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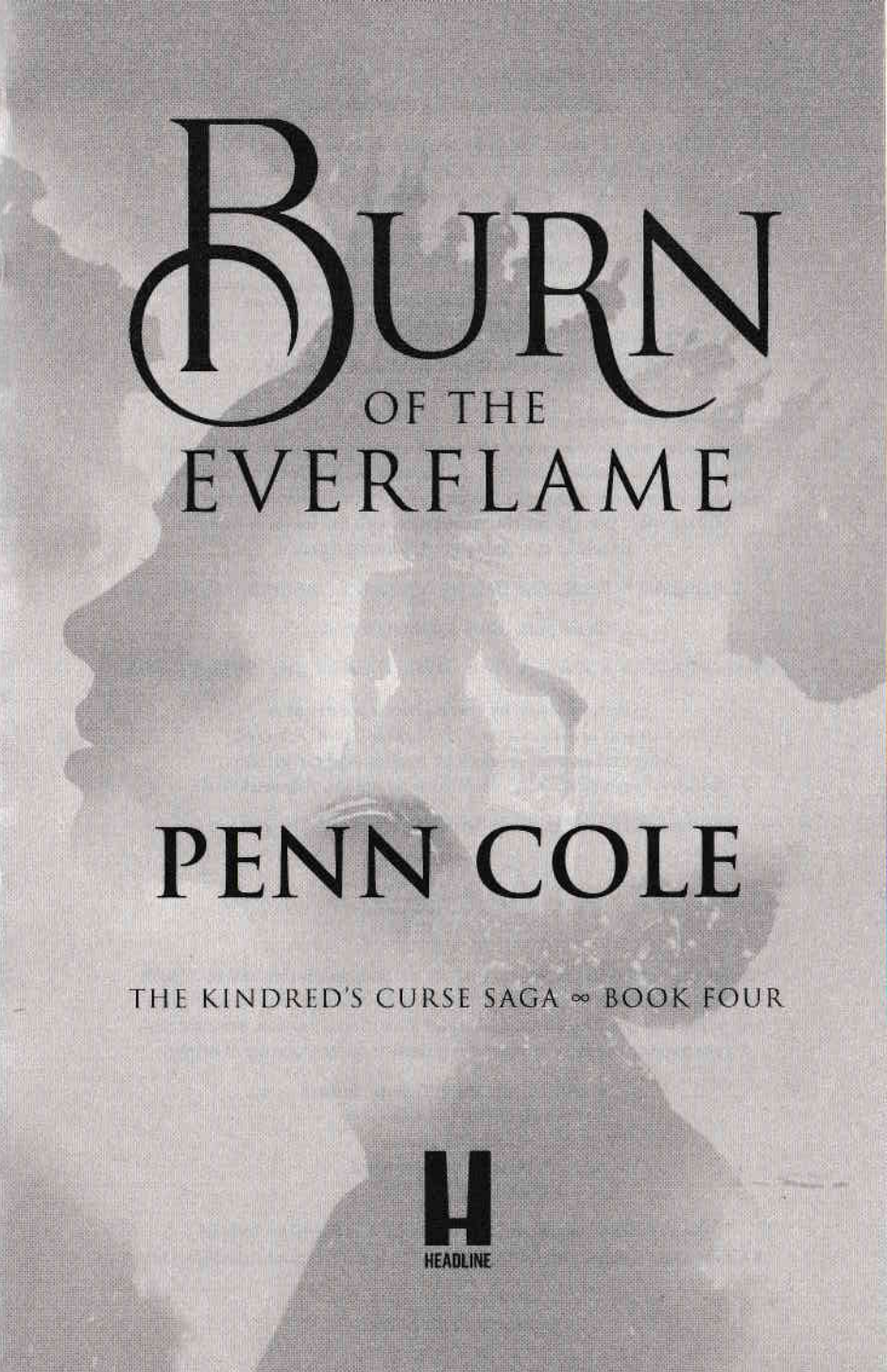
THE KINDRED'S CURSE SAGA

