers.

Lost in the sweep of his tongue as he savored me, slowly and deliberately, like the most decadent dessert—like the last wish of a dying man.

Lost in the roll of his hips between my legs, and the hardness that pressed between us.

Lost in the way I hungrily arched to meet it.

I didn't even realize I'd dropped the knife until my hands were on him, roaming his body, tangling in his hair. A breathy moan slipped free from my lips, and the sound of it goaded him on, my back crushing against the stone as he wrapped me in his arms.

I'd *never* been kissed like this before. I'd never even known this was what a kiss could be.

And that scared me even more than a blade to the throat.

Adrenaline set my veins alight. I fumbled for my training, racking my brain for some pertinent lesson on how to fight off an enemy you couldn't seem to resist, but the only words of my father's that surfaced were utterly useless and horrifyingly mad: *The truth is that I just knew.*

With more effort than I was ready to confess, I slid my palms to Luther's chest and shoved him back.

"I don't know who you think I am," I panted as I tried to piece my anger back together from its shattered fragments. "There are plenty of people in Mortal City who will happily spread their legs for a rich Descended suitor, but I am not one of them."

He couldn't have looked more disgusted if he tried. "*That's* what you think this is? Is your opinion of me truly so low?"

Something dark passed over his face. I forced my attention away—down to the bloody handprints coating his chest, his arms, his jaw, their scarlet streaks following the line of his scar.

"How should I know?" I said, shrugging like it meant nothing. Like that kiss—that fucking *kiss*—had meant nothing. "You're practically a stranger. You've never shown me any side of you that's real."

He fell preternaturally still. Any remaining shards of his icy veneer melted away under the heat of his rising temper, that blazing soul of his now burning beautifully, fearsomely unchecked.

The realization hit me like a punch to the gut. All this time, I'd dismissed Luther as someone ice-cold and heartless, too frosty to feel anything true.

But Luther wasn't cold at all.

Luther was an *inferno*.

Looking at him now was like staring in a mirror in the worst kind of way. I hid behind false bravado and snarky jokes, while Luther's shield was forged with brooding stares and clenched jaws—but inside, we were one and the same.

Inside, we rattled the bars keeping us trapped in lives we didn't choose. Inside, we roared with an insatiable craving for more. Inside, we paced and we planned and we waited.

Inside, we *burned*.

"You know, Diem," he growled, "I've spent a great deal of time thinking about you, wondering if you're the best liar I've ever met or the worst. I think I finally know the answer." He placed his palms flat against the wall, ensnaring me between his arms. "The only person you're good at lying to is yourself."

My anger forged back together with a sizzling crack. "How dare y—"

"Tell me you don't feel it." Sapphire sparks ignited in his gaze as the energy surrounding us fluttered in a matching rhythm. "Look me in the eyes, and tell me you don't feel my magic."

Though no trace of ghostly light or deadly shadow spilled from his hands, I might as well have been drowning in it. The hum of his magic was a sword swung in the darkness, an ominous storm you couldn't yet see but felt brewing in the wind. It was everywhere and nowhere, infusing the very air itself, holding me in its grasp and caressing my skin like a thousand hands.

The *voice* in my chest purred in recognition.

"Go ahead," he breathed. "Lie to me. I already know the answer. I know you feel my power." His chin rose, our lips so very, very close. "Because I can feel yours, too."

No.

No.

He smirked. "You're no more mortal than I am."

"No," I whispered. Argued. Bellowed. Begged. "You're wrong. You're—you're mistaken."

"Diem, if you're scared of the progeny laws—"

"I'm not scared. You're just... wrong. I feel nothing, and neither do you."

He pulled back enough to meet my panicked stare, his disappointment so thick I could almost taste it—sour and long since spoiled. With a heavy sigh and sinking shoulders, he stepped away, letting his hands fall to his sides.

"If that's what you really want," he said quietly. Sadly.

What you really want...

There was so much I wanted. So gods-damned much. So much I couldn't have—not without risking everyone and everything I loved. Not without sacrificing myself in the process. But how could someone like Luther ever understand that?

"I... I have to go," I stammered. "My family..."

His head dipped. "You should know I won't enforce your mother's bargain. That's between her and me. It's not your burden to bear."

"But my brother—"

"It's not his burden, either. He can finish his schooling—I'll make sure of it."

Something ached in my chest.

I should have been glad to hear it. Instead, I felt... confused. Too raw and brutally laid-bare. He'd stolen all my certainty with his lips, and now

the only thing left of me were questions I wasn't strong enough to answer.

I couldn't seem to force myself to leave—and neither could his magic. The tendrils of his potent presence wound around my limbs and hovered, as if yearning to draw me closer, but holding back.

“Be the palace healer,” he said, his voice rough. “Take the role back from Maura. Not because of your mother or the bargain. Because I’m asking you to. Because I need—”

“I’m quitting my job as a healer,” I blurted out.

I’d known it the second I saw the explosions from my kitchen window, but I hadn’t dared admit it until now. Saying the words aloud made them real. Final.

The expression that gripped his features looked so much like that first morning in the palace, when he’d watched Lily collapse in his arms. “What? Why?”

I couldn’t explain to him what I didn’t entirely understand myself. I was overcome with regret over my broken vows and my role in the Guardians’ attack, but it was about more than that.

Something had shifted in my soul. The wind was changing course, pushing my sails on a new, uncertain path, and though I didn’t know how or why, I felt powerless to stop it.

More than that—I didn’t *want* to stop it.

“It’s something I have to do for myself.”

“Then... I’m not likely to see you again.”

“No,” I agreed. “Not likely.”

He nodded stiffly, his back straightening. As his magic retreated, its wisps traced the contours of my face, my lashes fluttering at its tender touch. Its warm energy clung to my skin until, at the last possible moment, it fell away.

I took a step back, drawing in a deep breath for what felt like the first time in minutes.

“Goodbye, Prince,” I murmured.

He smiled, and it was the saddest smile I’d ever seen. “Goodbye, Miss Bellator.”

I turned and walked away.

When I was almost out of sight, his voice called out again. “You saw it too, didn’t you?”

I stopped, but I didn’t look back.

“Last night,” he said, “right before the roof collapsed. The vision. The battlefield.”

I couldn’t move, my body paralyzed, my thoughts stunned to stillness.

“What if our story isn’t over, Diem Bellator? What if it’s only beginning?”

