



A Book of Royals and Deities (The Lost Fae Riders #2)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: The dragons are back...and destruction comes in flames.

“You were a survivor when you knew your body was broken; and you are now my rider. You were found to be stronger than any dragon below, and I have waited for your rebirth, Story Dehana. Now we ride to save this world.”

When the magic on the mansion shattered—so did my heart. I became a dragon rider on the brink of death at the hands of the sun, but I won't let any man break me again. The dynamics of the merciless world I was brought up in have changed, and just when I thought I had exposed all of the lies one more revelation pushes me to the edge.

King Ziven is my entwined mate, and he will do anything to earn my trust back. He was once my enemy, but now he is the man who saved my life over and over—we are tethered forever.

The dragons bring with them more than fire and wings.

They bring a hope of freedom in a world just as broken as I was.

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Within this book you will find the truths of the deities.

It all began in the Twilight Dynasty...

I can't read. It's a sad truth, but as I stare at the endless books on display in the king's library, oh, I wish I could. I might not be able to read, but I learnt the language of flowers, regardless.

Roses, red and bright as blood, are for passion.

The king regularly leaves them on my nightstand.

I regularly dream of throwing them in the fire and watching them burn.

But to do that would be an insult to my king, and an insult could mean a painful death for me when I've spent years doing everything I can to survive. I keep my soul alive by dreaming of freedom and of flying high enough in the skies that no one can hurt me.

The king throws yet another book onto the ground, making the fae workers jump before rushing over to his side, their brown cloaks rustling in the silence. It smells like them in here, the sweat on their brows and the fear lodged in their throats. A fae male comes close to grab the book off the floor nearest the king, but he doesn't back away. Move. Run. Don't say a word. I can't voice any of the warnings on the tip of my tongue. He bows his head, but I already know the fae male has made a grave mistake and nothing and no one can save him. "Your majesty, may I ask which book you are looking for and I might be able?—"

The king lunges like a snake, sinking his teeth into the fae man's neck, and the metal tang of blood invades my senses. Draining him, destroying him as he takes his life, and the man screams into the void of the library. I can't help him. I can only look into his horrified and scared eyes as he dies.

I can only dream of a future where I might be able to save people like him.

But dreaming doesn't work. Hope is fruitless in this world, and the fae is dead within a minute. The king releases his body, letting him drop unceremoniously onto the tiled floors with a thump that echoes. Right next to the scattered books the king has thrown. I don't know his name, if he has kids or parents, or what his dreams might have been. It all means nothing to the vampyres, and it never will do.

No one else dares to offer the king help as he reads for hours, frantic and unhinged as he always is when he is around books. We stay long after the fae man's blood has dried on his chin.

When he throws the last book, he stalks out of the room, and I dutifully follow him. He is fast, but he has always kept to a slower pace to almost mimic the fae he hates so much.

Except me. He tells me I'm more than the others. I'm different .

I hate it. I hate him .

My detest has festered for so, so long that it's become my own private song, repeated over and over in my mind. It's a song that I can never let come out into the open. I can never admit to the fire in my soul that wants revenge or even acknowledge my true feelings. I have to act like I'm in love with the king and want nothing more than his pleasure. The truth can't be seen out in the light of the day, but there are those I trust in the darkness, like my sister and her husband.

The fact that the king likes me as much as he does is the sole reason I've managed to stay alive, and whenever I speak of him, I speak of love. The Valin lands of the south are brutal, and my childhood was worse than this. The orphanage where I grew up was not a kind place for pretty girls who had hair like mine and stood out in a crowd. The king did save me from it and gave me the opportunity to save my sister later on, when I became his lover at fifteen.

It doesn't mean I truly love him. I can't. Love doesn't hurt, it doesn't scar and bleed red. The king heads to the throne room with his red cloak trailing on the ground behind him, and any fae or vampyre lurking in the corridors quickly bows their head. The warm air is thick and humid tonight, and I can smell the sage incense that the king likes and constantly has burned throughout his home.

The throne room is old, revealing the past of this legendary castle in every direction I look. This is the only older part of Valin that the king didn't destroy and remake years ago. The walls are the deepest orange and yellow; paintings of incredible sunrises fill tapestries that are hung between massive open archways that overlook deserts that surround the castle. The castle is made of sandstone, and despite its age, it is still rich with beauty.

The king heads straight to the glass jugs of blood. Blood from fae blood slaves like me. They just drain us like we're nothing. Our blood sits on a table by the throne, and a fae stands nearby to serve. A nervous fae servant in a thin brown cloak pours a heavy crystal glass and hands it to the king with her head bowed.

I never know his mood or what causes him to lose his temper, but every fae in this castle knows, when he loses it, death is coming. He takes the glass and walks over to the throne, sitting on it like he does every single morning for a few hours. He sits in dead silence, and I listen to the wind for company. My own thoughts are something I like to avoid.

When the day begins, just when the dawn light casts through the castle and hits the throne, the king smiles. Maybe he was handsome once, and young and something else, because for this second of the day, I can see it. It makes him look vulnerable and I wonder if it means there is a way to kill him. The light makes it almost seem like the crystal throne glows orange and red. I don't know why he is so fixated on this time of day, but I know better than to make a sound, to dare interrupt. Even his children and his queen don't dare come in here at this time. He tolerates me here, as I go onto my knees, my red dress fanning out around the white stone floor, and bow my head on the steps.

I never liked the day or night, but there is something about the twilight of midnight that makes me feel alive for a second. The very opposite to this time of day. It's the only time I usually get alone, to pretend I don't feel used and broken in this pretty cage I call my body. If I was born ugly, perhaps I wouldn't have been forced to this fate. The light makes the sun highlights in my black hair glow, and I almost enjoy that colour. Almost. It's the same colour as my blood and the very reason I am a slave.

The throne room doors slam open, the echo of the wood creaking fills the silent throne room. My eyes widen as I watch Prince Emyr Valerian Vampirion, crown prince and heir to the throne, walk in with three guards trailing after. He is in red armour that glistens in the orange light, spread across his thick and muscular body. The crown prince is a pretty prince but empty. Cold and evil. There is something deeply wrong with him, and he gets it from his father. The guards shut the door behind him, and the prince walks right up next to me, looking at his father and standing on my cloak. From what I've seen and heard of the crown prince, he is every bit of a cruel psychopath like his father. The entire royal family is the same, and him being here can only mean trouble.

He usually stays in the dark lands of Nightwell, where he has a castle and a big city to rule. His name is never far off the lips of the nobles and royals at court, though. The

prince who fell in love with a lessborn fae blood slave and declared her his. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't met her myself and saw how she is. Even I know Story Dehana is a force to be feared or loved. She escaped, if the rumours are right. Those rumours, or even mention of Story's name, are dangerous. The idea of a favourite to the crown prince escaping is pure hope to all of the fae. But it's true and everyone knows it. Story Dehana has become quite famous. Even a powerborn fae wouldn't have managed to escape the royals. A lessborn fae, who somehow managed to conquer the prince's heart and then abandon him? She is now whispered of as a god walking among fae. I wonder if she knows about the far-reaching effects of her escape.

It was very embarrassing for the royal family. The king killed three hundred fae for sport to quell his anger, and I suffered many nights of pleasing his mood. The king looks at his son with boredom in his orange eyes, the dullness in them matching the sheen of his skin that looks more broken with cracks than my soul. His silver hair matches his son's, but the king's is long and braided down his spine, whereas the prince keeps it kept and short. "What do you want now?" He makes a point of looking around. "Unless you've finally found that runaway fae girl of yours. I want to meet her."

I don't know why he still allows the prince to have such freedom. If anyone else came in here, he would have beaten and bit them, whether they were his queen or daughter. But not him. For some reason, he manages to get past every rule with a charming bow. Emyr straightens his shoulders this time, and I wonder if he has finally found his limit with the king. "I need an army, and I've lost the city of Nightwell to our new enemies. I'm here to report to you what has happened."

This catches the king's attention. He looks around the room at the fae servants. "Leave." I go to stand but the king shakes his head once at me, and I kneel. I'm surprised he is letting me stay, and I try not to shake with nerves as the room empties until it's just us three. Me and the two most powerful vampyres in my world. "A

rebellion?”

“No,” Emyr responds. I frown at the floor. I know there are rising rebellions in the Nightwell lands among the powerborn, but I don’t think they have the numbers to have taken the city. Not this quickly. “Dragons. With riders. I heard word they burst out of the woods before a magical barrier surrounded the city and locked everyone inside. No one can see in or out of it.”

Dragons?

Riders?

What in the name of the deities? The king is silent for a long time, but he is completely drained of the little colour he had left in his face. Is he scared? I try to hide my joy at seeing him look fazed. “They’re alive.” He suddenly stands up and walks the few steps to his son. He grabs his chin and stares at him for a long while. “You’ll get an army. The biggest army with my backing, and together we will end the riders for good. I know who they are, and they must have the other book. We will need it if we are to defeat them, my son.”

The king lets his son go and puts some distance between them. His eyes are nothing but calculating.

“I didn’t think you would believe me,” Emyr admits, brushing a hand through his silver locks that have grown wild around his face. “Dragons are truly real then?”

“Yes. Every story that I told you when you were a child of the dynasties and dragon riders was real.” The king looks back at me, and for a moment, I feel like he sees someone else when his eyes soften. He speaks like I’m not here though. “I remember the past like it was yesterday. I remember the reason I became a vampyre to begin with and what it cost me.” He looks away and frowns at the window. “They cannot be

allowed to ride around the world and take it back. Vampyres will rule for eternity.”

Before she died, my own mother told me passed down stories of dragons that used to be crystal red and flew the skies in my ancestors’ home. She told me stories of how the dragons used to be the brightest crystal colours that you ever saw and would look different in moonlight or sunlight. If this is true, maybe the chance we have been waiting for is finally here. Hope. The dragons can mean hope for us all. “I will follow your orders, father. I only request my plan for Story Dehana does not change. She will still be mine.”