Spark of the Everflame

Glow of the Everflame

Heat of the Everflame

Burn of the Everflame

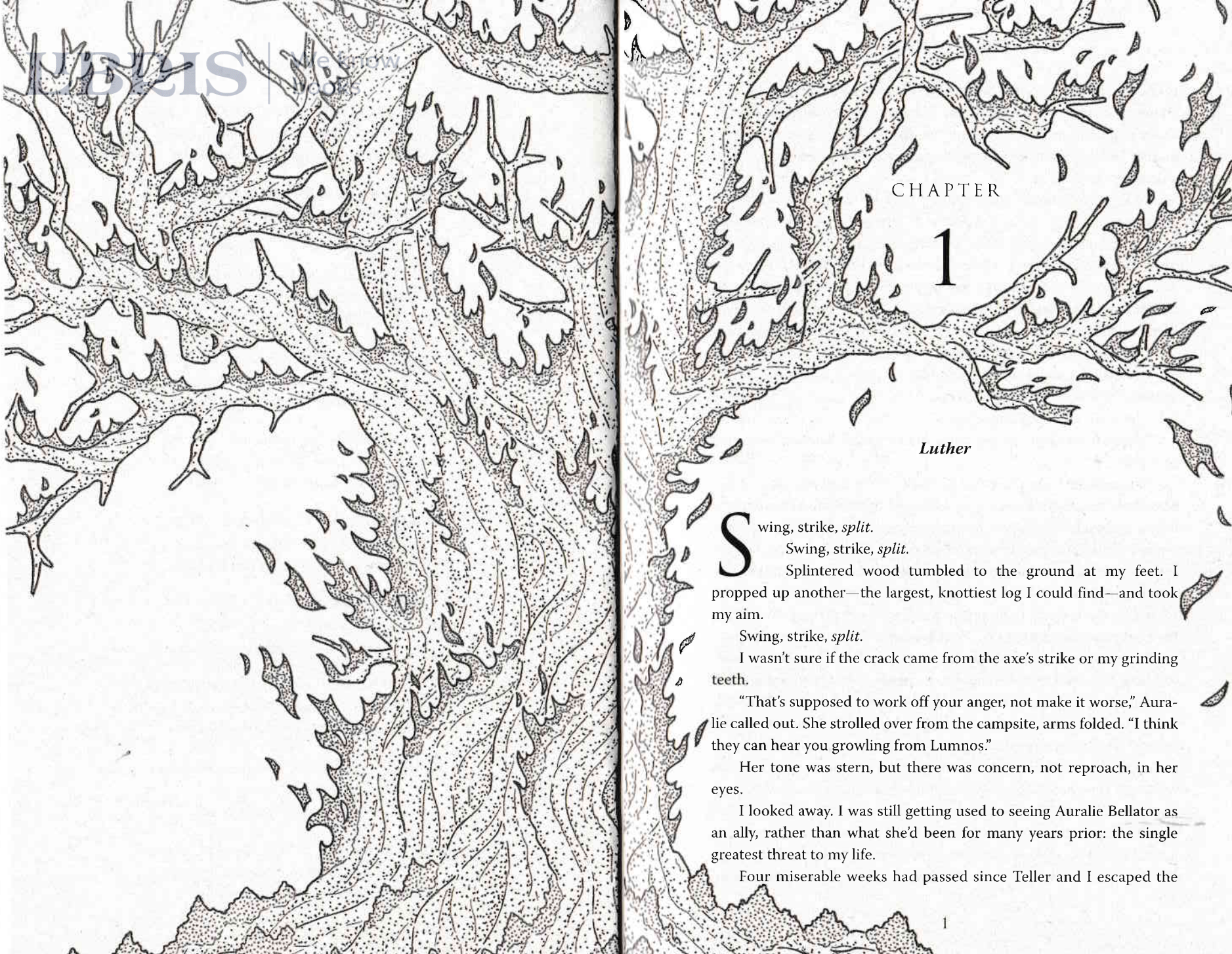


BURN OF THE EVERFLAME

PENN COLE

THE KINDRED'S CURSE SAGA ∞ BOOK FOUR

H
HEADLINE



CHAPTER

1

Luther

Swing, strike, *split*.
Swing, strike, *split*.
Splintered wood tumbled to the ground at my feet. I propped up another—the largest, knottiest log I could find—and took my aim.

Swing, strike, *split*.

I wasn't sure if the crack came from the axe's strike or my grinding teeth.

"That's supposed to work off your anger, not make it worse," Auralie called out. She strolled over from the campsite, arms folded. "I think they can hear you growling from Lumnos."

Her tone was stern, but there was concern, not reproach, in her eyes.

I looked away. I was still getting used to seeing Auralie Bellator as an ally, rather than what she'd been for many years prior: the single greatest threat to my life.

