

THE FIRE QUEEN - BOOK TWO

CROWN OF FLAMES

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SCHOLASTIC PRESS

New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-76681-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 22 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, October 2022

Book design by Abby Denning



CHAPTER 1

Burning Crowns and Other Serious Bummers

It all began with me being forced to wear a crown of flames. Which, as you can imagine, was a bummer. A serious bummer.

Since I'd officially/unofficially joined the rebellion against the Serpentine Empire, I'd been having trouble sleeping. It was probably because of the bounty that Sesha, that two-faced slimeball son of the Serpentine Governor-General, had on my head. But being hunted down by a boy I used to kind of—sort of like would stress anyone out, amirite?

So I'd done what I always did when I couldn't sleep. I'd snuck out a bunch of dusty old books from the school library and started reading. That's when it happened. I was lying in bed, in the middle of looking through a crumbling, silver-covered volume called *Thakurmar Jhuli*. Like I had

since I was a lonely kid, I was reading the words aloud to myself, only softly, so as not to wake my water-clan roommate, Kumi. That was when I felt the strange, sucking sensation of being pulled out of my own reality. One second, I was Pinki the fire rakkhoshi, reading in my dorm in the middle of the night, and the next moment, I whirled, as if through a wormhole, right out of my own body, my own place, and most bizarrely, my own time.

Now, if you've never traveled unexpectedly through a time vortex magically created by an old book you stole from your school library, I don't recommend it. At least without a helmet and some anti-nausea medication.

When my vision cleared and stomach sort of settled, I found myself in a royal court lined with high columns and majestic silk banners. Snoring Kumi wasn't there, or anything else from my familiar room. I was still queasy, but had to stifle the urge to yuke, because before me, upon the high throne, was a fierce rakkhoshi queen. Her long, matted black hair flowed over her sharp horns and broad shoulders like a mighty river from a mountain. Her dark, all-seeing eyes swirled like two galaxies on her face, and the longest, sharpest tusklike fangs I'd ever seen curved like small daggers over her unsmiling lips. In other words, she was all that with an extra helping of awesome-sauce.



I was seriously impressed. Especially since I recognized her.

“Hidimbi!” I breathed, trying not to burp. I was pretty sure burping was inappropriate behavior when meeting a legendary queen of old.

The Queen looked unsurprised. “I’ve been waiting for you, young fire rakkhoshi.”

“But how? I mean, you’re dead!” I couldn’t help but point out.

I agree, this wasn’t my finest conversational moment. But ask yourself if you would do any better in the same

situation. Hidimbi was not only the mother of Ghatatkach, my school's namesake and founder, but the last Demon Queen who had ruled over an independent Demon Land, before the Serpent Empire had come and colonized all the different peoples of the Kingdom Beyond Seven Oceans and Thirteen Rivers. Hidimbi wasn't just a little dead, she was seriously dead. Like, starring-in-history-books-level dead.

At my words, however, the ancient queen seemed unbothered. To put a finer point on it, her exact response to me was "Pffft."

My emotions went quickly from awe to irritation. "What do you mean, 'pffft'?"

The Queen waved her hands as if my question was an annoying pest flying by her ear. "What is death? What is life? What is time?"

"Things whose rules we have to follow?" I suggested.

"Pffft!" Hidimbi said, yet again. "Which part of the timeline are you from? I mean, which Pinki are you?"

"I beg your pardon?" What did she mean which Pinki was I? I was me!

The Queen squinted as if sizing me up. "So the name Neel means nothing to you?"

"I don't think so?" I was starting to suspect the many

millennia she'd been dead had somehow messed with Hidimbi's head.

"Hmm, I thought not." I heard a distinct buzzing, which stopped as Hidimbi caught something out of the air. She opened her fist, revealing a fat bee sitting in her hand. "When you get back, ask about the consorts, will you?"

"Consorts?" I repeated as Hidimbi let the insect go and it zipped by my face. Was I imagining things, or did the little stinker blow a raspberry at me as it flew by?

The Queen's eyes followed the path of the flying bee. Then she directed her attention at me again. "Do we rakkhosh still store our souls in bees in the future?"

"Yes, we do," I said impatiently, adding, as an afterthought, "Your Highness."