The king places his hand on his son’s cheek and, to anyone else, it might come across as a loving gesture, but it’s not. The king loves no one but himself. “I will kill her myself if she distracts you from war. I’ve indulged your affair with her for far too long, son.” He grabs his son’s throat and squeezes. Emyr struggles, trying to pull the hand off him without hurting his king. I wasn’t alive to see what his childhood must have been like, but I can imagine. “You will do as I command—and for the vampyre race. Story Dehana is a name I do not wish to hear again. Do you understand?”

Emyrs croaks. “Y-yes-s.”

The king drops him on the floor like a log. “Come, we have much to do, son. It is time you learnt the art of warfare and I teach you all the preparations I have made for the dragons’ return. They are not the only creatures that will return to the skies for war.” I watch them walk to the doors, and I just hope he’s forgotten me. The deities’ luck is never on my side, and the king looks back. “Ava, pack your clothes and get ready to leave. You’ll be travelling at my side.”

I plaster a smile on my red painted lips. “Of course, my king. I wish to be nowhere else.”

The prince stares at me. “Your favourite...she looks like Story. I never noticed it until

now.”

His father secretly smiles at me. “Some bloodlines are more addictive than others and taste better. Ava is a rare breed, and perhaps your Story is the same.” As I watch them walk out together, my heart pounds as loudly as the rustle of the guards following close. Only when they’re gone do I climb to my feet and rush to the side door, slipping through the corridors, my red dress brushing against my legs.

The secret passageways through the castle are known only to the fae, and it’s easy enough to hide in them when I want to. I get to the basement quickly, but I pause by the wall that has a door hidden behind it to make sure no one is following me. I can never be too sure, but usually I’m forgotten within the castle. I’m there to lie on my back for the king, give blood for the king, and not die when he beats me for his pleasure.

I’m the last person they expect to be working against him, and I act broken enough to think there is no hope left in my soul to fight. They don’t get it. The vampyres will never understand that breaking someone only works when they choose to give up. It’s their power, not the abuser’s. Only when it’s completely silent for at least fifteen minutes do I open the trapdoor down to the basement level and light a lantern to carry.

I head through the cobwebs of the long-forgotten tunnel, my feet tapping on the damp floor as I pray no rats come near, before I get to a pillar where a boy sits asleep, snoring loud enough for the deities to hear him. I’m relieved to see my nephew, even if I wish my sister and brother-in-law didn’t send their young child here. They don’t have a choice; they are both worker fae, and they can’t be missing for too long. Marius is only ten, and no one notices the young fae running about. I kick his boot and he jumps. “You shouldn’t be sleeping when you’re on guard in here.”

He pulls his cloak tight around his bright red hair and grins up at me, two of his teeth

missing at the front. Marius is a lucky kid, though, to have two parents who aren't breeders and a full belly of food thanks to my regular donations. He stands and wraps his arms tight around my waist, and I smell his hair for a second. "I missed you, aunt Luna!"

"I missed you too." I lean down. "Listen, something big has happened, and I need you to tell your dad it's time for him to go into hiding like we planned. Apparently, Nightwell city has been taken by dragons and dragon riders. The king is going to war, and he claims to have weapons against dragons. I will be travelling with him, and I will send word of anything else I hear to the secret place. Do you understand?"

"I understand and I'll tell dad. How can all that be true?" He looks at me with his big blue eyes. "Dragons? What are they?"

I smile at him. "Fire breathing creatures that fly in the sky. They can fight the vampyres, and it's a good thing they are back. They used to be our rulers, but legend has it they vanished overnight." I'm never more thankful for the stories I was told. My sister was too young, only a babe when our parents died, but I've told her all the stories too. I hope she tells her son one day, before he sees them fly above and free us.

"And they're back to save us?"

Or doom us. I stroke his soft hair. "Yes. The dragons must be back to save us all." He hugs me once more and leans away, pulling out a book from the inside of his cloak. "Dad said there were great lengths taken to save this book, and he wants you to keep it safe. To get it to the rebellion in Nightwell city because the powerborn he is in contact with there should know the truth." I take the book and he picks up the bag I left down here with food a few days ago. All of it is sealed well and the rats can't get into it. "Bye, aunt!"

I watch as he leaves before I look at the book and hold it in the light. The cover is blood red, and in gold letters are two words. I've been trying so hard to spell out letters, and I stare at it, mouthing out every letter until I can finally understand the two words. Twilight Dynasty . Why would this book be so important that it's worth risking my life?

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The deities were once nothing more than trees, grown deep into the lands of the Twilight Dynasty and loved by the dragons whose ancestors were hatched within the bark. One Twilight king ordered them to be cut to make books so he could be all powerful. Two books are all that survived the fires of the revengeful dragons who lost their home... An orange book burnt that night long into dawn.

I 'm riding a dragon and I'm going to die. I feel cold, not like the cold of being outside in the snow in the dead of winter, but the kind of cold that has sunk into my bones, into my very blood, and I can't breathe through it without my chest rattling. I don't know whether it's from my blood loss or the sheer cold wind blowing at me, threatening to push me straight off the back of the beautiful red crystal dragon I'm awkwardly riding. I can't stop shivering, and everything is blurry. I'm going to fall. The moon hangs high above me like a taunting deity and only reminds me of him.

I hate him.

I hate them all.

Liars, the lot of them. For a moment, I feel like we are going to fly right into the silver moon and be lost to the stars for eternity. But the dragon veers to the left of the mansion, and we crash straight into the trees, several branches smacking into me, and I scream on impact. I roll straight off the dragon's back, down its wing, and I roughly slam onto the muddy forest floor with a gasp. The thick smell of leaves and forest fill my senses as I finally stop rolling, the bleeding hole in my stomach screaming with pain. I feel closer to the end of my life than I have been in months.

With a cry, I roll on my back so I can look at anything but the forest ground as I die.

I'm going to die for them to be free. Those liars who don't deserve it. My rage gives me strength and clarity not to feel frightened as the dragon roars into the sky. I look up at the fierce, striking dragon as it leans over me. Its head is so big that I feel lost in its shadow, and one of its teeth could be the same size as my arm. Its wing crashes into the ground with a thump, and the moonlight shines right through it, onto me until all I can see is silver and red light. This dragon is almost crystal clear to see through, but its body is covered in thick, glittering scales.

Beautiful.

The silver moonlight only makes its scales brighter as it looks down at me, and the heat of its breath blows around my body. I hold my hand over my stomach, feeling fresh blood pouring from the wound. Daegan tried to kill me. He used me and hurt me... And everyone else lied to save themselves. Even though the dragon broke the glass ceiling, not a single one of them deserves freedom. My teeth clatter as I stare up at the dragon, who could so easily end my poor excuse of a life.

"You were tested in the Decidere, and I watched. You were brave like your mother when you believed in your soul you couldn't be; you were a warrior like your father when you have never been trained to be one; you were a survivor when you knew your body was broken; and you are now my rider. You were found to be stronger than any dragon below, and I have waited for your rebirth, Story Dehana. Now we ride to save this world."

The dragon's words come back to me as I stare into her purple eyes that burn like actual fire. I'm tired. I'm so, so tired. The ground shakes with every step as she gets closer, and she watches from above me. She chose me as her rider, and she is a girl dragon. This wild, huge dragon chose me, and I don't think she made a good choice. I don't have the strength to get up off the forest floor, and I doubt anyone in that mansion is going to help me. I wouldn't want their help.

Bitterness stings my throat as I picture the Moon king, like he is right here. I realise with a horrid feeling in my heart that he has been telling me the truth from the beginning. I'm a traitor, or a reborn one, in his eyes. Still, he warned me about Daegan, and yet he still left me alone with him in the end to die. Betraying bastard. They all betrayed me. I realise they've all got what they wanted—my death. The princess I read about, she died for all of them and somehow signed my death right along with hers. Except dying is not the plan I fought for. It can't end like this. I want to live. "Your life does not end here, Story Dehana. We have only just met, and you are a survivor. We will survive this night, and it will be one more battle you won."

Her voice is so loud and yet softly spoken in my mind. "How can you speak to me?" I whisper around the pain. I can hear in my mind, and I feel her in my soul like she is part of me now. Like somehow, she has wrapped her claws tight around my heart and sunk them in forever. Like Ziven did, and then he ripped them out when he betrayed me. I fell for him, and he lied.

"We are bonded through time and generations, through birth and rebirth. There is no space, no world, that will ever part a rider and their dragon. You are my rider, Story Dehana and the deities above us. I chose you as mine and you will recover."

She chose me? "Why? I'm not this princess?—"

I swear she laughs, but I'm in too much pain to care. "No, you are stronger than she ever was. The Princess Atilia was born in luxury and never fought for anything in her life until her death. I have waited for you to come back, and I watched the skies on the night you were born. Encased in stone, I saw you enter the mansion, and I knew our time had begun."

A gasp of pain echoes from my throat. "I'm sorry then that I'm going to die. I would have liked to get to know you, too." I look up at the stars and lift my hands to see the dragon markings dancing on my arms. The fierce dragon who chose me leans right

over my broken body, her hot breath blowing against my face even warmer now. But she can't breathe life back into me.

Someone might be absolutely terrified looking up at a dragon, whose mouth could easily clamp over them and kill them in a single huff of fire or bite. But when I've got nothing to lose and death is chasing me, something in my soul doesn't feel terrified anymore. I've been used as a blood slave, then used as a way for the fae riders to escape their trap, and I don't want to die on this cold, damp forest floor. Not yet. A tear that looks like silver starlight drips from the dragon's eye, down her cheek, before dropping straight onto my stomach. I gasp as it feels like it burns my injury from within, and I scream through the pain.

The pain is gone within a minute, and any bad feeling in my body is gone with it. I run my hands across my flat stomach, feeling for the injury that Daegan did but finding nothing but my usual scarred skin and torn dress smothered in blood and mud. My hair is a mess of windblown red and black locks as I push it aside to smile at my dragon. She saved me. "Rise to your feet, my rider."