Four miserable weeks had passed since Teller and I escaped the

island and flew on Sorae's back to the Guardians' camp in Montios. I'd been all but certain Auralie was going to skin me alive for leaving Diem behind. Instead, she took pity on me—perhaps as thanks for reuniting her with her son, or perhaps because my mood was dark enough for both of us.

I'd let Diem down.

Again.

My fingers stretched at my side, reaching for a hand that wasn't there. Every day without her was a reminder of how badly I'd failed the woman I loved. And now, in a trait I shared with my Queen, my guilt had darkened to rage, a bomb more volatile than any the Guardians had ever constructed.

"We'll get her back," Auralie said gently.

I rubbed my jaw, now covered in a rough, dark beard thanks to our weeks on the road. "I'm sick of waiting."

"We'll act when the time is right."

"We've been sitting for a month, and nothing's changed. Your plan isn't working."

She brushed aside a curl that had fallen from her upswept hair, her advanced mortal age showing in the silver strands mixed among the fiery copper-red. "We haven't been 'sitting,' and you well know it. It took weeks to move everyone here to Arboros."

And we gave up the insight we had on Ophiucae's plans in the process, I thought irritably, but I held my tongue. Though the risk of Vance recruiting more rebels to Ophiucae's side was a key reason for pulling the Guardians out of Montios, the move had been to protect me, too.

Diem's birth father, Ophiucae, had inherited the Crown of Omnos, the long-lost tenth Kindred whose existence had been hidden from everyone, even the other Crowns. Ophiucae ruled over the Forgotten Lands, where the Guardians' old camp had been. If he found me in his realm, I doubted my relationship to Diem, the daughter he tried to kill as an infant, would persuade him to spare me from his quest to massacre every Descended as bloody retribution for the centuries he spent imprisoned on the island of Coeurile.

In truth, the move hadn't cut off our ability to watch him. Messenger hawks arrived in a steady stream with news of his movements. In typical Auralie fashion, Diem's mother refused to reveal from whom

these missives came. All I knew was that Ophiucae had stepped up his onslaught. Every week, more Descended died and more Descended children went missing. Though Ophiucae had thus far left Lumnos untouched, it was only a matter of time before he turned his violent eyes on my *terremère*.

"I sent out a call for all Guardians to join us here in Arboros," Auralie reminded me. "New mortals arrive every day. We're training them as fast as we can." She shot me a pointed look that reminded me so much of her daughter, my heart lurched beneath my ribs. "And gathering an army for Diem was your plan, not mine."

"A few hundred people is not an army," I argued, "and I don't know who we'll face first, Ophiucae or the Crowns, but we'll need more than mere mortals to defeat either one."

"Don't lecture me, Prince," she shot back. "You were born into your titles, but I earned mine, and I did it fighting Descended with *mere mortals alone*."

The air chilled between us, and for a moment, we were back to the hostile foes we'd always been.

I turned my face north. Though I couldn't even see the coast, let alone the island where Diem was trapped, my heart had an innate sense of where it was. I'd left a piece of myself in that Temple, and I would only be whole again with her in my arms.

Until then, it was my job to keep her family safe. I'd let Diem down enough.

"You're right," I forced out. "My apologies."

Auralie let out a sigh as the tension eased. "I know you're worried about her. I am, too."

"It's not worry. No matter how often this world tries to tear her down, Diem always finds a way to survive."

A touch of pride warmed her face. "Then what is it?"

The truth was too raw, too painful to explain. I dropped the axe and slid my hand into my pocket, rubbing my thumb over the etched case of the whirring golden compass—a gift to Diem from the Meros King at her Ascension Ball. Ever since Diem went to Coeurile, the compass had slipped into an aimless spin. The island's ability to block magic was apparently strong enough to thwart the compass's spell to point toward your heart's greatest desire.

I told myself that as long as its arrow continued to move, that meant Diem was still trapped. Once it stopped spinning, that meant she was free.

And the second that happened, I would go get my Queen.

"The realms are under siege," Auralie said. "The ports are barely functioning. The Emarion Army's a mess—since Diem has the Fortos Crown, no one can agree on who has authority to command it in her absence, and every battalion they send to face Ophiucae never returns. Soon, the Crowns will have to admit they need help." She glanced over her shoulder at the rebel camp, then lowered her voice. "And we might have just the weapon they'll need."

She pulled a small ceramic jar from a pouch at her waist and handed it to me. I pried open the cork stopper, and the smell of citrus and smoke hit my nose as I peered inside at a vibrant scarlet balm.

"Flameroot," she explained. "The Guardians managed to bring a supply of it from the island, though Vance took much of it when he left."

