

BURNING ROSES

GAURI

The guards unbound my wrists and shoved me into a red room. I waited for them to go before pulling out a small silk bag of pearl dust I had swiped from the cosmetics table. I repeated the flimsy plan in my head: *Throw the dust in his eyes, gag him, steal his weapons.* If the Prince made a sound, I'd hold the dagger to his throat and hold him ransom. If he didn't make a sound, I'd make him free me for his own life. I knew I couldn't get far on my own, but most people could be bribed, and if bribery didn't work, threats always did.

I was glad they hadn't taken me to a throne room. The last time I was in a throne room, Skanda had ripped away my hopes for the kingdom and destroyed my future.

Arjun did not meet my eyes. And he refused to look up when his new bride and my best friend was hauled into the room. Nalini sank to her knees. Her gaze was frantic: leaping back and forth from me to Arjun and the dead on the ground.

Skanda's knife was pressed to her throat, sharp and close enough that beads of blood welled onto her skin.

"I know what you want," said Skanda.

I closed my eyes, shuttering the memory. I looked around the room, wondering which corner was the best position for attacking. At one end, a trellis of roses covered the wall. My chest tightened. I used to grow roses. One trellis for every victory. I had loved watching the blood red petals unfurl around thorns. Looking at them reminded me of my people's love: red as life. A month before Skanda had me thrown over the Ujjain border, he had set them on fire in a drunken stupor. By the time I got there, it was too late. Every petal had curled and blackened.

"You think these flowers are tokens of Bharata's love for you," he had slurred. "I want you to see, little sister. I want you to see just how easy it is for everything you plan and love and tend to go up in flames."

I'll never forget what burning roses look like. All those scarlet petals turning incandescent and furious. Like the last flare of the sun before an eclipse swallows it from the sky.

"You think they love you now, but it doesn't last. You're the rose. Not them. They are the flames. And you'll never see how quickly you'll catch fire until you're engulfed. One step out of the line I draw, and they will set you on fire."

I turned my back on the roses.

I chose a corner of the room, and then sank my teeth into the insides of my cheek. It was a habit I'd picked up on the eve of my first battle. Nerves had set my teeth chattering, so I brought out a mirror and glowered at myself. The glowering didn't help, but I liked the way my face looked. The small movements made my cheekbones look as sharp as scimitars. And when I tightened my lips, I felt *dangerous*, as if

I were hiding knives behind my teeth. Biting my cheeks became a battle tradition. Today I went into battle.

A door in the distance creaked. I ran through what I knew about the Prince of Ujjain. They called him the Fox Prince. And given the way some of the soldiers had jealously said his name, it didn't seem like a name given because his face had animal features. He spent part of every year at an ashram where all the nobility sent their sons. Reputedly brilliant. *Not good*. Weak with weapons. *Excellent*. The guards were fond of retelling the story of his trial with the council. Prince Vikram had to submit to three tasks in order to be named heir of Ujjain—give the dead new life, hold a flame that never burns, and deliver the strongest weapon in the world. For the first task, he whittled a piece of bark into a knife, proving that even discarded things could be given new life in purpose. For the second task, he released a thousand jars of fireflies and held the small insects in his hand, proving that he could hold a flame that never burned. And for the last task, he said that he had poisoned the council. Desperate for the antidote, the council named him heir. The Fox Prince then revealed that he had lied and proved how belief itself was the strongest weapon in the world.

I rolled my eyes every time I heard the tale. It sounded like something that villagers with a restless imagination would spin beside a fire. I'd heard another rumor about him. Something about his parentage. That he was an orphan who'd moved the Emperor to pity. But I doubted the vicious Emperor would be moved in such a way. The guards told me that the Emperor kept great beasts at his side that could tear the throat out of anyone who dared to cross him.

Footsteps shuffled down the hall. I clutched the silk bag of pearl dust. The Prince might be clever and eloquent, but you can't talk your way out of death and I wasn't going to give him a chance to speak. All

A CROWN OF WISHES

my intelligence told me that he was no match for me. I'd have him on his knees and begging for his life in a matter of moments.

A final door opened.

The Fox Prince was here.