I can't believe what I'm feeling, what I'm seeing, as the dragon looks to the sky. "You healed me."

"Dragons only cry for their rider. Not everyone has betrayed you, Story. I never will, and not everything is as it seems. One king's choice was not the other's." Her wing nudges my arm. "Stand at my side where I can watch. We are not alone, and an enemy is coming to us on wings."

I climb to my feet as another dragon flies above us, its huge wings blocking out the moonlight in the forest right before it swoops down and lands with a thump that sends my heart racing. I stand by my dragon's leg as she roars, and the nasty sound can only be heard as what it is—a warning. It's a brilliant bright yellow dragon that looks like pure sunlight, beautiful, slender and half the size of my bonded dragon. There is

still rock on its legs that is breaking away, revealing the true colour, the true dragon underneath. Daegan sits on the yellow dragon's back, and he looks right at me. For a second, I actually see some sort of unease in his face as he looks at my dragon and then back to me with surprise. "The rumour is true then. You survived and you're now a rider of Maeve."

Maeve. The name rolls over me and I like it. I lift my head high because there isn't a damn chance I'm showing an inch of weakness in front of him. Daegan looks every inch the king of the Sun Dynasty in gold shiny armour and his gold crown dug into his hair. The golden king here to save everyone by murdering me. It's ironic that murder will paint him a hero. "What do you want, Daegan? You have your freedom and my hate, wasn't that your plan?"

Daegan runs his hand through his blond hair and flashes me a charming smile. It doesn't work anymore. He is a good liar and very good at twisting people's feelings, but we both know he might be the king of the Sun Dynasty, but his heart is black and rotten. "I didn't want to hurt you, Story. Let me explain?—"

My dragon roars loud enough to shake the leaves out of the trees before baring her teeth at him, and the smell of smoke from her mouth fills the air. I wouldn't stop her if she tried to burn him to a crisp. I hate him too. "I don't want to hear anything from you ever again! You could have told me the truth from the beginning and showed me the book. If I did make the spell in another life, maybe there was a way to undo it without killing me, you fucking monster! You could have taken any path other than trying to make me fall in love with you and then attempting to kill me. Do you want to know something?" I look into his eyes. "Even when I was your friend, I knew something was wrong with you. Something bad. It's why there was never a chance I would have fallen for you. I doubt anyone could love you when you're a monster. The deities are said to judge us, and I'll pray they judge you hard for this."

I was owned by a royal monster before, and I will never let myself be used by another

again. Emyr and Daegan have a lot in common, and I was a fool not to see it.

Daegan blanches and I know I struck somewhere in whatever he has left of a heart. “And you think Ziven loves you?” He laughs at me, and my cheeks brighten. “He left you with me, knowing I wanted you dead. Where is he now?” He cocks his head to the side to listen to the wind and the silence. “Not here. Maybe there is something wrong with you, Story. Maybe you’re the problem and not me.”

“Why are you here?” I refuse to let him show how hard his words just hit. I don’t think there has been a day in my life that I haven’t thought something is wrong with me. Something unlovable. I’ve thought it my entire life, but I refuse to let his actions dictate how I see myself. He made a shit mistake and attempted to kill me. I know I wouldn’t have done the same to him. “I don’t want to talk about Ziven with you.”

“The magic didn’t fully break because you are not dead. There is a barrier over Nightwell city and for miles around it, including here. Ziven will be happy to reclaim his lands, but to get to my lands, the spell needs to be broken.” He tightens his grip on his dragon, who has a saddle of gold on its back, with more gold strapped to its chest. This must be Odemis. “We never asked you to lock us away, princess. You still got us trapped. I don’t know how you just healed yourself, but you have to die. Don’t think I take any pleasure in doing this.”

“That’s a lie, and we both know it. You’ve been using me for months, trying to figure out a way to make me love you. I’m also not a princess, and I’m not her! I wouldn’t choose to save any of you liars.” I wave my hand in the forest. “Go and find the vampyres. You deserve everything they will do, but I’m done. I’m done with everyone in that fucking mansion.”

He sighs, but I watch his hands now, knowing damn well that he’s sneaky with his light attacks. He fights like a coward. “Not all of them lied. I have the book, and whoever has the book is in true control of the mansion. Everybody that entered the

mansion was blood bound to the book. It commands them like I. There's only one other person who is strong enough to resist that command, but I told everyone else to lie, and the book helped make sure they couldn't interfere. There were a few, like Mazzis, who tried to tell you the truth in other ways. Books and hints. Never breaking the command but skirting around it with wit." He shakes his head. "I must have a heart, because I'm telling you that for nothing."

He's telling me out of guilt.

"Ziven could have told me, then?" He was my enemy to begin with, and now he's...I don't know, but I hate him for this. I don't think there is ever a way we can fix it, and I doubt he cares enough to want to. He knew all this time, and he didn't tell me. That hurts more than Daegan attempting to kill me. Maybe Daegan was right. I fell in love with him when I shouldn't have, but the Moon king doesn't love me. I feel like I'm the same as the princess—obsessed with a man that isn't mine.

I look up as dragons start filling the sky like a wave of nothing but coloured wings. Most of the dragons are yellow, like the sun, and I know they are with Daegan. Some are more of a burnt orange, but there are hundreds of them pouring out of the mansion now. I drop my eyes back to the Sun king. "You've got your war. You're free of the mansion. Isn't that enough for now?"

Daegan's laugh is hollow. "I want the world back, and my lands freed of the vampyres. Your death is the only wa?—"

Maeve growls in warning, and fire spits out of her mouth onto the ground between us. She is huge, and I think she could take down Odemis and Daegan in a fight. Daegan knows it too, as he looks between us and frowns. I smile. "I'm not as weak as you thought I was. Come for me and see what happens. When Maeve is done with your dragon, I will kill you myself, Sun king. We aren't friends and you literally burnt any part of me that once cared about you, so fucking try it."

Daegan looks at me like he has never met me before. Good.

Maeve feels proud, or maybe I'm imagining feeling her emotions. "His dragon is weak in light of mine. I am a queen to those of old dragon blood. Tell the Sun king if he takes one step towards you, then I'm going to make sure the Sun Dynasty dies with him and all of them burn."

The venom in her voice is nothing like the soft way she spoke to me before. I clear my throat. "Maeve claims to be a queen of the dragons, and she warns that you shouldn't go anywhere near me, or all of the Sun Dynasty burns."

He grits his teeth. "How did you claim her?"

"She's mine." I smile at his frustration.

"The Twilight Dynasty had the biggest dragons, and yours is the only one left. Yes, they were royalty among the dragons." I feel Maeve's pain like it's my own. Something terrible happened to the other Twilight dragons, and my eyes fill with tears. I am feeling her emotions. I reach out and put my hand on her leg, needing to comfort her somehow. She looks at me for a second, only a second, because she wants to keep her eye on Daegan, and her purple eyes tell me everything. She has suffered like I have. "It will be a shame to end her, but I will have every single dragon in my army attack her at the same time to get to you. A hundred dragons against one? We will win."

The ground shakes as a new dragon lands to our right, distracting us both, and a chill dances down my spine. Ziven. The Moon king and my enemy who kissed me and wrecked my heart. Ziven is sitting on his dragon, in all black armour that curves around every tught mnulcar of his thick body, and a silver cloak falling from his shoulders to his waist that matches the silver earrings in his one ear. His black locks are windswept, and yet he still looks perfect.

My heart pounds faster as his eyes meet mine, and I can't see anything but anger in the silver depths of his striking eyes. I have to look away, and the new dragon is a good distraction. His dragon is all pure black crystal that shines silver, with rows of black teeth in its massive mouth, matching the black spikes down its back and on its tail. It's bulkier than both Odemis and Maeve, and he is close to the same size as Odemis—huge—and familiar as its fiery eyes turn to me. I know this dragon, even if it was covered in rock the last time we saw each other. He came and saved me in the Decidere.

My eyes are pulled up, locking with Ziven's, and all the air leaves my lungs at the fury I see there. He runs his eyes over me before smoothly sliding down his dragon's leg. Daegan has climbed off his dragon too, and he walks over to Ziven with his back to me. "As a king, surely you see what I did was for the best. If we take her together, our people can still be?"

Ziven punches him hard enough that I hear a crack, and blood splatters across Ziven's face, into his dark hair, and Ziven's fury glows in his eyes. Their dragons roar as Daegan stumbles back a few steps. Ziven is on him, punching him again and again, until Daegan falls in a bloody lump in a puddle of mud. "You fucking fool! You've only known her for a short time, and you're going to risk everything for her?"

Moonlight acts like shadows as it tightens around Daegan in the puddle, who is glowing with sunlight to try to escape. It's hard to look at either of them. Ziven reaches for Daegan and grabs his arm, snapping the bone in two. I don't think I'll forget the sound of the break and how it feels like any alliance between the dynasties snaps right along with it. Daegan's scream is loud enough for the deities to hear. I should feel good that he is being hurt, but all I feel is sickness rising in my throat. Ziven grabs Daegan around his throat and lifts him like a bloody doll. Blood coats Ziven's hands, and Daegan's light hair is smothered in it.

Ziven finally speaks and each chipped word is full of hate. Rage. So much rage. "I

warned you at the ball, if you touched her, you'd die. I fucking warned you and you still went after what is mine .”

Mine.

Daegan claws at Ziven's hand as he chokes. Ziven isn't done. He might kill him and I'm not sure I want to stop it. “Then you scared Hettie and hurt her. She's your fucking niece, and you used her as a distraction. They both belong to my dynasty, and I am going to enjoy murdering you for going anywhere near them.”