Like in the vision, an exquisite ache swelled in the left side of my chest. Without thinking, my hand rose and pressed against it.

I hesitated, then stole a fleeting glance back. Luther’s own palm lay flat below his left shoulder, a plea in his eyes.

I couldn’t give him the answer I knew he wanted. Our worlds were too distant, our goals too aligned with each other’s destruction. If we ever met on a battlefield, surely it was destined to be as enemies, not allies. But there was one olive branch I could offer—a weapon I never should have put into play to begin with.

“There’s a hole in the exterior wall of the palace gardens,” I said. “Hidden under the ivy on the southeast corner. Repair it as soon as you can—today, if possible.”

He nodded, his expression turning stormy once more.

I finally turned my back and ran, feet pounding against the long gravel path to Mortal City. Though I knew from the silence in my wake that he hadn’t followed me, I couldn’t shake the feeling of Luther’s piercing gaze searing into my back every step of the way.

Chapter
Thirty

Maura took the news better than anticipated.

I had expected anger or perhaps tears. I'd thought she might lecture me or yell at me or tell me how ashamed my mother would be. I'd thought—rather embarrassingly, in hindsight—that she might even fall on her knees and beg me to stay.

Instead, she'd looked relieved.

Not relieved to lose me—my absence, so soon after my mother's, would put a strain on the center's resources, and the trainees would need to speed their progression to full healers—but relieved that I was choosing to follow my heart, even if it led me into the misty unknown.

She put on a steaming kettle of tea, and we sat in the back room for hours, sharing stories of my childhood growing up around the center, teasing each other about old patient visits gone terribly awry, and weeping over memories of my mother.

She didn't ask me what I planned to do next. Perhaps she sensed I didn't yet know the answer.

And though her warm caramel eyes glittered with questions, she also didn't ask about my swollen just-kissed lips, or the crusted blood coating my hands, or the tunic I wore that clearly belonged to a man.

When the tea had gone cold and the afternoon began its gentle roll into evening, I washed myself up, and we said our goodbyes. We hugged so tightly I could barely breathe, and through tears, we promised to stay closely in touch.

As I walked away from the center for what might be the last time, a fragment of my heart remained lodged within those four stone walls, forever to stay.



HENRI WAS A DIFFERENT STORY ENTIRELY.

I'd been standing on the rickety wooden porch of his home for the better part of an hour, staring at his door and trying to scrape together the courage to knock.

Every time I thought I had a plan for what I might say, the questions I might ask and the answers I might offer, I'd raise my fist to the door. Then, right as my knuckles grazed the chipped white paint, every thought would eddy from my mind like the low tide.

On what must have been the twentieth attempt, I thought I'd finally figured out the exact right words in the exact right order. I blew out a sharp breath as I pulled my shoulders back. My fist rose to eye level, and—

“Diem?”

I spun on my heel. Henri stood several feet behind me, arms loaded with overflowing satchels of packages neatly wrapped in sandy paper and tied with twine.

Our eyes met.

Empty. My head went completely empty.

He lumbered up the stairs and dumped his bags against the front stoop. Brows pinched, he leaned a shoulder against the wall and shoved his hands into his pockets, his stony expression giving away nothing.

His eyes skimmed over my body and paused on the pants Luther's cousin had dressed me in.

“So you're wearing a Royal Guard uniform now?”

“My clothes were destroyed in the fire.”

He frowned, concern slipping through a crack in his dour mood.

“Were you injured?”

“No. I mean, I don't think so.”

“You're not sure?”

“I was unconscious.”

“Are you hurt now?”

“No. I'm fine.”

His features hardened. “So you weren't injured, but you slept at the palace and played dress-up with the Royal Guard?”

I flinched and looked down. My fingers nervously toyed with the sleeve of the tunic—Luther's tunic. A deep breath had his woodsy scent filling my nose.

“You shouldn’t have run,” he said flatly. “You made things so much worse.”

“Seems to be a trend for me,” I mumbled.

“You lied to Vance’s face. To *my* face. You pretended to be with us and took off as soon as I let you go. Do you know how that looks?”

I gritted my teeth. “I wasn’t your prisoner. You had no right to stop me in the first place.”

“I was trying to keep you from doing something I knew you would regret.”

“What I regret is ever joining the Guardians in the first place.”

His head jerked back. “One night at the palace and suddenly you’re on *their* side?”

“Of course I’m not, but the Guardians’ methods went too far.” I shook my head. “People died last night, Henri. They died horrible, painful deaths.”

“Mortals die horrible, painful deaths every day at the hands of the Descended.”

“And that’s wrong, too. No one deserves that, mortal or Descended.”

“Evrin Benette deserves it. That King deserves it. They’re bad people, and they deserve to pay for what they’ve done. The sooner they’re gone from this world, the safer every mortal will be.”

“But *they* aren’t the ones who died last night. The guards who were killed were just doing their jobs—”

“And the executioner who kills children under the progeny laws is just doing his job. The soldiers who slaughtered mortals in the Blood War were doing their jobs. The army assassins who round up and kill every Guardian they can find are just doing their jobs. And none of them are going to stop until we force them to face consequences.”

“If the Guardians hurt innocent people to get power, they’re no better than the Descended.”

“*No better than the Descended?*” He drew back in disgust. “How can you even say that? The Descended are monsters, Diem. The Guardians are trying to protect our people and take back what they stole from us.”

“I know you trust them, but...” I winced and rubbed at my temples to soothe the sharp, pounding headache that had begun to form. “Henri, I think they poisoned that Benette girl to arrange the call for a healer.”

He looked away, a shadow passing over his features. I’d seen that look on him before, and it struck me deathly still.

“Tell me you didn’t know about that.”

He pulled his hands from his pockets and stood straight, but his gaze remained distant, lips pressed tight.

“Henri.”

No response.

“By the Undying fucking Fire, Henri, tell me you didn’t send me into that home knowing a little girl was poisoned just so I could—”

“She was fine,” he snapped. “It was only deathshade.”

I gaped at him, breathless. “You *knew*?”

“She was only ill for a day. We knew you could treat it and she wouldn’t face any real risk.”

“Deathshade can be lethal if it’s eaten. If any of it had gotten into her food or in her mouth—”

His eyes blazed with rage, his cheeks flushing an angry scarlet. “They’ve killed thousands of our children. *Thousands*.”