My lips twitched with a scowl. Auralie had used the substance for years to hide Diem's magic, even from Diem herself. Though I knew she'd done it to keep her daughter safe, it had cost Diem the chance to train her magic—a shortcoming that could turn deadly in the coming war.

"It's a salve, not a tea," she went on. "My son thinks it might have the same effect when applied to a wound. If Diem smears this on a blade and is able to strike him, it could stop Ophiucae's magic long enough for us to kill him."

"Teller made this for you?" I asked.

Auralie looked pained at my surprise. Though her reunion with her son had been teary-eyed and tender, once he'd learned how much she kept from her family over the years, things between them quickly strained.

"I told him it was for Diem. He'd do anything for her."

My eyes narrowed. "Is it for Diem? Or is this going to end up on the tip of every Guardian weapon?"

She shrugged, her gaze darting away. "That's up to Diem to decide. It was Teller's condition to telling me."

Smart man, I thought, my respect for him rising. "You're certain this works?"

"Not yet. We need to test it. I was hoping you might be willing to—"

"No," I snapped.

"Just a small cut—"

"No."

"I thought you said there was nothing you wouldn't do for her."

The jar nearly cracked in my clenched hand. "Do not challenge me on what I would do for your daughter," I warned. "I'd drive a blade into my own heart if I thought it would help her. Diem could escape at any moment. When she does, she'll be the target of the most powerful people on the continent. I won't risk leaving her to fight them alone."

"She won't be alone." She pointed to the camp. "The Guardians captured the port in Meros and the island without Descended help. We're more skilled than you think."

"Oh, I'm well aware," I said, my tone low and lethal. "I watched my guards take their final breaths after burning alive at the hands of the mortal you left in charge in Lumnos—the same man who ran me through with godstone. I know just how *skilled* at bloodshed Guardians can be."

The nobler part of me regretted using Vance's crimes against her. Auralie had been irate when she learned what he'd done with the Guardians in her absence. After hearing how he'd held Diem down and sliced her open to take her blood, Auralie wanted him dead as much as I did.

I drew in a breath, trying to dull the fiery wrath that now seemed to be my baseline state. "Even if I wanted to help you, I can't. I don't have my magic outside of Lumnos. Testing it on me will do you no good."

That wasn't *entirely* true. Whatever the Crowns had done on the island, it hadn't slowed the deterioration of the realm borders or the Forging spell that enforced them. Just like before, my magic occasionally returned in random, temporary bursts—a fact I'd kept to myself.

"Fine," Auralie conceded. "But if you get your magic back . . . will you let me test it then?"

As if on cue, a familiar prickle of energy tingled in my chest. Like a

struck match in a vat of oil, my magic sparked to life, searing through my veins.

My jaw clenched at the timing. I knew what a sign from Blessed Mother Lumnos looked like. For whatever reason, she wanted me to help Auralie.

The Luther of a month ago would have obeyed without a second thought. I'd always been a devoted servant, ready to offer up my life for the Blessed Mother's divine will. But ever since losing Diem to that fucking island, knowing she was alone, after all she'd already been through...

For the first time in my life, when called on by my patron goddess, I said no.

"I'll think about it." I shoved the cork in the jar and started to hand it back to Auralie, then thought better of it. Our mutual trust was growing, but it had a long way to go.

I tucked it into my pocket instead. "I'm going to check on Sorae."

"You can bring her closer to camp, you know. I won't let anyone hurt her."

"Are you going to dismantle your ballista and burn the godstone bolt so no one can use it against her?"

No response came.

"Then Sorae will stay where she is."

"Luther..."

"I said no, Auralie. Diem would have my head if she knew Sorae was this close to them as it is."

"It's not that. A messenger hawk arrived this morning." She held out a scrap of rolled-up paper, her expression grave. "Vance is in Lumnos."

My blood went cold. Visions of a burning, crumbling palace filled my mind, the imagined screams of my sister Lily ringing in my ears.

"Is Ophiucae with him?" I asked. "Did they attack?"

She shook her head. "He only brought Francis, his third-in-command. They're recruiting for Ophiucae's army."

Her answer brought little relief. Vance and Ophiucae had formed an unlikely alliance, bonded by their shared wish to see all Descended dead. Where one went, the other might not be far behind.

"And if they do more than *recruit*?" I asked.

"We talked about this, Luther. We agreed it was a risk we had to take. Lumnos is well fortified against an attack."

"So was Fortos. Now half the city is a pile of rubble."