Hettie? What did he do to her? I know Ziven isn't joking about killing Daegan, but as I look to the sky of dragons and hear the fires they are beginning, I know he can't kill him. “Ziven.” I barely say his name, and when he looks at me, right into my eyes, all I see is two people: the man I love even when I didn't want to and the man who lied to me. “We've got enough problems with the mansion open and Nightwell city within the barrier of magic. That is a city full of vampyres and fae slaves who need to be saved. They will be attacking soon.” I step forward and Ziven's burning scent wraps around me. “He is pathetic, but he is the king of the Sun Dynasty in a time of war. I want nothing more than to watch you kill him, but not right now. Let him go.”

Ziven doesn't move and I carry on. “They're going to come and attack us no matter what. They're fast and quick, trained and have weapons. The vampyres are the real enemy here.” My eyes drift to Daegan, who is pathetically wheezing. “He is the Sun king, and he tried to kill me, but I'm telling you to let him go. If that isn't enough to convince you how much of a threat the vampyres are, then nothing will and just kill him.”

He releases his grip on Daegan's neck, but Ziven doesn't release him from the moonlight, the shadows of pure silver wrapped tightly around Daegan's body that are cutting deep lashes on his arms, legs and chest. Daegan doesn't scream, but he is shaking with pain. Ziven's voice is cold and empty. “You can thank Story for saving

your pathetic life.” He waits. “Now.”

“Th-hank y-ou.” Daegan manages to spit out, but there is disgust in his voice that no one could miss.

“Careful,” Ziven’s murmur echoes in the forest. He may have whispered the word, but the full force of the Moon Dynasty king echoed within it. “You’re speaking to my woman and the future queen of the Moon Dynasty. I suggest you begin expressing your gratitude with your majesty and then respectfully go from there with your apology.”

I blink in surprise at Ziven’s claim on me.

Daegan gulps and looks at me. “Your majesty?—”

He is cut off as Ziven wraps silver shadows around his throat. “I sensed sarcasm and now I’m done giving you a chance to even speak to her. You’re dead.”

“Ziven!” I shout at him. “For fuck’s sake, he got the message. He’s pathetic. Just let him go.”

Ziven’s jaw tightens as he looks at me, and the shadows flicker away. He doesn’t look back at Daegan, like if he does, he won’t be able to stop himself from killing him. “Get on your dragon, Sun king, and get to the skies. You’re a king rider. We can talk about the rest when the vampyres have burnt.” Daegan is smart enough to climb to his shaky feet, and he practically runs to his dragon before taking to the skies.

I finally relax a little now he is gone. Relax as much as I ever can around Ziven.

Ziven walks right to me, all male arrogance that I’m used to from the Moon king. I back away when he is close. He frowns but he stops, looking at the space I made

between us like it's on fire. "I was a blood slave to the vampyre crown prince and abused by him for years. I thought when I ran and found freedom, even in that mansion, I was done with royals abusing me, but then...then the Sun king tried to kill me because I'd finally let myself fall for you!" My shout is half sob, half roar. I don't keep the rage in my voice from ripping him apart. I can't even see his face through my tears.

"Why do this to me, Ziven? Why not just tell me the truth? Daegan said that the rest of them were bound by the book. Catherine, everyone, they couldn't tell me. But he said that you could! You called me a traitor; you made me your enemy and then hated me. You also kissed me; you also danced with me and trained me. You also made me laugh and feel safer than I ever felt in my life. Why not just tell me the truth?" I shove my hands into his chest, and he lets me shove him back a few steps. Tears fill my eyes until I can't see, I can't think, I can't breathe. He lets me hit his chest over and over until my fists hurt. Until my face is wet with tears and I just want to scream. I want to scream and scream until one of us falls. "You let me fucking love you! Was it all part of the plan, to get free of the trap? Did none of it mean anything to you!" I smack his chest one more time and stop. My hands are shaking as I suck in cold air. "You just claimed I was yours. If that is true, why did you leave me with him?" My chest heaves as I finally meet his eyes. His silver eyes are smothered in pain, shattered, broken and cracking as we stare at each other. Like two lovers in a star-crossed path. "Did I mean anything to you?"

I'm not strong enough to stop him from closing the space between us. He presses his forehead against mine, and he breathes with me until it's no longer like sucking in air to feel alive. Until his touch calms me, and I hate him more for it. "I hate you."

"Story, you mean everything to me, and I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry." He kisses me and my body comes alive for him, ignoring my screaming mind, burning for him like he isn't our enemy at all. He kisses me like that can be the answer to everything. Only when I'm breathless and taste him on my tongue like a drug does he place his

hands on my waist. “I owe you a long explanation, but I need you to trust me just one more time. I need you, Story. I need you to stay by the mansion with your dragon and protect Hettie. Protect those in there who cannot fight and do not have riders. Our history is in that mansion, and vampyres cannot be let in to destroy it all.”

“I still hate you, but I love Hettie, and if you’re going to fight the vampyres, then I will stay with Maeve for her sake.” I nod once and make space between us. I can only think straight when he isn’t holding me.

Ziven searches my eyes, but in his, I see the same stubborn conviction I usually see. The same frustrating, gorgeous and powerful king that I kissed only hours ago in a ballroom under the stars. “I mean what I said. You’re mine and I am going to beg, plead and do anything to prove to you that you’re mine. I’m yours. I won’t let Daegan touch you again.” He heads to his dragon and pats the leg of the huge black beast. “Brythan, we ride for war!”

I know I need an explanation, but the idea of the vampyres getting anywhere near Hettie terrifies me. I turn and attempt to climb onto my dragon in a stupid torn dress, pulling her scales until I get onto her back with my entire body shaking with nerves. There is almost a seat shape on her back between two crystal spikes, and I settle into it, wrapping my arms around the spike in front of me. “We protect the mansion tonight. Tomorrow, we leave for good. I can’t stay here. Daegan will try to kill me, and Ziven, he has my heart, but he doesn’t deserve it. I’m done.”

If I do stay, Ziven will tear my heart apart more than he already has. If I made the barrier, maybe I can leave through it. I have to try. I promised Kyrell I would choose me, I would fight for my future and live. This isn’t living, not anymore. Maeve’s fierce voice fills my mind. “I fly wherever my rider commands.” She jumps off the forest floor and straight into the smoky skies as I scream from the shock of the air smacking into me, just as the bells of war echo from Nightwell city.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:21 am

My name is lost to time because of the books.

They were once good, but they are now filled with dark magic.

Be warned.

Maeve flies up above the mansion, and I quickly learn my lack of experience in dragon riding means I'm going to fall off. I lock my body in, tugging on every muscle I have to try and hold onto her as the sheer force of her flight slams into me. She glides around the tips of the towers of the mansion, before gliding in a circle around the clouds above. My breath catches in my throat as I see the thousands of stars around me and how easily it looks like I'm sitting in them. I was a girl who read books about the stars, and now I'm the girl flying through them. I wish I could have told myself this was my future, back when I felt so hopeless. That I'd claim a dragon and fly in the skies. That I'd face my enemies, and I'd survive them. I survived, just like Kyrell always claimed I would.

An echo of a scream, one so far away but carried by the wind, has me turning to face the Nightwell city in the distance. It's nestled on the edge of the forest, but it's easy to see, even in the dark. It's burning. The vampyres right along with the city they once ruled. The barrier of magic that Daegan mentioned is a mile or so outside of the city and glittering white. Sickness rises in my throat as I imagine what is going on in the city and how bad it must be. I can just make out the burning structures and the roars of thousands of dragons that I have just unleashed onto this world as they swarm and dive with mouths of fire.

A part of me wonders if they deserve it...the vampyres who have never stopped

taking from fae. Including me. They took and took, destroyed and conquered every part of my body until it belonged completely to the vampyre who owned me. Hundreds of thousands of fae in that city would tell the same tale as me, and they would cheer for the dragons who will be burning the vampyres for their freedom.

But I think of Professor Aleksander Wollke for a second and remember the kind vampyre who showed me nothing but love. He cared for me, protected me, and never once treated me like I was his slave. I know if he could have chosen, he would have never had me as a blood slave but as a daughter and given me the world. Can an entire race be cast into the fire for the mistakes of the majority?

I'm glad Ziven told me to stay here. This isn't a choice I want to make. My hands tighten on the scales of Maeve, my dragon, as we watch the thick forests outside the mansion for any sign of vampyres. I wonder if Maeve went against the vampyres with Atilia on her back or if she never got to fight them because she was stuck in stone in that mansion. I lean down, closing my eyes and trying to speak to her in my mind instead of out loud. "You should make a ring of fire around the mansion to protect it. The vampyres are fast, but they won't run through fire. It burns them."

"Dragon fire burns any race," she responds, diving, and the wind whips hard against my face. I shiver from the cold air, wishing I wasn't wearing a dress with blood soaked into it and nothing else. "And any move I make is with your command, Story. It is we should make a ring of fire. We are as one when we ride."

Something warm floats around in my chest at the sheer belief she has in me. She reminds me of Kyrell but with the fierce protectiveness I once saw from Ziven. I stroke her scales as she flattens out into a smooth glide. Maeve tips her head back before pure red fire, hotter and brighter than any fire I've ever seen, pours out of her mouth. It crashes onto the ground where it stays alive, burning like it might forever. Maeve moves fast, making a ring for a mile around the mansion with thick flames lighting up the night and casting away any shadows.

Fae watch from the mansion door, staring up at me, and I try to push down the insecurity that their stares create. I don't want anyone looking up to me. I feel the heat against my skin as a shivery feeling drifts over me and down my spine. I know that feeling—I could never forget it. Vampyres are here. The vampyres, in red guard clothing, pour out of the forest. Several are stupid enough to try to run straight into the dragon fire, and they end up screaming on the ground before disintegrating into ash. The smarter ones look up at the sky and to us.

I can't see their faces under the red armour, but anger flows through me until I feel like I'm shaking with it. "Burn them." My dragon swoops low on my command, catching two vampyres in her mouth with a mouth of fire. I wince at their screams, looking away as she eats them, and they are soon gone. A vicious snarl echoes out of Maeve as she lands on top of the mansion and spreads her red wings out wide. There isn't a better feeling in the world than riding a dragon, and I feel more powerful than I ever have done. I can see why rulers get addicted to power...to death.