“And you think that justifies the Guardians hurting theirs?”

“She’s fine now, isn’t she? It was a calculated risk, and you have no idea how many lives it will save. We set Benette’s shipments back for months. We recovered enough weapons to arm half the rebel cells in Emarion. If one spoiled Descended child had to have a mild rash for a day so thousands of mortals could live, how can you say that’s not a price worth paying?”

I glared at him, working my jaw. “You should have told me. I never would have done that mission if I’d known—”

“What did you think the Guardians do, Diem?” he exploded, veins straining on his neck. “Did you think we would hold hands and sing tavern songs? Did you think we would take the Descended down through the gods-damned *power of friendship*?”

“More violence can’t be the right solution.”

“It’s the *only* solution!” He slammed his fist against the wall, tiny cracks webbing out from the point of impact. His voice and his shoulders shook with roiling fury. “In all of mortal history, violence is the only thing that’s ever worked. Every right that we have, we’ve had to scrape and claw and kill for. People with power don’t give it away out of the kindness of their hearts. They do it when we leave them no other choice. When they fear what we’ll do to them if they don’t. And they sure as hell aren’t giving

us our homeland back unless we have a knife to their throat—a knife that can actually make them bleed.”

Images of Luther flashed in my head—my blade at his neck, his blood on my hands. His lips on my mouth.

Henri seized my chin in his hand and tilted my face up to make me look at him, his expression feverish. “Tell me I’m wrong, Diem. Tell me you honestly believe we can win this war without bloodshed.”

I couldn’t.

And I knew from the grim satisfaction that washed over him that he could see it on my face.

He released me and let loose a shaky breath as he carved a hand down the back of his neck, suddenly looking world-weary and exhausted.

“I love you, Diem. And I am not blaming you for this, but your mother kept you away from the Descended, and your father’s history means your family has never been targeted. You have been protected from them your whole life. But the rest of us haven’t.”

I looked down, cheeks burning. “I know that.”

I did know. There was hardly a family in all of Lumnos that hadn’t been touched by some kind of tragedy or injustice at the hands of the Descended.

I saw the evidence of it every time I walked through Mortal City and saw mourning flags in too many windows. I saw it every time I treated an impoverished patient who had to risk their life for food or when I passed by the mass graveyards full of tombstones from the Blood War. I saw it every time I looked into Henri’s eyes, where the loss of his mother had cut a permanent scar.

An arm slid around my waist as he pulled me close. My body stiffened instinctively at the movement. I tried desperately to shutter the awareness of how Luther had done the same thing, and how my body had had a very different reaction.

I rolled my shoulders, forcing my muscles to relax. *This is where I’m meant to be*, I reminded myself. *This is where I belong*.

Henri tapped a knuckle on the tip of my nose. “You have a big heart, D. You want everyone to be safe and happy, no matter who they are. But you have no idea how bad it is out there. Here in Lumnos, things are peaceful enough, but some of the things the other rebel cells are dealing with...”

I watched him for a moment, the way his jaw worked with the tension of barely suppressed rage. “I want to know,” I prodded.

“Do you know how they cleared the mortals out when Ignios closed its borders?”

“I heard they went to Umbros.”

“A few of the lucky ones made it out, yes, but the King of Ignios doesn’t trust the Umbros Queen. He didn’t want the Ignios mortals giving up any information to her on his defenses. He had his guards flush them out into the dunes, and...” The murderous rage that flashed in his eyes sent a chill down my spine. “His guards stood there for a week while the mortals cooked to death under the sun. They begged for their lives, and he wouldn’t even use his fire magic to give them a quick death. He called it punishment for the Blood War.”

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head at the monstrous cruelty.

“Even that’s a kinder end than what the mortals of Sophos get. Do you know what happens to the mortals who get ‘invited’ to research at their institutes?”

“Are you saying they don’t get to study?”

“They do. For a while.” His voice soured. “Have you ever met a mortal who has studied in Sophos? Have you ever even heard of a mortal returning to their realm after visiting?”

I frowned. “Well, no, but—”

“Because they never do. There’s always some reason—an illness, or a tragic accident, or their families at home die a mysterious death so they have no reason to go back. No mortal who goes in to Sophos ever comes out.”

“Why would they do that? If they don’t want mortals there, why invite them in the first place?”

He chewed on the inside of his cheek and studied my face, seeming to debate how much to reveal. “When the mortals have outlived their usefulness doing the research, they... *become* the research.”

A sickening lump formed in my gut. “I don’t understand.”

“The Descended experiment on them. They put them in cages and run tests on them. Sometimes with medicine, and sometimes with magic or weapons.”

I fought to claw air into my lungs. The thought of Teller going there—how thrilled he would have been to receive an invitation. How proud I

would have been that he was among the brilliant chosen few.

Gods, I had been praying for it for *years*.

How could it be possible that so much evil was occurring yet I knew so little of it? This morning at the palace—I'd sympathized with Luther, even with the King. I'd *pitied* them. Held their hands. Had I truly been so blind? Had I not seen the face of evil staring right at me?

I pulled away and pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes as I paced. My head was churning, my stomach reeling. "I need some time to think. It's been a long day."

"You're telling me," he scoffed. "I spent all day trying to convince the Guardians not to put a knife in your back before you could betray us. I told them you were only trying to do your job as a healer, but they're not happy."

"I'm not exactly thrilled with them, either," I mumbled.

"You need to take this seriously, Diem. I don't need to remind you they can be very dangerous if provoked."

"So the Guardians are coming after me now?"

He hesitated. "They're going to want some kind of assurance you're not going to reveal anything."

"Well, I'm not. You tell Vance and his *Brothers* that I have no interest in anyone else dying because of me. Everything I learned there—consider it forgotten."

"It's not that simple. Your word alone might not be enough."

I cocked my head, gaze narrowing. "What are you saying, Henri?"

He opened his mouth and paused, his darkened expression once again betraying that there was some truth he didn't want to reveal. "Just lie low for now, alright? Stay away from the Descended. Don't go into Lumnos City, and whatever you do, don't go near the palace."

I waved him off. "Fine. I have no reason to ever go back there again anyway."

A faint twinge of sadness stung at my chest.

We stood in silence for several painful minutes, each avoiding the other's eyes, slowly boiling alive in the uncomfortable heat of all that had happened between us these past months.