Her expression softened with a maternal concern I wasn't sure what to do with. I hadn't seen a look like that since my mortal mother was alive. "My offer still stands," she said. "I can have my people get your sister and bring her here—"

"No," I cut in. "Keep your people away from her." Though I'd allied myself with the Guardians, I saw the way their hands tightened on their blades when I passed. Lily was no safer here than in Lumnos.

"Very well. If there's anything else I can do..."

I turned away, unsettled by her compassion. "Tell me if you hear more. If Ophiucae gets anywhere near Lumnos, I want to know."



I found Sorae in her usual spot. Though I was unwilling to let her come near camp, she was equally unwilling to let me too far out of sight. We'd compromised on the trees by the Arboros coast, out of range of the Guardians' ballista but close enough that if Diem got free, we could be airborne in minutes.

Today, though, she wasn't alone. She was sprawled on the shore with Teller, who sat nearby on a boulder, holding a fishing rod he'd crafted from wood and horsehair.

Sorae lifted her head and let out a whirr of greeting. Her golden eyes shone with the same concern as Auralie's, though I knew her spir-its were as low as mine.

Teller cast me a glance. "Your magic's back again," he said flatly.

Again—so he knew I'd been keeping it a secret.

I schooled my reaction. "What makes you think that?"

"Your eyes get brighter. The same thing happened to Diem when she stopped taking the flameroot. Every time it happens, you disappear, and you don't come back until they're dark again."

I stood on Sorae's other side and stroked a hand down the obsidian scales of her neck. She leaned into me with a restless whine.

Teller pulled in his line, then cast it back out into the water. "Did you tell my mother about your magic?"

"No."

"You don't trust her?"

I pulled out the jar with the flameroot balm. "It seems you don't, either."

His expression darkened. "She tried to test it on you, didn't she?"

"She asked." I tossed it to him. "I declined."

He caught it and ran a hand through his hair, the late afternoon sun making his auburn curls look the same bright red as his mother's. "I already know it will work. Everyone else here might be a fighter, but this is what *I* do."

He was a damn good fighter himself. Though he'd refused to officially join the Guardians, on his darker days, I'd seen him wander into the sparring rings at camp. His technique was impressive. His strikes were calculated and precise, no doubt the result of his father's training. He kept his cool, even when goaded. And he was strong—he'd been well fed at the Lumnos palace, and every ounce had gone into filling him out with a layer of muscle. Like me, he'd declined the rebels' half-rusted razors, and a dusting of copper hair now coated his jaw.

He'd turned eighteen a fortnight prior. His mother's attempts to celebrate had been met with tense silence. The timid boy I'd first met in the dungeon had grown into a man—an angry one. One who carried the guilt of lives lost on his shoulders.

A burden I understood excruciatingly well.

"I asked Mother why she sent me to the Descended school," he mumbled. "I knew the answer. I just wanted to see if she would admit it." He paused. "I used to wake and see her taking my notes from my desk or putting them back. I never said anything. I thought she was curious. Paranoid, maybe." His jaw ticked. "Turns out she was using me to plan a rebellion."

"Did she admit it?" I asked.

"She said it was for me *and* for the Guardians. And for Diem, so we could help her once the truth about her being Descended came out." His eyes narrowed. "I would have done it for D. There were classes I could have taken or books I could have borrowed. I could have helped her understand her magic, if Mother had just given me a *choice*."

He angrily threw the jar of flameroot balm into the sand. Sorae nuzzled his leg with her snout.

I offered only a nod. I'd seen my cousin Taran in moods like this, mad at the world and needing to be heard without judgment.

When Teller didn't continue, I stretched out my palm toward the jar and called forth my godhood. I gritted my teeth as it rose in a furious surge. My arm trembled with the effort of holding it back from exploding across the beach and leveling half the forest.

Find her, it growled. **Free her. Save her. Touch her.**

My godhood had always been defensive of Diem. *Protect her*, it had commanded me the day I first met her at the palace and every day since.

At the time, I'd resisted, unsure whether it was a message from the Blessed Mother or my own raging lust. Diem was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, and her unapologetic scorn for the Descended world I secretly despised had been more addictive to me than a drug.

After she took the Crown, I thought I had my answer: she was the gray-eyed Queen that Lumnos had commanded me to serve, the leader who would burn this world to ash and build it anew.

But it wasn't until the day I stormed into a spare palace bedroom in a jealous rage to stop her from fucking that mortal prick Henri that I'd seen the truth: my lust had become something *more*, and my devotion to Diem had far exceeded the Blessed Mother's command.