The fire in the distant city is growing fast, and I can hear screams echoing from it that freeze my heart. Ziven. He is strong and his dragon looked as fierce as he is. He will be okay; it's the vampyres who should be frightened of them. Most of them have lived in a world where they are on top of the food chain and no one was ever a threat to them. The food chain just changed, and dragon-riding fae are on top. The dragons are free, and this world will burn under them.

I spot a dragon coming from the fire and smoke in the far distance, fast and swift. They fly better and more trained than I can yet. Maeve braces herself to jump into the sky before she relaxes when the dragon is closer. "It is a Moon Dynasty dragon. You are safe."

I'm not sure what to make of the fact she seems to trust Ziven—far more than I currently do. I'm not sure if I hate him or want him. Maybe with us, it will always be a mix of those two, and the chaos in between is where we live.

I don't recognise the dragon, but they all seem to have changed from the rocky dragons I was used to seeing. It's almost like grey crystal in colouring, and inside its wings looks like grey smoke swirling around, with sharp tips on the edges of its wings. The dragon is much smaller than Maeve, but he or she is fast. The dragon flies around us before slamming into one of the towers, curling around it before lowering its head so I can see its rider. Calix.

The Moon Dynasty dragon rider is someone I could have called a friend, but I'm not sure what to make of him now. He didn't exactly betray me when he couldn't tell me anything because of the book's magic. It comes down to the book and Daegan, and Ziven too. Calix is in black armour that matches Ziven's from earlier, and he is covered in ash and blood. It's enough blood that I worry it's coming from him, but there doesn't seem to be an injury on him. His eyes are nothing but panicked. "You're wearing a dress in a war, Story?"

"Not by choice," I shout back over the howl of the wind. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you with Ziven?"

He shakes his head. "I came for you." I frown. Me? "You need to go and stop Ziven before he does something he regrets. He isn't thinking straight. The city fell quickly because there was a building rebellion in the city by the powerborn fae, and the lessborn fae joined them. They locked out the vampyres on the streets, killed those they couldn't get outside, and Daegan sent his army to burn all vampyres. Most of the fae have escaped to the forest but not all of them. There are thousands locked in the city and thousands of vampyre women and children too. Ziven is too far gone to see reason. He will listen to you."

The wind blows my messy hair around my shoulders, the red mixing with the colour of my dragon as my heart pounds. "You're his best friend and second in command. Why do you think he'll listen to me, of all people?"

“We both know everything he does now is for you.” Calix points to the city. “Get to the city and stop him. He...Ziven needs you. I’m begging you, Story. I know you must feel betrayed by us all, especially him, but Ziven is in love with you. We all knew you were in love with him for months, and if he wanted you dead, he could have done it himself at any point. He didn’t; instead, he protected you. He fucked up and he can explain it all, but please, if you still care, stop him doing something that will haunt him forever.”

I can’t face the truth in his words right now, but I can face the Moon king.

“Fly.” I lean down, clutching her scales tightly as she listens and jumps into the sky with so much force I nearly sail straight off her into the clouds. I can barely breathe over my racing heart as she flies fast, up into the clouds but towards the city. We go past dragons who move out of the way for her, and many turn to watch Maeve. Maybe she is a queen to them.

Maeve flies faster than I’ve felt her fly before, and when she dives, my stomach fills with butterflies and I nearly scream. I feel like I’m going to fall right off her as I hold on, praying to the deities that it’s not too late to stop Ziven. The silver moon shines down on us, a full moon that bleeds high in the sky and feels like an omen of death as I get my first look at Nightwell city when we break through the clouds.

It’s burning.

There’s fire everywhere, and the beauty of it is lost in death and chaos. The smoke fills the air like a grey cloud, choking and killing, but the fire is like a wave that has crashed into the city. Dragons are everywhere in the sky, some diving and catching vampyres in their mouths, and others are on the ground with their riders, fire pouring out of their jaws. This is what Daegan wanted. Revenge. War. The end of the vampyres. The revenge of the dragons and their riders...and it won’t stop. I let them out; I did this, and how many are dead already? The dragons are like a storm,

endlessly swirling around the city and leaving nothing but screams and death in their wake.

Ziven is easy to find ,but maybe that's because I can find him anywhere. His massive dragon outsizes every other dragon here except for Daegan's, but Daegan's dragon looks the same colour as the others. I don't have to instruct Maeve to fly to him. She takes off to the other side of the city by the coast, where vampyres are desperately getting their families into the boats like that might save them. It won't.

Ziven is burning a row of houses before he lifts his head, and even in the distance, I know he has seen me. The Moon king looks every inch the powerful man he was born to be as he rides his dragon in the night. His dark hair is a mess of ash, and his silver eyes are glowing like stars. Moonlight is wrapped around his dark, tight leather clothes, and the sword on his back catches the silver light so it almost glitters. Ziven is as beautiful as the moon, even when he is riding through flames of death.

He lifts the reins, his dragon moving with him like they are one, and he turns to face me. Maeve heads to the cliff side, landing right on the edge where the smoke isn't too thick. It's silent up here, but the screams of the burning city are a sound I never want to remember. Brythan lands with Ziven, and he climbs off as I slide down Maeve's wing, ripping my dress even more. I must look a mess, but Ziven doesn't look at me like I am. He looks at me like I'm his salvation. Ziven waits for me on the edge of the cliff, moonlight pouring over its king as he watches a city burn. The moon mark on his cheek seems to reflect the flames.

I touch his arm, but he doesn't pull his eyes from the city. "You're going to burn the entire world to ash. Stop."

Ziven turns to stare at me, and for once I can read his every emotion. Protective, possessive, and pure merciless love. "For you, it burns. For you, there is going to be no world left to ever hurt you again. I once asked you who hurt you, and your answer

broke the part of my soul that would ever show the world mercy again.”

Loving Ziven was never a choice for me, never something I could escape, even when I wasn't sure we could make it. Loving him is hard, messy and dangerous, but no one can make me feel like he does with just a sentence. He will burn the world for me, and I know I'd burn it for touching him, too.

I step closer until our bodies are touching, locking my eyes with his until I feel like our souls are watching each other. Every bit of my body that touches his feels alive, and I want to stop him. Calix is right, he will regret this, even if he doesn't feel like it right now. “You're right, most of them deserve to die, but not all of them are monsters. My first master wasn't a monster, and he was a vampyre. He never hurt me, not once. We can't judge everybody, and there are vampyre children in this city who are going to burn. You want the king who took this world from you all, and he isn't here. He doesn't care if you kill every vampyre here, and he will use their deaths to fuel a war against the dragon rider race. There are hundreds of thousands of fae slaves in Nightwell; be their saviour and not just another king.”

Ziven presses his forehead against mine, breathing me in. His voice breaks and my heart does too. “I nearly lost you. I fucked up and nearly lost you, Story.”

“I'm not gone,” I breathe, my eyes filling with tears. “But I can't watch you burn them for me. Stop.”

He kisses my forehead before stepping away from me. Moonlight bends to the command of its king as it falls from the sky like falling stars. Pure silver light floods the city and stops every fire, stops every dragon, and within a few minutes, there is silence and smoke. The dragons take to the skies, and Daegan flies past us, his eyes locking with Ziven in a silent challenge before landing on the cliff edge. “What the fuck are you doing? We?—”

“There is no we in any of this, Daegan. You come a step closer to Story, and I will fucking kill you,” Ziven growls. “Now fuck off. These are my lands, and we are done burning them. You have no power over the night lands.”

Daegan grits his teeth, wiping ash off his cheek. He looks a beaten wreck, and everything pretty about him is damaged. I like it. “You’re a fucking fool, Ziven. She is just?—”

“ Mine ,” Ziven snarls. “And you don’t get to say a word about her. Fuck off. Last warning.”

“We both know that isn’t the whole truth,” Daegan snarls right back, looking once at me with pure venom before turning and getting back on his dragon. What did that mean? Ziven turns back to the city, watching it like a guest, and I forget about Daegan. I hate him for trying to kill me and trying to use me. I fell for his charming smiles and lies. I should have known that the king I couldn’t stop thinking about, who became my best friend and lover all in one breath, was the only one I could trust the most in that mansion. I’m not sure I trust him, and I still want to know what happened, but Calix’s words have gotten into my head. Ziven could have killed me at any point. I think I only pretended to hate him, when the truth was, I didn’t. Ziven always saw right through me. “My lands once held the most beautiful city in the world, and now look at it...it is a burning disaster. A shell of what it once was when my father ruled. It feels like only yesterday I stood here with my mother and watched the festivals for the moon.”

But that’s all gone now. I almost forgot this is the first time he is seeing this in hundreds of years. I haven’t gotten my head around the fact he is hundreds of years old...they all are except Hettie.

“They need a leader.” I wave to the city, to the fae and vampyres who will be fighting down there. “And everything can be rebuilt. We are safe in here. You can tell the

surviving fae what we used to be, and we can dance at festivals again. We can get it all back with the dragons and a new king.”

“And queen,” Ziven agrees, touching my back and leading me back to our dragons. Queen? Ziven really has a one-track mind, and I can’t be his queen. I’d be a disaster. “We will return to the mansion and make a plan. Until then, I will make some dragons stay to keep the people calm. I need to see that Hettie is okay after what Daegan did.”

“What did he do?”

He parts from me. “Used her to distract me from you. He knew there were only two people I care about, and he used them both to get what he wanted. That’s why, by the end of this war, the Sun king is going to die.”

We both know killing Daegan won’t be that easy, but I’m done defending him. Ziven can kill him for all I care. As I look over my shoulder, I pray that Kyrell’s mother isn’t in that city. That my own mother isn’t either. As much as I want to see them...I know the city will be a home for death and death alone.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:21 am

They said all who hail from the Twilight Dynasty

have the power of fire in their blood...