The childhood love we'd once shared had been simple and pure. We'd chased each other in the forests, picked wild berries and swam naked in the sea, teased each other and imagined the great journeys we might take

together one day. I wanted more than anything to get back to that effortless joy, but the harder I reached for it, the further it seemed to float away, a shrinking point on the sunset horizon.

If I didn't have being a healer, and I didn't have Henri, what was left of me? Who would I become?

"Henri, what if..." I swallowed once, then twice. "What if we left Mortal City? We could start over somewhere fresh, far away from this mess."

His large brown eyes blinked in surprise.

"We could go to Umbros," I suggested, "maybe even save up some money to leave Emarion. Things might be better elsewhere—they have to be."

"You want to run away?" he asked, frowning.

"It's not running away," I said defensively. "It's finally starting our life together, just like you wanted. A life that belongs only to us. Away from the Guardians, and the Descended and..."

And Prince Luther.

I bit down hard. "We used to talk about doing this all the time, remember? Going off and having a grand adventure together—"

"Sure, when we were *children*."

"And now we're adults, and we can do more than talk about it."

I was rambling now, my words picking up their pace like I might outrun the truth if I could just move quickly enough. I rushed forward and fisted my hands in his shirt. "We could find a cute home on the water or maybe a townhouse in one of the bigger cities. You could get work as a courier. I... I could train healers."

I nodded to myself. Yes—I could do that, at least. I could pass along my knowledge, teach the trainees to be good and honest and loyal. All the things I'd failed at being.

"I have a life here, Diem. I have my father and my work at the post office. And so do you—you really want to leave Teller here alone, after what I just told you?"

"I'll tell him about Sophos, and he can come visit us all the time. Besides, Teller won't be alone, Father will be here with him."

Henri's throat bobbed, and his eyes shifted to the side.

I froze.

Another secret. Another lie.

“Henri?” He wouldn’t look at me. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He gently pried my fingers from his chest and pulled my hands away. “You might not know your father as well as you believe you do. He’s not the hero you think.”

The bitterness to his tone rankled my protective pride. “I know you don’t agree with what he did in the army, but he fought for the mortals against the Descended in his own way.”

“You can’t really believe he’s opposed to the Descended.” He gave me an exasperated look, and when I only frowned, he threw up his arms. “Your father belongs to them, Diem. He’s a Descended puppet. He does whatever they tell him to.”

“A puppet?” I jerked back a step. “How dare you, Henri—my father is a good man.”

“How dare I?” He gave a harsh laugh. “Did he tell you he’s being recalled to the army?”

“He—what?”

“The order came through last week. They’re assigning him to lead a contingent against the rebel cell in Meros. He’s going to be killing mortals just like me. Just like *you*.”

I shook my head—slowly, then desperately. “He’s retired, they can’t force him back into service. Perhaps they asked, but he must have declined it. He would have told me if he was leaving.”

“He already sent back his acceptance. Brecke delivered it himself. Your father said he would report there by the end of the month.”

“You’re wrong. You’re *wrong*.” I gripped onto the porch railing as my knees turned liquid. “He wouldn’t do that to us. Not after losing Mother.”

“Andrei chose *them*, Diem. He chose the Descended over you and Teller, your mother, and all his own people. If you don’t believe me, go ask him. He can’t hide it from you much longer anyway.”

I desperately searched his features for any shred of uncertainty. “Maybe you’re mistaken. Maybe—maybe it’s a miscommunication. It’s possible, isn’t it?”

He gave me a tight smile. “Sure. Maybe. Go home and ask him.” But his eyes, so guarded and full of pity, told me he already knew what truth I’d find.

Chapter

Thirty-One

I had walked the path to my family home a thousand times over the course of my life, and every one of them had been a relief.

Of course there had been times where I'd been quarreling with Teller or avoiding a confrontation with one of my parents, but our little cottage on the marsh had always been my safe harbor, the one place where I was loved and truly accepted.

Even in the aftermath of my mother's disappearance, when her empty chair was a constant and horribly painful reminder of her absence, our house remained a place of hope—a lighthouse in the dark, stormy sea that might someday draw her safely back home.

Until today.

Today, for the first time, every step felt like a steady march into the frozen tundra of hell.

Everything was wrong. *Everything.*

My career was over. I had no prospects to replace it and, thanks to my penchant for taking on the center's most indigent clients, no savings.

The Guardians now saw me as an enemy. Though I had brushed off Henri's warnings, I had to admit I was frightened. I knew too well the lengths they were willing to go to stop anyone they deemed a threat.

I wasn't ready to give up on my goal of taking down the Descended. The murder I'd witnessed in Paradise Row had struck a match in me that couldn't be snuffed. I felt a calling from the deepest pits of my soul that this was a war I was meant to fight, a blood debt I was born to repay, but I refused to stoop to the Guardians' level to do it. I'd find my own way to bring justice to Emarion—even if I had to do it alone.

But it wasn't just *my* future that worried me.

Teller's dream was dead, and he didn't even know it. He'd spent his life studying to be the best and brightest in the hopes the final payoff would be an invitation to Sophos. That was the only outcome that might have

made walking away from Lily worth the pain. Learning the truth now would destroy him.

My father was about to march off to war. Growing up, I'd eagerly devoured every crumb of his thrilling tales of battle, but the threats in those stories had existed only in his memories and my imagination. The enemies he now faced were very real—and very well-armed, thanks to me.

My mother was still missing, and I was no closer to finding her than I'd ever been. With the door closed on my access to the palace, my hope of finding answers was slim, at best.

And Luther...

What he'd said. What he'd done.

What I'd *felt*.

I waded through my messy, complicated thoughts of him as I trudged through the door. All I wanted was to slump into the nearest armchair and surrender to exhaustion and the throbbing headache I couldn't seem to shake, but one look at my father, seated at the kitchen table with hands clasped and hard lines on his brow, stopped me in my tracks.

"Sit down."

I recognized that tone. That steel in his eyes, the stiffness of his shoulders.

The voice of the Commander.

I knew better than to put up a fight when he was like this. He would be obeyed, one way or another.

Wordlessly, I pulled out the chair across from him and sank into it.

"I learned some interesting things today."

So did I, I thought, though my lips remained firmly shut.

"I went to Lumnos City last night to find you, but no mortals were being let through. Then I went to the healers' center, thinking you would wait there to be called for, but you never returned. So I assumed you had come home, but you were not here, either."