FIND HER, my godhood snarled again. **FREE HER. SAVE HER. TOUCH HER.**

I dug my heels into the sand as I wrestled my godhood into submission. It grudgingly bent to my will, though its feverish resolve continued to simmer.

The jar's outline wobbled as if in the distance of a desert mirage. Its edges blurred and its color lightened to match the sandy beach. A moment later, it faded from sight.

Teller balked. "Luther, that mixture took me *weeks* to formulate!"

My brows knit in concentration. With a twitch of my finger, the jar shimmered back into view—in an entirely new shape and hue.

"An illusion," Teller said as understanding dawned.

I nodded. "It's a trick I never mastered. Since you know about my magic, you might as well help me practice."

The prospect of a challenge seemed to lighten his mood. He dragged

in his fishing line and pulled the bait from his hook, tossing it into Sorae's waiting mouth, then set his rod aside.

I drew in a breath and let my magic expand in a cocoon around my body. The air around me glittered, then wobbled, and my body disappeared.

Teller rose to study me. "No matter how many times I witness it, I'm not sure I'll ever get used to Lumnos magic." He pointed. "Your shoes. I can see their imprint in the ground."

I was grateful he couldn't see the irritation on my face. That was a novice mistake—one I should have caught had I not been distracted by the shouts of *find her* in my head.

I bent my wrist, and my magic erased the outline into undisturbed sand. I kept my footsteps light and silent while I crept around to Teller's back.

"Perfect," he said to the empty air. "I can't see anything."

"Good," I said loudly behind him.

He whirled around just in time for me to drop my magic and reappear an inch from his face.

He stumbled back, then scowled. "That's something D would do. You two are perfect for each other."

My chest ached. "Let's try something more difficult."

My magic spread up my arms and through my body, seeping from my skin into the fabric of my clothes. Teller's eyes widened as my leather breeches grew longer and slimmer. My tunic tightened on my chest, sprouting a collar and wide, elaborate cuffs. The scratchy wool jacket I'd bought off the burliest man at camp, despite being far too small and coming apart at the seams, deepened to a garnet-hued velvet, its edges gleaming with intricate silver thread and precious gems.

When my magic settled, my ill-fitting mortal rags had transformed into the scarlet suit I'd worn to my uncle's funeral. Illusion magic worked best when based on memories tied to strong emotions, and the intimate moment Diem and I shared in her chambers after the funeral had made that a day I'd never forget.

I pulled the magic over my head like a hood. My beard disappeared, and my unbound hair became sleek and tied back. All trace of dirt vanished beneath the facade of the immaculate Prince I'd always pretended to be.

Two sets of eyes—one mortal, one gryvern—squinted in scrutiny. Sorae let out an unimpressed-sounding snort.

"The clothes look right," Teller said, frowning. "But there's something about your face . . ."

Damn. This was the part of illusion magic I'd always feared.

Turning something invisible required power more than skill. With enough magic to fuel it, the godhood could blend into surroundings easily enough on its own.

Redrawing an image was more complicated. It required a detailed mental picture of what was being shown *and* what was being hidden. In this case, that meant my ruined, scar-torn face, something I'd spent a lifetime trying to forget.

I closed my eyes and thought of how Diem had used her Umbros magic to let me into her mind back in Sophos. I'd seen myself through her eyes, enrobed in her fondness and admiration. No disgust. No scorn. No judgment of my choice to keep my scars, no pitying thought of how much better I'd look without them. None of the stares or whispers that had wounded me as a child and enraged me as an adult.

When everyone else looked at me, they saw something to fix. Diem saw someone to *love*.

"You did it," Teller said. "Now it's perfect."

My eyes cracked open. He was staring at me strangely.

"You were thinking of her, weren't you?" he asked.

I forced my expression to blandness—a move so familiar, it had become a reflex. "When she returns, I have to be ready."

"That's not what I meant."

"I'm always thinking of her, Teller. Every moment, awake or asleep."

His throat bobbed. He slumped down to the boulder. "What if she never comes back?"

"Don't go there," I said sharply.

"You saw the same thing I did when we flew away. Someone else was at that Temple."

The memory of a month ago flashed into my mind. Sorae had plucked me off the island's soil just in time to avoid the deadly spell the Crowns had cast. By the time Teller pulled me onto her back, we'd been too far away from the Temple to make out anything more than a

white-clad figure walking up behind Diem—and the last ray of sun glinting off something in their hand.