Ziven lands first in the clearing, and he knocks over every bit of forgotten gardens left. His dragon digs his claws into the dirt at his feet, roaring at the fae in front of the mansion. Maeve smoothly lands next to him, half on the gate I once ran through before getting trapped in the mansion. Our dragons fly well together, and I found it easier to hold onto Maeve as she kept up with Brythan. I know Ziven and Brythan were friends, and their dragons must have flown together before, because they act too natural in the sky. Am I jealous of Atilia? Am I jealous of a dead woman? I don't know, but something feels horrid in my stomach at the idea of them spending any time together. I keep thinking of the diary, of how she was so in love with Ziven, and how he turned his back on her. Or at least, that is what she felt happened. Will he do that to me? Did he already?

Daegan abandoned her altogether, and I think they had a relationship.

I manage to dismount a little bit easier this time with my torn dress before she takes off and Brythan joins her in the skies. Watching them, I still can't get over the amazement of seeing dragons in the sky. I need some training on how to be a dragon rider, but something about it feels natural, and I wonder if my connection to the princess is that reason. It might explain why I learnt to fight quicker than Ziven expected, why the stones glowed red for me and not yellow like everyone else. I need to ask Ziven or Maeve about the stones.

Outside of the mansion is filled with fae, and so many of them are touching the

ground, staring at the sky and just breathing in the air. They were trapped and even if it was my blood spilled to get them out, I like seeing them happy. Even as fucked up as that is. Calix and his dragon are still on top of the mansion, watching everything, and he nods to Ziven. Ziven pulls his eyes down and watches the fae with a coldness I'm used to seeing from him. He moves to stand on a rock and claps his hands once to attract attention. I know if I stood up there and clapped, no one would bother stopping what they are doing, but when Ziven does it, his natural commanding presence draws every pair of eyes to him like a moth to a flame.

“Everyone needs to get back inside. This is fucking war, not a chance to smell flowers or dance about like we are fairies from the tales your parents told you. We survived in there for hundreds of years, and unless you want to be a vampyre's lunch, get the fuck back inside.” Whispers break out and everyone goes silent as they look to Ziven and are shocked by his bluntness. I internally wince, knowing he really needs to work on his speeches. Many of them turn their eyes to me, and some are clearly surprised I'm alive.

I clear my throat. Here it goes. “There are still vampyres out here who will be escaping into the forest and looking for any fae to kill. King Ziven is offering to protect you inside the mansion while the royals make a plan for our freedom.”

Ziven takes over at my pause, and my stomach finally stops feeling like it's rising up my throat. “As you are all aware, these are my lands, and while you're here in them, you follow my command. The rule of Moon stands, and I order you back into the mansion.”

“Where is King Daegan?” Someone shouts out, followed by a few agreements. They love Daegan, their blessed Sun king who is a fucking manipulative monster. If only they knew what he was really like. I stare at all the people around me and hate that everyone here knew I was destined to die as a price for their freedom. And they were all fine with that.

Ziven waves his hands out, but I know him well enough to see he is pissed. “Fucked off somewhere. Stay out here if you want to die. I’m done convincing you to save your own lives. Wait for your Sun king if you want.” He jumps off the rock and offers me his hand. “Come with me.” I take his hand even when I’m not sure where we stand at this point, but I know I don’t want to be left alone with this many Sun Dynasty people staring at me.

Even though most of the people here are from the Sun Dynasty, they all start walking back inside with the threat of the vampyres and with Daegan nowhere to be seen. I don’t blame them for wanting to stay outside though, after all those years of being trapped in there. I spot Catherine standing to the right of the doors, and when she sees me, she waves me over. I stare at my first female friend and see all the times she lied, all the times she looked like she wanted to say more and all the times she tried with Mazzis to show me the truth. She is rubbing her arm as I stare at her, digging my feet into the stone.

I tug on Ziven’s hand to stop him before he pulls me along. “I’ll catch up.”

Ziven follows my line of sight to Catherine, and he leans down. “I’ll wait by the door where I can see you. Remember, you’re the one person in the way of Daegan’s freedom, and you’re not safe.”

I nod at him before heading towards Catherine. She is wearing a brown cloak from her shoulders down that matches the colour of her hair, which is in a messy bun like she threw it up at the last second. The sun mark on her neck seems to flash at me as I stop a few steps away. “Do you hate me?” Tears brim in her eyes, and her voice cracks. “Because I would if I were you. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t. I promise if I could have found a way around the magic or a way to make sure you were not harmed, I would have. I couldn’t even speak out about King Daegan to warn you; it felt like the magic only wrapped tighter around me the more I became your friend. Like it knew I’d tell you.”

“I know all that, but...” I pause, a sob working its way up my throat. I push it down. “I thought you were my best friend, and you let me get close to Daegan, knowing he wanted me dead. You could have said anything! Anything, Catherine.”

“I couldn’t,” she whispers back, taking a step forward. “I was going to say something, but Daegan knew we were friends and made it clear, if I said a word against him, he would murder my family as traitors to our race. His power is stronger than any of us, and any time I tried to tell you about any of it, I felt like I was being strangled. I was a kid when I was brought here, and I never saw you in another life, but my parents did. They said you were a spitting image of her, and many in there call you a goddess for protecting them. They don’t see you as trapping them but saving them.”

“I’m not her!” I all but shout. “I don’t have her memories, I don’t?—”

“I know,” she interrupts, brushing a lock of her stray hair to the side. “You’re not a spoiled princess like my parents remember. You’re someone that’s fierce and brave and courageous. Someone who defended me when they definitely didn’t have to. Someone who loves to read and escape within books. Someone who became friends with the outcast and saved her life.”

The wind blows around us as she waits for me to say anything to that. I didn’t know she saw me that way, and I’m not the hero she is painting me as.

“Everyone has lied to me, and I don’t know who to trust anymore.” I finish this for her. “I can’t blame you when it wasn’t you that made that choice to not tell me. It was Daegan, it was the book’s magic, and I’m well aware what he is like now.”

She looks down. “I should have found a way to fight against the magic, or figured something out, or done something for you.”

Etena’s voice nearly makes me jump. “If I couldn’t fight it to tell her, then you

wouldn't have been able to, Catherine."

We both turn to face Etena, who is black with ash and blood marks in her hands. The ash makes her blonde hair look silver and her skin so much paler than before. Calix's dragon roars, and she looks up at her entwined mate for a moment before dipping her gaze to me. "Daegan isn't evil, but the book is, and it has changed him over the years. Every time he opens it..." She stops, like she wanted to tell me something else. "I need your help to stop him from opening that book again. I need you to steal it and fucking leave, Story. Take the book the princess brought here and take it far away so my king can be free."

"You're not going to get help from me," I snap, anger making me clench my fists. "You're asking me to do something for Daegan? Fuck you and fuck him! He used me and nearly killed me, Etena!"

I am done being a victim for the Sun Dynasty or its king. I'm just done with them.

"I fucking know that, Story, but everything has changed! We can't fight between each other when?—"

"Why can't we?" I ask, lifting my head. "Go back to Daegan and his lies. I want nothing to do with either of you." I touch Catherine's hand and soften my voice when I see her trembling. "See you around."

Ziven is watching me from the doorway, the same doors that I squeezed through all those months ago, and I hold my head high as I walk to him, feeling Etena burning daggers into the back of my head. As I stand in front of the open doors, it feels like yesterday that I entered, seeing my dragon statue in the entrance hall. Everything changed when I ran in here last time, and I know so much more will change now that they are free. Dragons mean hope for the fae. We have been losing against the vampyres for so long that I think most fae have forgotten what it is like to actually be

free.

Ziven walks with me into the entrance hall, silent and protective, as we go through the crowded pathways that are covered in glass and stone. The staircase that was around Maeve is now gone, nothing but rubble at the bottom level. He leads me back down to the Moon Dynasty rooms, and I follow him into the back where I've never been. Ziven opens a door to a purple bedroom, where Hettie is in bed sleeping and Ruelle is in a chair watching her. Her chair is rocking slightly, a purple blanket covering her from the neck down, and her tired eyes run over my body from head to toe. A healer assessment.

She looks right into my eyes and smirks like Ziven does sometimes. "You're not too easy to kill, then?"

"The sun has to try harder next time," I mutter, not ready to joke about it, even with Ruelle. I watch Hettie as Ziven goes to her, kissing her pale forehead. Her arm is bandaged up, and there are red marks seeping through the fabric that make my stomach turn. "What happened to her?"

"The Sun king lured her away from me. When she tried to run away from him, he burnt her arm with sunlight, and it's hard for me to heal it. I don't have dragon tears lying around, but she will heal. Some scars will remain." Ruelle barely notices my fury and rage and the way my body shakes from it. Daegan, he hurt this little girl. "Ziven was looking for you because the Sun king took you, breaking the agreement that was put into place, and then he found Hettie crying alone in the middle of the mansion. He brought her back here for my healing when the glass shattered along with the magic. I'd never seen Ziven look so pale or the roar that came from him. He sounded like a dragon."

This was my fault. He needed to distract Ziven because of me. Ziven touches my arm like he can read my thoughts and wraps his hand around it, tugging me close to him.

“If you’re thinking this is your fault, fucking stop it. Daegan did this, and he will pay for touching both of you.”

I tug my arm out of his grip and make space between us so I can think. I can’t think straight when I’m around Ziven. I walk past him to Hettie and softly kiss her cheek. “I’m sorry this happened. When you wake up, I’ll take you outside the mansion. You can see everything, Hettie. Everything I told you is out there. The doors are open.”

Ziven walks out as I rise up and tuck her in. Ruelle looks between the door and me. “Give him a chance to tell you everything. The time for you two pretending to be enemies is over, and it’s up to you what comes next. Just know you belong to the Moon Dynasty king, girl, and nothing will change that.” She sighs at the stubbornness in my gaze. “I’ve known that boy since he was a toddler, and he never claimed anything but his dragon as his own. He told me the first day he met you that you were his.” She chuckles even when my heart races. “He said it in a way he meant you’d be his decision on what to do in consideration of the book and the magic, but I knew he’d met his match. The deities do not make mistakes.”