I shifted in my seat.

"It reminded me so much of a different day when I scoured this city searching for another missing member of our family."

My eyes dropped guiltily. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"Turns out my worry was unfounded, since you were in such good hands at the palace."

I stared at the table with rapt fascination, focus fixed anywhere but on him.

“You may not know this Diem, but I have quite a bit of experience with the royal family. King Ulther often called on me when tensions rose between the Descended and the mortals.”

I frowned slightly. I hadn’t known that. Neither he nor Mother ever spoke of it, and Luther had never mentioned my father’s name.

“For nearly two decades, I’ve worked with the King and his advisors to keep the peace here in Lumnos. I’ve helped him stop many uprisings with the rebels, and I spoke in his favor when there was discontent in Mortal City.”

Your father belongs to them, Diem. He’s a Descended puppet. He does whatever they tell him to.

“And in all of that time, I was never allowed any further into the palace than a sitting room. I was never invited to dine there or offered the services of their staff. And I was certainly never, ever received as an *overnight guest*.”

I started to speak, and he raised a hand to cut me off, then pulled an envelope from his shirt pocket.

“So imagine my surprise,” he said, his voice growing louder and angrier with every word, “when I received a letter, hand-written from Prince Luther himself, telling me that my daughter was recovering in his *personal* care and assuring me he would see to it that she would receive the ‘*very best treatment Emarion has to offer*.’”

“He was only being kind—”

“Luther Corbois is many things, but kind is not one of them.”

An irrational urge to defend Luther shot through me, and I had to bite my tongue to keep the words in. “Perhaps the royals only wanted to repay your serv—”

“I’m not finished,” Father snapped.

My lips pressed closed.

He ripped the letter from the envelope and held it up to read. “The Prince went on to commend me for raising a daughter who was, in his words, ‘*so courageous and so selfless that she ran into a burning building to save the lives of two guards mere seconds before its collapse*.’” He slapped the paper down and leaned forward, his palms curling into fists. “You told me you were going there to heal the injured.”

“I was—I did.”

“What part of healing involves running into burning buildings?”

I couldn’t tell him the truth—that I had saved those guards because of guilt, not courage. That I’d nearly let myself burn alongside them for the same reason.

“The guards were injured,” I said quickly. “They needed help to get out.”

“And *you* were the only one who could help them? A mortal, who could have died in a thousand different ways?”

“I’m fine now, aren’t I?”

His dark walnut eyes narrowed on me. “If only that had been the end of the letter.”

Dread began to take root. I cleared my throat, squirming uneasily in my chair.

“The Prince also mentioned what a great debt he owes to you—” I closed my eyes, knowing the damning words coming next. “—for saving Lilian’s life in your work as the new palace healer.”

My head fell back to rest against the hard wooden spine of the chair. *Luther, you fool.*

“Are you out of your Flaming mind? I hardly know what to yell at you for first!”

“We could put them all in a hat, and you could pick one,” I muttered.

I jumped at the crack of his hand crashing into the table. “This isn’t a joke, Diem.”

My eyes flew open, my spine straightening. “No, Father, it’s not a joke. It’s my life. *My* life—not yours.”

“Your mother and I have made great sacrifices to protect you from those people all these years, and you’ve thrown it all away.”

“I never should have been protected. Why should I be spared while every other mortal in the realm suffers?”

“So now you wish to suffer?”

“What I *wish*,” I hissed, “is to live my own life by my own choices. It’s time you start trusting me to decide what’s best for myself.”

His knuckles blanched with the strain of his clenched fists. “How long have you been working at the palace?”

“A few weeks.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I gritted my teeth. “Well you’re reacting to it so calmly now, it’s a wonder why I ever thought you might be ups—”

“You took your mother’s role as palace healer?”

“Yes.”

“Why? I thought Maura was handling it.”

“At the time, I thought Teller would lose his place at the Descended school if a Bellator didn’t fulfill the bargain.”

“What bargain?”

“The bargain Mother made to serve the palace in exchange for Teller’s admission to the academy.”

A mix of emotions flickered across my father’s face, but the clearest one was surprise. I sat up straighter, frowning at him. Did he really not know about Mother’s agreement?

“You said ‘at the time’—what does that mean? What changed?”

“Luther forgave the bargain this morning. Teller can finish his schooling even if I don’t work at the palace.”

“Why would he do that?”

A loaded question.

I looked down at the old oak table and ran my fingertip along its grooves. “I don’t know.”

“The royals never do anything that isn’t in their own interests. What did the Prince have to gain?”

“You saw the letter. He thinks he owes me a debt.”

“They don’t care about debts to mortals. They believe they’re entitled to our service as a matter of right. Why would you be any different?”

“You’re the expert on Luther,” I grumbled under my breath, “why don’t you tell me?”

Again his fists pounded against the tabletop, startling me and snapping my gaze back to his.

“Who is Lilian?”

“Luther’s sister, the Princess.”

“What happened with her?”

“There was an incident at the palace. Some children were injured, and Maura and I were called to help. I treated Lily—”

He stiffened.

I knew instantly I’d made a very, very big mistake.

“How old is this Lily?” he asked softly.

I winced. “Sixteen.”

Red exploded across his face.

“*Teller*,” he bellowed. “Get in here.”

Teller came slinking out of the hallway almost immediately—quickly enough for me to know he must have been eavesdropping just out of sight. He scowled at me with a blend of betrayal and panic.

Father pointed a quivering finger in his direction. “Tell me this is a misunderstanding, son. Tell me you have not been courting the *gods-damned royal Princess of Lumnos*.”

“He’s not courting her—”

“I’m talking to your brother,” Father snarled at me. “I’ll deal with you and *your* choices in a minute.”

Fight.

No. *No, no, no, no, no.*

I tried and failed to shove the *voice* down as I pushed away from the table and rose to my feet.

“Leave Teller alone,” I protested. “I was only teasing him the other night. They’re just classmates, he’s done nothing wrong.”

“You said you invited her to our home.”

“Yes, because that’s what you do with friends.”

“He will not be *friends* with the Princess of Lumnos.”

My eyes narrowed. “He’ll be friends with whoever he damn well wants to be.”

“Diem,” Teller cut in. “I can handle this.”

Father stalked around the edge of the table until he was facing me. “Have you been encouraging this madness? You’re supposed to be a role model for him.”

