



SPARK
OF THE EVERFLAME

THE KINDRED'S CURSE SAGA, BOOK ONE

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EMARION



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

*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.*

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.

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.