Hidimbi eyed me, pursing her full lips. "Maybe we should reconsider that. Not as safe as it seems."

I wanted to stomp my foot. If there was one thing I hated, it was feeling out of control. If there was a second thing I hated, it was being confused. I tried to get a handle on the situation. "Your Highness, what were you saying about consorts?"

"That you should *ask* about them?" Hidimbi snorted, rolling her huge eyes.

Wow, for a legendary queen of old, she really had an attitude. I was realizing that Queen Hidimbi reminded me of my own headmistress, Surpanakha, who didn't exactly adore me. I mean, yes, that probably was a little bit because of how much I interrupted her in class, and the fact that I wasn't great at following instructions. Also it could be because of that little incident when I'd almost burned down her outdoor banyan grove classroom. But I never said I was perfect.

"Now, onto the real business of the hour!" The ancient queen pointed a long-taloned finger at me. "Tell me, young rakkhoshi, what will you do with my crown? Will you use it to free your people, or serve yourself? Will you burn powerful with its magic, or let its powerful magic burn you?"

"Your crown?" I looked at the heavy golden mukut upon her head. "I don't want your crown! You're getting me confused with my friends Aakash and Kumi! I mean, I'm not even competing in the demonic royalty competition!"

Since the Serpent Empire began ruling the Kingdom Beyond centuries ago, they hadn't allowed anyone to be Demon Queen or King. The fact that they were permitting a demonic royalty competition to happen at Ghatatkach now was probably just a ploy to keep us rakkhosh in check. A little meaningless carrot to make us ignore the sting of

the imperialist stick on our backs. But symbolic title or not, I also knew that whoever won Demon Queen or King this year would be the first person to wear Hidimbi's crown since Hidimbi herself. I just hadn't planned on it being me.

"Whether you want my crown or not, it is coming to you," Hidimbi intoned.

As she slowly took it off, her bulging arm muscles and pained expression told me how much the mighty mukut must weigh. I recognized the crown's central jewels—the legendary Chintamani and Poroshmoni Stones—glowing white and gold, humming with intergalactic power like the stars they were. But if the history books were right, these magical jewels had been stolen from the rakkhosh many years ago. In fact, legend had it that only the true Demon King or Queen could summon the lost stones, which were actually living stars, back to the crown. And any imposter who presumed to put Hidimbi's crown on their head without the precious jewels back in place? Oh, no biggie. They'd just be burned to death by its power.

"I don't want your mukut," I repeated. "Believe me, I've never wanted to be Demon Queen. If you knew me, you'd know I'm way not into stuff like that! Leadership, sacrifice, honor—I mean, yuck!" I gave a shudder. "I swear, I'm really not about school spirit or royalty competitions. I'm

much more of an independent operator, if you know what I mean.”

“Time has a way of catching up to us all,” said the Queen, her voice echoing strangely in my head. “As do our destinies. And, of course, bees.”

I was starting to wonder if this was all just a dream. Everything—the throne room, the air, the words out of Hidimbi’s mouth—was taking on that weird, otherworldly, wibbly-wobbly quality. But what if it wasn’t a dream, and this was just the way time travel worked? What if Hidimbi put that crown on my head and it revealed me for what I really was—an imposter? If that happened, and the legends were true, then wearing that crown would spell my doom.

“I don’t want your crown,” I tried to repeat firmly. But my words floated out of my mouth in slow motion. I felt strange and stuck, like an insect caught in amber.

“Sometimes you choose the crown,” said Hidimbi, moving from her high throne and down the marble steps toward me, “and sometimes the crown chooses you.”

Her expression was beginning to seriously freak me out. “Wait, don’t put that thing on my head!” I yelled. “I told you, I don’t want your crown!”

And then, just as I had feared, the moment Hidimbi placed her weighty mukut upon my head, it began to burn.

Not slow, but sudden and fierce, like a raging inferno. My vision erupted in flames of orange, yellow, red. Soon, not just the golden crown but my head itself burst into flames that engulfed all of me in moments. And unlike when I created my own magical fire, these flames burned with a horrible, unspeakable pain. That's when I remembered that this had happened before. And I knew, in my bones, that it would happen again.

“Stop!” I screamed. “Stop, please! I don't want the crown! It burns, it burns!”

Everything got very loud, then very quiet. And all went dark.