I can’t make myself reply to Ruelle, but I leave her with Hettie and go out to find Ziven, which speaks volumes. I should leave. I should run out of this mansion and get on Maeve and just fucking leave. It’s a mansion of traps, and I fell into each and every one of them so perfectly that I never noticed my heart was stolen along the way. Ziven is in a cosy room opposite, which I’ve also never seen. It has a big dollhouse nestled between bookcases jammed with books I want to read, and three large sofas around a fireplace. Thick cream rugs line the floors, and Ziven is standing in front of the flames, watching me over his shoulder as I stop in the doorway.

“I’m leaving tomorrow morning. I need you to let me go, and it’s best for both of us.” He crosses his thick arms and turns to face me. “I can’t trust Daegan not to stab me in the back at the first chance he gets, and I want to find my mother. I want to make sure she is safe, and I haven’t thought past that. I know while I’m here, I’m not safe. I

never told you everything about my past, Ziven, but just know I went through hell, mentally and physically, and my best friend died to get me out. I didn't tell you that I had given up. I had broken." I linger on the word broken because it doesn't feel like a big enough word for how I felt. "I broke and shattered until there was nothing left. Kyrell, he loved me like a brother I never had. He believed in me from the beginning, and he never once gave up on me. When he died, I promised myself I would never give up. That I would live and fight for all things life had to offer me." My voice breaks. "And if I stay here with you, I'd be giving up everything he died for. I'd be staying with a man who used and lied to me, who could have told me the truth and didn't. I'd be letting myself be used again, and I can't do that."

"Storm." He whispers that nickname for me that I used to hate, but now it makes my heart jump. It makes me feel alive and loved...wanted. I'm desperate to be wanted by him. The man I screamed was my enemy, who I slept with and hated as much as I enjoyed. "Stay here with me. I know I don't deserve to ask that of you, but please, stay." He walks to me, and my heart pounds as he goes to his knees. The Moon king is kneeling in front of me. "Let me tell you everything, and let me fix it. I will beg you, I will plead and grovel. Fuck, I'd do anything for you. Just don't leave."

"I know I can't trust you. You lied a lot, Ziven. Daegan told me all these things that you did for me in the Decidere, and I thought you were trying to kill me. It's almost funny how blind I was to this." Neither of us laughs and my hands itch to run through his dark hair. "How getting your friend to throw me off the bridge was actually you helping me get to the better pillars, how you sent your dragon in to help me that one time, how you came in and you helped me that other time. I want to believe that you're on my side, that it's me and you, but you've hated me since the beginning. You called me a traitor and, in the same breath, you saved me. I'm not Atilia, but I'm paying her debts."

He still doesn't say anything, and I can't stop the words from getting out. "I've read the book, the princess's own diary, everything she said. She was obsessed with you,

and I don't think you felt the same from what she wrote. I'm. Not. Her. I won't die in here because she loved you and Daegan, and she wanted to save you all. I'm not a traitor, or a liar, or any of the names you've called me."

"You are a storm, sent from the deities to smack into my world with the face of my dead best friend. You are the storm I never wanted but I needed, and I won't let you run away from me. Fuck." He pauses and rises to his feet. "I looked at you in the beginning and saw her. I called you a traitor because it's what she deserved to be called for what she did."

Tears fall down my cheeks. "She saved you."

"She doomed us. I was never given a chance to fight for my family and this place... We became shells of our former selves by being locked in here. We forgot who and what we were, where time stopped and the world carried on. This wasn't good for us," Ziven finishes. "She was a spoiled princess who got everything from anyone she ever wanted, without care or need for it, except from me. Fucking hell, Story, I wanted to hate you from the beginning when we met. I lost nearly everything. My kingdom, my dynasty, my parents, my people in the wars here, and being trapped in this fucking mansion cost me the life of my sister in the end. I've never been able to show Hettie anything outside of these mansion doors, and we are trapped here, endlessly trapped, immortally trapped, and your soul was the very reason. When I first I saw you, fuck, I hated her and blamed you."

I wince at the fury in his voice, but his voice softens, softer than I think he's ever spoken to me. "Then you stole my heart on that first night when I kidnapped you, when you kicked me in the balls and stared into my face like a true warrior. I was done for. I knew right then and there you were everything I had been waiting for. I felt a connection between us then, and I kept trying to convince myself that helping you was my foolish way of keeping you alive. Daegan called a council meeting between Mazzis, him, and me to agree that killing you when the time was right was

the only way, but I didn't agree to it." He comes to me, cupping my cheek with his hand. "There is so much history to tell you, so much I want to explain, but know that you're safe when you're with me. I would never let any harm come to you ever again. The magic would never have broken this place if you didn't love me."

He moves an inch closer, and I breathe in his burning jasmine scent. This is the man who has been inside my body, claimed every inch of me, and he's the first man I have ever wanted for myself. "You're the reason that I want a future, Story. I'd given up before you, too. We found each other, and I want everything with you. Don't leave, because I love you. I will love you until we are sparks of embers floating into the skies to dance with the dragons."

"Story...you're alive." I turn round to see Kyrell standing a few feet away in the doorway. If Ziven claiming to love me wasn't enough to stop my heart with shock, seeing my dead best friend is. Gone is his brown hair, the sun-kissed tan and bright eyes... What is left is a vampyre standing in the home of the dragon-riding fae.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:21 am

Twilight comes twice. Once before the sun

and once before the moon...

Moonlight blasts out of the air to cast silver shadows around the edges of the room that almost blind me. They head for Kyrell like arrows, and I'm running before my mind can catch up that Kyrell is alive. Kyrell, who I saw brutally murdered to save me, is somehow alive. On instinct, I feel something tap down my spine before red light pours from my body, burning the ground at my side in a way I've never seen. I slam straight into Kyrell's cold body, and he wraps his arms tightly around me without an inch of fear. The moonlight stops inches away from us and disappears within a heartbeat.

"Storm, what the fuck are you doing?!" Ziven shouts in horror, and I get it. I'm hugging a vampyre, and he has no idea who this is.

"This is my best friend, Ziven," I whisper, lifting my head back. A flow of emotions wash over me: relief, shock and some bit of pain, knowing this couldn't have been an easy change for him to become the vampyre he is now. I've never hugged Kyrell and felt such cold leaking from him. Emyr was never cold like this. Tears fall down my cheeks as Kyrell smiles at me with all the love and kindness I've always seen and felt I never deserved.

It's a kick in the chest, seeing that smile on a vampyre's face. His brown hair is now silver, his skin is deathly pale, and it matches the drained colours of his eyes. There is nothing vibrant about him now, except for that smile. Even dead and turned into some form of a vampyre, Kyrell's smile lights up the room. "By the deities, how are you

here?”

He lets me go, taking a step away. He has a white shirt and dark trousers on that are torn and ash stained. Ziven’s firm hand curls around my waist as he steps to my side. Kyrell’s eyebrows raise as he looks at that hand and then to Ziven. He whistles as he looks Ziven over and then winks at me, making my cheeks burn. Ziven isn’t amused. “How the fuck did you get in here, vamp?” He looks down at me. “And who said you didn’t have powers, Storm? Turns out death was the key to them for you. Please do not burn my floors.”

Powers? I glance down at the floor and the line of burnt wood where I ran. I did that?

“Easily. If you want to keep her safe, I would suggest you make sure the door’s security is a lot better. I’ve been looking for Story for two months.” Kyrell’s tone softens. “And I’m so happy I’ve found you, little Tory.”

My new powers, the burn marks, none of it matters as I stare at Kyrell in shock. He is alive.

“Careful,” Ziven growls, and I know the only reason Kyrell isn’t dead is because Ziven knows he saved my life and got me out. “The only reason you’re not moon dust is because she clearly trusts you.”

“Ziven.” I look up at him and he drops his devastatingly beautiful eyes down to me. “This is Kyrell, the man who protected me like a brother. Asked nothing of me until the day he told me to live and run. He died for me.” That seems to be enough for Ziven as his body loses some of the tight tension and his shoulders drop an inch. I gulp and turn to Kyrell. “How? You’re a vampyre, but I didn’t know vampyres could be turned until I came here and learnt the stories of the first vampyre. They are only born now.”

“Prince Emyr has worked out how to change even the dead into this...” He waves at himself, and sickness rises in my throat even at the thought of Emyr, let alone him messing with Kyrell’s body.

I look at the space where his chest, where his heart, should be, and I know it can’t be there anymore. “I—I watched the king rip your heart out and throw you on the floor like you were nothing. How are you still alive after that?”

“I don’t have a heart anymore. Not physically. Turns out you don’t need it to be brought back to the living.”

“What is it like to die?” Ziven questions. “And are you a threat to Story? Are you in control?”

These are valid questions, but the way Ziven asks is nothing short of a command. “Dark magic brought me back, and I remember nothing of death except a feeling of...well, I can’t describe it very well. As for my control, I do not know. I feed daily from animals in the forest, and I have never touched a fae. I don’t intend to either, even if it hurts not to feed right. I might be in pain, but I will never willingly hurt anyone.”

“Why did...he...do this to you?” I bite out the words.

“I think bringing me back to life was his way of giving a gift to you so you might go back to him,” he quickly finishes. Fear spreads through my blood, and for a moment I freeze, trapped in the memory of pain and suffering at Emyr’s hands. Ziven strokes my back with his thumb, bringing me back, and I wipe my wet cheeks. “I’d rather die again than see you back with him, Tory.”

“If he comes here, I will greet him.” Ziven’s eyes flash with protectiveness and pure vengeance. “The prince is a dead vampyre walking, and when I’m done, there won’t

even be moon dust left.”