Something that had looked suspiciously like a blade.

FIND HER, my godhood bellowed. **FREE HER. SAVE HER. TOUCH HER. PROTECT HER.**

Sorae whined softly.

"Whoever it was, Diem could handle them," I insisted, unsure which of us I was trying most to convince.

"Luther, before you got to the island, something happened with the Crowns. The Ignios King—I think he killed the Umbros Queen." Teller looked up at me, anguished. "What if he . . ." His voice choked. "What if Diem is—"

"*Stop.*" My fractured heart thrashed against my ribs. "She's alive. Don't even think of saying otherwise."

Suddenly, Sorae bolted upright. Her head swung toward the forest, a low rumble building in her throat.

"What's wrong?" Teller asked her.

Then it hit me, too—a magical aura.

A strong one.

For the briefest, most beautiful moment, I allowed myself to believe it was *her*—that somehow Diem had escaped and found her way back to my side.

But my godhood knew her aura as deeply as my heart did, and when its chants grew enraged, the truth hit me like a firestorm. This wasn't Diem.

A Crown was nearby.

And their aura was coming from camp.

CHAPTER

2

Luther

"Remember Diem's orders," I told Sorae. "Keep Teller safe." She snorted in agreement. Teller jumped to his feet. "I'm coming with you."

"Teller . . ."

"If my mother is in danger, I'm not staying here."

It was the one argument I couldn't deny, not after I'd lost my own mother because I failed to protect her. "Do you have a weapon?"

He pulled a blade from his boot. It was small, but it was the dark gray of Fortosian steel—good enough to draw Descended blood.

"Keep behind me," I warned.

As we made our way back, I palmed the compass in my pocket. Though I'd brushed off Teller's worries, they had dug up a terror I'd been trying hard to keep buried.

The figure, clothed in white.

A blade, black and glittering.

Diem's body, collapsing to the ground.

Voices taunted in the back of my mind: *perhaps there's a different reason the compass cannot find her.*

I yanked my hand back and curled it around the Sword of Corbois's jeweled hilt instead, sliding it free of its scabbard. If I couldn't get to Diem, at least I could get to one of the people who put her there.

At camp, a quick skim confirmed the Crown had not yet arrived. With no way to sense Descended magic, the mortals were oblivious, going about their day as normal.

"Grab your weapons," I shouted. "Archers, to the trees."

The mortals glanced at me, confused, then at each other. I'd never dared to issue them orders before.

"Don't just stand there," Teller said, layering his voice with a commanding bite that could just as easily have come from his father. "He said grab your weapons!"

With a mortal endorsement, the Guardians jumped into action. They swarmed the campsite, scurrying up trees and nocking arrows, while others corralled the children out of sight. A dark-skinned, darker-eyed woman marched out from a row of tents. "Who called a warning?"

"I did," I answered. "There's a Crown nearby."

Her gaze narrowed. Cordellia was the leader of the Arboros rebel cell. Even with Auralie speaking in my favor, she'd never warmed to me.

"How do you know?" she asked.

I bristled. I didn't even tell Descended when I could sense another's power, let alone mortals who fantasized about slitting my throat.

"It doesn't matter," Auralie cut in as she joined us. "If Luther says to prepare, we prepare."

I stiffened in surprise at her support. So did most of the Guardians, including Cordellia. As head of the Guardians, Auralie was the one person here who outranked her.

Cordellia gave an awkward nod and turned to the others. "Get to your stations. I want bombs ready to light, and the ballista loaded with—"

"That won't be necessary."

The voice floated from the forest like wind whistling through the leaves. It sounded delicate—harmless. But much like the petite blond it belonged to, first impressions could be deceiving.

And deadly.

The woman sauntered into view, her Crown of ever-blooming flowers marking her as the Arboros Queen, accompanied by two burly guards and a woman laden with blades.

I raised my sword. Her soldiers edged closer, hands twitching as a shimmering shield formed around their Queen. I answered with my own curtain of glittering blue at my back to keep the mortals beyond their magic's reach.

Myself, I left exposed. For a Descended, it was as good as a middle finger. A taunt: *I'm stronger than you, and I'm not afraid to prove it.*

The Arboros Queen lifted her chin. "You must be the famous Prince of Lumnos." Her emerald eyes skated over me. "A great many people are looking for you."

"Woe to those who find me," I rumbled back. "Especially those bearing Crowns."

Her lips thinned. "I have no fight with you, Prince, nor with anyone here. I come to deliver a message."