Fight.

“And so are you,” I snapped. My temper had become a living thing, fusing with the *voice* as it slithered and swelled. “Tell me, Father—when were you going to tell us you’re going back to the army? Today? Next week? Next month, as you’re walking out the door?”

Teller staggered backward, his confused stare jumping between the two of us.

Father’s voice went soft as death. “Who told you about that?”

“The better question is why I had to hear about it from someone else in the first place.”

“It’s true?” Teller whispered.

Guilt shadowed Father’s expression. “I wanted to discuss it with you both last night, but the explosions interrupted us.”

“Discuss it?” I laughed harshly. “You sent in your acceptance *last week*. What kind of discussion could there possibly be?”

Muscles ticked beneath his thinning beard. “The acceptance was a formality. These orders are not the kind that can be declined.”

“Screw the orders,” Teller shouted. My head jerked toward him—in my life, I’d never heard him yell at our father, never even heard him so much as raise his voice. “Mother’s gone and now you’re leaving? How could you do that to us?”

The anguish on his face shattered my heart. Teller had always been the steadiest of us—when Father retreated inward after Mother’s disappearance and I drowned myself in destructive decisions, Teller alone had stayed the course. His positive attitude, his kindness, his commitment to his schooling—none of it wavered, even in grief.

“Son,” Father started, his own voice unsteady. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Tell them no.” Teller shook his head as his eyes watered. “Tell them you can’t go. Tell them—tell them you have a child at home you have to care for.”

“You’re of adult age for a mortal. The army won’t care that you’re still in school.”

“Then just don’t go,” I joined in. “They can’t conscript you, not unless war is declared.”

“War *has* been declared.” Father’s eyes flashed angrily as they returned to me. “Last night’s attack was not an isolated incident. There have been bombings in several of the realms. The Crowns wish to stamp it out before it becomes anything worse.”

Fight.

“So you’re going to kill them?” I spat out, unable to conceal my withering judgment. “You’re going to kill our own people because the Descended told you to?”

“I am trying to keep the peace. If this goes on much longer, more of the realms may ban mortals from their borders. Thousands will die, and the restrictions we live under will get worse. If stopping a handful of rebels means preventing the destruction of our people entirely, then I’ll happily do it.”

His words sounded so similar to Henri's that it roiled my stomach. Each side was convinced they were fighting for good, each of them believing that the killings they committed were righteous and justified to prevent the deaths of innocents. How was it possible for me to love people so deeply on both sides of this war?

And what choices would we each be forced to make before it all ended?

Father gave a drawn-out sigh, slumping as the fight flooded out of him. He clamped a hand on Teller's shoulder, then did the same to me.

"I know you're both worried, but they only want me there because it will look better to have their orders coming from a mortal commander. I'll be far from any real danger."

Teller looked at me with brows raised, as if asking for permission to believe him, but my head was too crowded to offer much reassurance, the call of the *voice* now a constant, demanding rumble in my thoughts.

Fight.

Father gave Teller a good-natured jostle. "Focus on your schooling, son. I'll be back before you know it. And you..." He looked at me and placed his palm on my cheek. "I know you feel I do not trust you, my Diem, but nothing could be further from the truth. I know you'll take good care of your brother while I'm away. You'll have to take on more work at the healers' center to make ends meet in my absence, but once—"

I froze. I tried to rein in my features, but I knew from the gleam in his eyes that he'd caught on to my alarm.

"What is it?" he asked.

I stepped back until his hand fell from my face. His eyebrows sank into a deep slope.

"Diem..."

"I quit the healers' center."

Teller's mouth dropped open, and even he retreated out of Father's grasp.

Father closed his eyes, his chest expanding in a slow, controlled inhale. My muscles stiffened, as if anticipating a blow.

"Then you will go back," he said quietly, "and you will tell Maura to reinstate you."

Fight.

I steeled my jaw.

“No.”

His eyelids flew open. “Yes.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t be a healer now. I *won’t*. I did it for Mother, because it was expected of me, but... I can’t. Not anymore.”

The shaking in his fists radiated to his shoulders as he visibly struggled to contain his wrath. “Then you will marry Henri,” he gritted out. “His family can provide for you both.”

I gasped, or maybe Teller did. It was getting harder to separate what was happening in front of me from the chaos brewing inside.

Fight.

That *voice*—that wretched, angry *thing*—was pacing in frenzied strides, wringing its hands, clawing at the inside of my skin, shrieking to be unleashed, as it had done so many times before.

This time, though, felt chillingly different.

I had never been able to control the *voice* with any reliability, but I had at least been able to control myself. During its worst, most violent urgings, I could flee to the safety of solitude until my temper cooled and the *voice* returned to its slumber.

But tonight, I felt like a passenger to my own rage.

Every instinct and shade of better judgment warned me to leave, to lock myself in my room or run from the house until cooler heads prevailed. But I couldn’t run. I could not even move.

I could not do anything except...

Fight.

“Whether I will or will not marry Henri is my choice,” I shot back at him. “Not yours.”

“You gave up that choice when you walked away from being a healer.”

“The hell I did. If Mother were here, she would never let you say that to me.”

“Well she isn’t here,” he snarled, “and we’re all making sacrifices.”

“Please stop, both of you,” Teller pleaded.

“Then I’ll make some other sacrifice. I can find work in Paradise Row.”

“No daughter of mine will work as a barmaid or a prostitute. That is not up for discussion.”

Fight.

"It's not your choice." My face was burning hot, the air around me sizzling as if I'd walked right back into last night's raging inferno. "I'm a grown woman, I'm not a child anymore."

"Then stop acting like one."

"You can't—"

"*Enough*," he bellowed. Even the cutlery laying along the kitchen hutch rattled faintly at the force of his thunderous tone. "I am your father, and you will obey me."

FIGHT.

"*You are not my father!*"

The words poisoned the air like a foul odor. Lingered. Turning my stomach.

"Be that as it may," he said, his voice rough and trembling, "I am the closest thing to one that you will ever have."

FIGHT.

"Fine then," I seethed between gritted teeth. "Tell me, dear *Father*—where is our mother?"

He faltered. A subtle, almost imperceptible thing. "I don't know."

Liar.

"I don't believe you." My eyes narrowed to slits, a silvery firestorm blazing behind them. "Why did you stop looking for her, *Father*? Why have you barely lifted a finger since the day she disappeared?"