My godhood scratched at my chest, sharing my urge to inflict some bloody vengeance. I stepped forward. "I have a message for you, too."

Auralie grabbed my arm to stop me. "What do you want, Mireille?"

My head snapped toward her. *Mireille?* Auralie and the Arboros Queen were on a first-name basis?

Mireille pulled a small slip of paper from the neckline of her dress, a shift crafted of woven banana leaves and trimmed with sprigs of fragrant honeysuckle that I could smell across the clearing. She gave it to the woman at her side, who prowled toward me with hand extended. She, too, left her shield down—a challenge matched by the scowl on her face.

Diem would love her.

The thought speared my heart clean through.

Auralie shot me a stern look, a silent command to stand down, and I grudgingly obeyed. She walked forward and plucked the paper from the woman's hand, then spun on her heel, giving the women her back—her own show of no fear.

Auralie silently read the note, then looked up. "In all our time working together, Mireille, I didn't realize you thought so little of my intelligence." She crumpled the paper and tossed it to the ground. "If the Crowns wish to meet, it's certainly not to discuss *peace*. This is an invitation to an ambush."

"The meeting was my idea, Auralie," Mireille said. "We are desperate. Hundreds are dying."

"Hundreds of *Descended* are dying. The mortals have been dying for centuries. The Crowns had no interest then."

"Not all of us," Mireille said archly. "You know I've been working toward peace for years. I'm as dismayed as you that it took this long for the others to hear me, but they are indeed now *listening*. Are you really going to throw that away?"

"Why should I trust you? You locked my daughter on an island prison."

Blood drained from her face. "You know about that?" She shook her head. "That—that was Sophos's plan. There was nothing I could do!"

"*Nothing*? Swear to me, on your mortal father's name, that you had no hand in what happened to my daughter."

Guilt flitted over her features. Her voice turned quiet. "You must understand . . . I have a realm to protect, Auralie. I could not sacrifice it for one girl."

"That is my Queen you speak of," I growled.

"I did what I could. I got the Guardians safely off the island, didn't I? And I've returned to Coeurile every week to leave Diem supplies."

"Are you sure she got them?" Teller asked. "Were the supplies gone each time you went back?"

Mireille hesitated, then sighed. "No. They were never touched." She hurried on. "But I will keep sending her more until this dreadful ordeal is over."

Teller looked at me, eyes round. It was a look I had seen a thousand times before—from half-mortal children and their parents, from mortals facing their execution, from my own family when they found themselves on the wrong side of a more powerful *Descended*.

The look of a terrified person who had placed their last chance at hope in my hands.

"It means nothing," I said to him. "Diem wouldn't trust anything that came from a Crown." My eyes slid back to the Arboros Queen. "Neither should we."

"Come to the meeting, Auralie," Mireille urged. "This is your chance to make whatever demands you wish."

"And if I demand my daughter's freedom?" she asked.

"That, they will not give—not until the war is over. They fear her too much."

I'm the one they should fear, I thought darkly.

Auralie shrugged. "Then my answer is no."

Cordellia balked. It was barely noticeable, no more than a tensing of muscles, a slight turn of her head. I might not have noticed, had I not spent the past month watching the two women present a united front to keep the rebels from splitting any more than they already had.

"Auralie," Cordellia whispered.

"Leave, Mireille," Auralie said loudly.

The Queen's mouth fell open. "I'm offering you a chance to save your people."

"All I need to do to save my people is wait for Ophiucae to finish what he's started."

Murmurs of agreement rose from the mortals behind us.

Mireille gaped at me. "You're fine with this, Prince? The slaughter of your people—your *family*?"

Fury danced like fire in my bones. "The savior they need is on that island. If any harm befalls my family because of it, you and the Crowns will repay it in blood."

She rolled her shoulders back, feigning disinterest in my threat, but she couldn't hide the color leeching from her cheeks. She turned to Cordellia. "Dell, we've been allies for years. I helped you many times, at great personal risk."

"You have," Cordellia agreed tightly.

"Have I not earned your trust? Think about what's best for your people. All the lives that could be saved."

"Auralie is our leader."

Her tone was unconvincing. The Arboros Queen's eyes took on a determined glint at the sign of a crack in our ranks. "A leader does not place anything above her people—even her own family. If Auralie will not be the leader the mortals need . . ." She picked up the discarded invitation, then held it out to Cordellia. " . . . perhaps you will."

Auralie and Cordellia exchanged a lingering look so burdened with unsaid words, even the air felt heavier.