I had never seen him look so furious with me before. *Never*. I should have been terrified, but his wrath was feeding the flames of my own. My hands tingled with pulsating sensations of frost and fire.

Fight. Fight. Fight.

"Why haven't you grieved her loss, *Father*? Why do you speak as if she'll walk through that door at any moment? What do you know that we don't?"

The tingling coursed up my arms and scorched through my chest. Something crackled in my ears, and the corners of my vision went dark as the walls of the house faded from sight, leaving only the enraged man in front of me and an endless, angry darkness.

Fight.

Destroy.

Just like those weeks ago when I'd quarreled with Henri in Fortos, I was consumed with the overwhelming urge to hurt him—to crush his body and his spirit, to strike a wound so vicious he might never recover.

And so I did—with words, if not with weapons.

"Perhaps you do not look because you do not care. Perhaps *you're* the real reason she's gone."

"Diem," Teller gasped.

Father detonated, overturning the table and sending dishes and chairs scattering across the floor. "*Get out,*" he roared. "*Get out of my house!*"

"Gladly," I snarled. I shoved past Teller and across the threshold, slamming the door behind me.

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Chapter

Thirty-Two

I stormed across the patch of land surrounding the house and toward the watery marsh. Though night had fallen and the forest was barely visible under the thin wink of moonlight, the ground seemed to glow with its silvery light at my feet. I was still struggling to think, struggling to *breathe*.

Behind me, the distant call of Teller's voice yelled my name, but I couldn't stop.

My anger wasn't subsiding—it was growing. Mutating. I had completely lost control, and I had no clue what I was capable of.

I hurtled through the trees, barely noticing the sting of the wayward branches that whipped at my face. A root caught my foot and sent me crashing to my knees in a clearing near the shore.

I was hot—why was I so *hot*?

There were too many sounds.

My ragged, panting breaths. Teller's muffled voice. Something sizzling beneath my palms.

And the *voice*. It was no longer just chanting—now it was taunting me, singing to me, pleading with me, screaming at me. I clamped my hands over my ears to block it all out, but it only grew louder until it drowned out all else.

Free me, Daughter of the Forgotten.

“Diem, are you alright?” Teller's voice cut through the cacophony as he carefully approached.

I couldn't see him—the light was too blinding. Even in the dark shroud of night, it was as if the sun itself stood over me and shook its disappointed head.

“What's happening to me?” I whimpered. My fingers clawed into the damp, peaty soil, and I heard the hiss of steam. Beneath my palms, the ground had turned into a blanket of complete darkness, and for a moment I felt lost in a freefall through the evening sky, never again to land.

Far away, a shrill and inhuman cry roared through the night. An ancient sound.

A mourning—and a calling.

Release me.

The top of my head throbbed with undulating waves of pressure and pain. Slowly it began to condense and take solid form as an excruciating heat gathered in its place. And a heaviness—a colossal heft that threatened to crush my bones into stardust.

Teller cried out. “Diem, you’re—you’re—oh gods... *oh my gods...*”

Suddenly, I was screaming. My throat was scratchy and raw—perhaps I had been screaming the whole time. My connection to reality had become tenuous, my body too overwhelmed with warring sensations to separate the real from the imagined.

Claim me. I am your birthright and your destiny.

I couldn’t take it anymore.

The pain, the heat, the weight, the *voice*.

I was going to die from it. I wanted to die, if only to make it all stop.

I lifted my hands to the gods as a great beam of light shot from my palms into the heavens.

Take me, I whispered to the *voice*. *I surrender.*

All my senses narrowed in on the warmth that had gathered atop my head, and for a moment, all of existence went preternaturally still.

The light subsided.

The *voice* hushed.

The tingling melted away.

I looked up at my brother, his form watery and blurred. Crying—I was crying, I realized. I blinked until the tears spilled down my cheeks and my vision cleared.

With wild eyes and a horrified stare, Teller whispered the words that would change my life forever.

“Diem—you’re wearing the Crown. You’ve been selected. You are the new Queen of Lumnos.”

Epilogue

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ELSEWHERE IN EMARION...

Six months, two weeks, and four days.

She twirled the chalky white rock in her hand as she counted up the rows of jagged lines scratched onto the godstone wall.

She'd learned the last time how quickly the days could get away from her. A week could feel like a year, or a month could feel like a day. When the soldiers had arrived to take her home from this place two decades ago, if it weren't for the newborn in her arms, they could have easily convinced her she'd been gone for years.

This time, she'd been more careful. She'd tracked each sunset with a single white line, grouped in batches of seven, counting as the days ticked by.

Six months, two weeks, and four days.

When she'd left, the King's condition was already so weak, his mind murky and his power faded to embers. She had prepared, both mentally and in a more practical sense, to wait out the final throes of his death in solitude for a few weeks, perhaps a month or two at most.

She hadn't counted on the King holding out for the better part of a year.

As it often did these days, uncertainty nipped at her heels. What if the King made a full recovery? What if she had misread the signs and he had only been struck by some temporary illness?

With a task this dangerous, she had only been able to trust three people with her plan, and only two with her location. Even if one of them was willing to risk their life to rescue her, it had taken her twenty years to find a way back into this place. When would the next opportunity arise for them?

She could be stuck here for years. Decades. Centuries. Her body could be dust in the wind before another mortal soul touched this soil.

She tucked the hunk of chalk into her bag and rolled the covering of leaves back over her makeshift calendar. There was no point in wallowing over what-ifs. She'd known the risks when she came here. If this was her final resting place, so be it.

She whistled a tune to ease her mind as she started her daily routine—or rather, her nightly routine. It was too dangerous to wander among the

sunlight and risk being spotted, so she'd learned to survive only in the darkness. It hadn't been so bad during those warm summer evenings when she could lie under the stars, but winter was fast approaching. The nights were getting colder and food was getting scarce. Soon she would have to make some difficult decisions between staying hidden and staying alive.

But not yet, she chided herself. Soon—but not yet.

She circled the trails crisscrossing the land and checked each one of the locations she had mapped out for the culmination of her plan. She cleared debris from the walking paths and verified each of her stockpiles—fresh water, food stores, weapons, and the precious *surprises* she'd miraculously managed to sneak in. She edged as close as she dared to each of the ports of entry, making slight adjustments wherever nature's forces had dislodged her preparations.

She even managed to do a bit of hunting, winning herself a rare warm dinner from a warren of rabbits, whose unexpected presence here she could only attribute to a gift from the Old Gods. The large meal had her in such good spirits that she even talked herself into approaching the glittering black stone door.

It had been the first place she visited when she'd returned to this awful place. During the agonizing journey, it had been all her mind could think of. What would she find here? *Who* would she find here?

When she had stood at the door and called out his name, the ultimate answer had been *nothing* and *no one*.

Still, though, she hadn't yet managed to make herself go down those dark spiral stairs. Once a week, she forced herself to return, her godstone dagger clutched tightly to her chest, wondering what awaited her in that rat-infested room.

It had been her home once. Long ago. She'd been a very different woman then, with very different goals.

"Hello?" she called out, forcing herself to descend the first few steps. "Are you... are you still there?"

She strained her ears, every skitter and rustle making her heart skip a beat. She edged another step, then another, her toes brushing the line where the moon's silvery wash gave way to the ominous darkness. She reached into her satchel and pulled out a small box of matches. Even with her careful rationing, their numbers were wearing dangerously thin. Wasting even one could make a difference, especially considering her plans.

But she had to know.

She struck the match, its bulb hissing as orange light fluttered across the walls and illuminated a few more feet. She took another few steps, counting each one. *Nine, ten, eleven...*

Fifteen steps. As long as she stayed within fifteen steps, she was safe. Out of reach. She'd learned that the hard way, back then.

Tonight, she stopped at twelve.

She stared into the depthless shadows. "It's me. I came back for you."

Only silence answered.

She threw the match forward, holding her breath as the tiny flame nearly guttered on its path to the ground. It hit the floor and took an unlucky bounce backward, not far enough to fill the shadows in the room.

But far enough to see the edge of an old blackened stain on the ground. *Blood.*

She turned and flew back up the steps, heart hammering in her ears as relief warred with a foreboding apprehension.

He's gone, she reminded herself. Dead. You killed him. You're safe, and so is she.

When she emerged into the chill night air, something in the atmosphere felt... different.

The buzz in the air reminded her of those delicate moments between the lighting of a fuse and the detonation of a bomb—those precious seconds when there was no more turning back and all you could do was hold your breath and wait for the fallout to begin.

A hunch in her chest tugged her toward the other place she had yet to visit. Until now, she had always found some excuse to stay away, but tonight she felt it whispering her name on the autumn breeze.

She kept the blade gripped in her hand as she ascended the path to the broad stone dais. She avoided passing through the archways that lined the periphery, entering instead through the wide gap in the border on the northern edge.

An unearthly tremor passed through her as her foot crossed over the edge and settled on the black tile floor. The moonlight glinted off the smooth stone, revealing a symbol carved beneath her feet: a ten-pointed star.

Being here felt *wrong* in some deeply fundamental way, as if the very blood under her skin knew it did not belong in this place.

The feeling of it only made her angry. It was an artificial wrongness, a stolen sanctity its builders had no right to claim. It prickled at her inner defiance and pushed her to continue toward the center.

Across the circle, her eyes fell on one of the archways. Like each of the others, a tall obelisk rose from the top of the arch, capped by a shallow cauldron, wisps of ice-blue flames dancing around its edge. Engraved into the center of the shimmering onyx column was another symbol—a crescent moon emerging from within a fiery sun. Soft light glowed from its edges and cast her face in a hue of pale sapphire.

She stood quietly and watched the flames lick at the air, the evening silence disturbed only by the crackling of the nine fires that surrounded her.

The ground beneath her began to rumble, and she staggered forward at the sudden movement. Her hand flew out to steady herself and landed on a short pedestal in the circle's center topped by a hunk of glossy, smoky rock. The moment her hand brushed its rough-hewn edge, a searing pain shot through her veins.

She dropped to her knees, clutching her throbbing hand to her chest and gasping for air as waves of agony rocked through her. Red welts had already formed where her skin had made contact, and she watched in horror as they swelled and blistered to an unnatural shade of grey.

Far in the distance, she heard a series of long, piercing cries, their distinctly *inhuman* nature cutting through the fog of her pain.

Her eyes lifted in the direction of the sound—but caught on something else.

The obelisk she had been looking at moments ago had gone dark, the symbol at its center fading to shadow. The cauldron at its peak now held only wisps of smoke.

In the sky beyond, a column of light rose from within the forest and disappeared into the clouds. As if in answer, a twin beam shot down from the sky directly above her head. It landed on the glassy rock at her side, filling it with a sapphire glow.

Despite her still-aching hand, a jubilant grin spread across her face.

The King was dead.

After six months, two weeks, and four days of waiting, of being apart from her family, of retracing the steps that haunted her—the King of Lumnos was finally, *finally* dead.

Which could only mean one thing...

In thirty days, Auralie Bellator was going home.

To be continued...

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Ready for more?



Diem's journey continues in *Glow of the Everflame*, book two in the Kindred's Curse Saga, releasing July 18, 2023 and [available for pre-order now!](#)

For sneak peeks at upcoming books, bonus chapters, and exclusive content, subscribe to Penn's newsletter at www.penncole.com



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There are no words to describe the feeling of putting your first book into the world. It's thrilling, terrifying, agonizing, nerve-wracking, inspiring, daunting, bewildering—but for me, most of all, it has been fulfilling, the long-awaited arrival of my most deeply held wish finally coming true.

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And finally, because we always hear the advice to talk to ourselves the way we talk to our best friends, here goes: Self, we almost didn't make it! Sometimes we were each other's worst enemy, but we had faith in the story our heart wanted to tell, and we found the strength to push through. I am so, so proud. Never stop believing in yourself. You are capable of greatness, as long as you're willing to put in the work.

To anyone else reading this: Keep shining, little flame. There's no limit to how bright you can burn.

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About the Author



Penn's life has taken her through many ups and downs, but her love for literature has forever been her true north. Ever since she was a child, she has been filling mountains of notebooks with elaborate worlds, feisty women, and angsty romances.

After a detour as an artist, attorney, and small business owner, she is thrilled to finally have accomplished her lifelong dream of becoming an author.

Although Penn is a Texas girl born and bred, she currently lives in France with her husband, where she can usually be found sipping wine and eating far too many pastries.



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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Contents](#)

[Map of Emarion](#)

[The Realms of Emarion](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Ready for more?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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