“He’s rather intense, isn’t he?” Kyrell asks me, rubbing his chin. His fangs, pure silver, drop a little more, and I’m not sure I will ever get used to seeing them. Seeing him as a vampyre. It hasn’t sunk in yet. “As for the fucker prince, he’s not in the magic barrier that appeared. He was going to see his father, from the rumours I overheard in the city. I’ve been hiding there for a while.”

“Do you know where your mum is and maybe mine? I know you said you couldn’t find her before, but are they in the city?”

“I sent my mother away, where everything went wrong, and I personally never found your mother. She is not in the breeding camps anymore.” He looks away and silence drops between us. “I would like for someone to explain to me who the intense hot fae male is and where the hell dragons have come from?” He looks at me from head to toe and smiles. He smiles so brightly, even like this, and my heart warms. “But first, it’s me, Tory. Look at you, standing there, brave and head held high. I saw you riding a dragon, and I knew everything I said to you was coming true. Believing in you was easy for me, even when you stopped believing in yourself. I believed in you since the second I saw you, and I knew, I absolutely knew, if anyone was going to burn this world down, it would be Story fucking Dehana.”

I grin at him, smiling like I haven’t in a long time. “I’ll start from the beginning.” I tell him everything that’s happened in the time he has been gone. Ziven doesn’t move from my side, but he does let Kyrell come in and sit on the sofa as we carry on explaining. Ziven adds things here and there that I forget until eventually both of us are seated in pure silence.

“He has to leave.” Ziven nods to Kyrell. “We can’t have a vampyre in here. I am sympathetic to the fact he’s your best friend and he saved you, but...he can’t stay. He’s a danger and we’re at war with the vampyres.”

I pull away from Ziven and stand, staying next to Kyrell and raising my eyebrow. “He stays or I go with him.” I wave at the door when Ziven doesn’t lose the stubborn look on his face. “I will get my dragon, and we will leave together.”

“Storm...”

I put my hands on my hips. “Ziven.”

“I feel like I’m watching my mum and dad fight, and I’m really confused about it.” Kyrell rises. “But I agree with Ziven. I’m only going to put you in danger, Story.”

“I’m already in danger, Kyrell. It turns out I was born before as some kind of Twilight princess that locked everyone in here with a magic spell from a magic book. Part of breaking that spell was my death. I nearly died, and that’s why the magic broke around this mansion, but the magic seems to have expanded around the city and caused that barrier now. There are a list of fae dragon riders who want me dead in here.” I wave a hand. “You are likely a safer bet than they are.”

“I won’t let them hurt you,” Ziven growls. “For fuck’s sake, he is a vampyre.”

“I’m well aware, but he is also my best friend and family to me!” I retort. “And I have lost so many people. I’ve had everything taken from me and even in here, the people I trusted betrayed me, so I’m not giving him up.”

Ziven grits his teeth, looking at Kyrell. I see the moment he gives in, and it’s purely for me. “Don’t make me regret this. Welcome to the Moon Dynasty, Kyrell. You have my protection.”

Kyrell bows his head. “I won’t and it is an honour...so, where’s this magic book, then? Maybe it has the answers to how we fix the magic so we can leave and get far away from the vampyre royals. He’s looking for you.”

I freeze, knowing exactly who he is talking about. Ziven does too now, and his voice drips with hate. “Let him come and try to touch her. I’d enjoy hearing his screams.”

I glance at Ziven, knowing this king is damn good at keeping me here. “Daegan has it,” he answers. “He took the book and locked it away with sun magic before Mazzis or I could make a claim for it after his brother died. His brother was the first owner of the book.”

“He’s the one that tried to kill me.” I catch Kyrell up and Ziven looks ready to murder Daegan again.

“I hope you killed the fucker.” Kyrell looks between us when we don’t agree.

“I would, with pleasure, but he’s the king too. The killing of a king would cause a riot between our people. They don’t see me as the good guy. They see me as the villain. The fae here see Daegan as a fucking angel sent from the deities to save all of them. No one here would fight for me, but they would fight for his memory in a heartbeat. I don’t usually do the right thing, but I have a reason to right now. I’ve already killed a Sun Dynasty royal, and it cost me.” He looks at the fire. “There are not many of the Moon Dynasty left, and we will need to work on Daegan by keeping him alive for now. I have a plan.”

“A plan you’re going to tell me about?” I question, already knowing the answer. Ziven smirks and I shake my head. I sigh and turn to Kyrell, still not believing he is in front of me. “I want to show you everything here. I want you to meet Catherine. She’s become my best friend too. I’ll show you the library—deities above, the libraries they have here! I want to show you everything that we lost as fae to the histories. We were not always slaves, and the people out there need to know. We have royals, we have leaders, and Ziven...he isn’t the bad one.”

“Excuse me, why the fuck is there a vampyre sitting on a couch in our chambers?”

We all turn to Calix, who is casually leaning against the door and swinging a sword around in his other hand.

Kyrell runs his eyes up Calix before whispering to me, “Tell me this one is free and into men?”

“He is more complicated than anyone else I’ve met,” I whisper to him and then answer Calix next. “This is Kyrell. He’s not a threat.”

“Kyrell is under the Moon Dynasty protection,” Ziven adds in. “And we have plans to discuss.”

“Hettie okay?” Calix questions, pulling his eyes from Kyrell, even when I’m sure he has a hundred questions. When Ziven nods, he straightens. “We’ve got a problem. A bigger problem than a fucking vampyre being in the protection of the Moon Dynasty.”

“Spit it out, then. It’s been a long fucking day, Cal,” Ziven tensely warns.

“Thousands of fae are filling the forest, and they are on their way here. They fled out of the city, and they’re coming here for help, guidance or fuck knows what. They are following the tracks of the dragons. Most of the city is unlivable, and we are about to have a big problem if they try to flood in here. They’re going to need someone to speak to them.”

“Sounds like a job for the Sun king,” Ziven growls. “Where the fuck is Daegan?”

“Not been seen since the city, and Mazzis would piss himself if I asked him to do this. That leaves you, my king.” Calix waves at the door. “Time to do the thing you’re well known for being great at, talking.”

“Even I know he is being sarcastic right now,” Kyrell mutters.

“I’ll be at your side,” I offer Ziven. “Show them you’re not Daegan because you actually care. You stopped when Daegan wouldn’t have done. You won’t leave them to die. Tell them who you are and what it means to be a fae. Give them hope, and they will bow to you. We have been slaves for our entire lives, and there has never been a leader who is on our side before.”

“Fuck you, get Story to do the speech,” Calix suggests with a cough. “She is good at it.”

Ziven sighs and looks down at his clothes. “First, we get changed. They want a king, then I’m walking out there with a crown, and so are you.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:21 am

The Twilight Dynasty bred their dragons in the pits of fire, and the deities bled fire into their veins, which can only be seen in their magic and the shade of their hair.

The deserts are as vast and endless as the heat. Even though I was born here, this weather is too much. Guilt gnaws in my chest as I look at the fae worker next to me. He is a thin fae. I can see the outline of his bones sticking out of his cheeks, and his hair is all but gone from the top of his head. He's walking next to my horse as a lead, a rope tied to his waist so I don't use the horse to run away. His feet are covered in blisters, and he has no shoes. His skin is burnt nearly everywhere in shades of red and blisters so bad it's hard to look at him. The smell is haunting too.

All I want to do is reach for him, to tell him to go and get in the shade, that he doesn't need to walk next to my horse. But I know if I do speak to him, if I say a word, the king will kill him for speaking to me. He is possessive of his favourite, and it's another cage of his for me.

A dark shade is above me, keeping me constantly cooled, but the lotions on my skin stop any burns from the scorching sun. Here in the Lightsun lands, the sun feels like it never sets, and even the sandy ground is so bright it could resemble sunlight to anyone who looked upon it. Creatures like giant yellow scorpions and huge red snakes slither around the sand into holes, and many have attacked the working fae who are walking around with no shoes on. If they fall in the desert, the king's order is to just leave them to the creatures of the sun for food. I hate it.

I glance over at the king's carriage behind me, where he prefers to sit in complete darkness and mostly alone. I join him occasionally when he wants to feed, or fuck, or whatever he wants from me. But I prefer to be out here in the sunlight. There's a

sense of freedom, and I don't feel as strangled by stifling heat.

I lift my metal drink container and open it, sipping on the warm water before looking around to make sure no one is paying attention to me. Thankfully, no one is. I slip the bottle down the side of me by my leg and gently kick the fae worker's arm to get his attention. He jumps and looks over before quickly facing forward. His hand soon wraps around the water, and he drinks some, hidden by his cloak. I can't give him much help other than this.

"Thank you," he whispers, his voice broken. I don't have the words to tell him not to thank me. The guilt I feel over the fact he is like me and he might die leading my horse is stifling. Eventually I get the water back when I'm sure no one is facing me. Bruises line my spine from how rough the king was with me yesterday, but I look at working fae, knowing damn well I have it easier than they do.

After six more days of travel, where the sands all look the same and there is nothing to look at on the horizon, a mountain district finally comes into view. Massive sheer walls surround the mountains for miles, and there is a single dirt road in and out. Bodies with sun birds picking at them hang next to skeletons outside the wall, a few feet between each one, and my stomach twists in disgust. The bodies move in the warm breeze, and an awful stench comes off them that I can't help but smell. I don't have to ask why they are hung outside. They're hung there to make sure that the workers don't try to form a rebellion and escape, because this is their fate. No one escapes here.

There must be hundreds, if not more, skeletons lining the thick walls of stone that are so high I can't see into the village. The metal spiked gates are held open as we go in, the watchtowers on either side full of bowing vampyres. I feel eyes on me, and I turn back, finding Prince Emyr watching me with Princess Caelina at his side. Both of them are on white horses, like they are pure, and it feels like a total joke. I turn back to forward, knowing they are both watching me.

The rest of the royal family didn't come except for the queen and Princess Caelina, the youngest princess. I don't know her very well, but I'm sure she's just like the rest of them. The queen keeps her close, takes her everywhere she goes, and they usually live in the snowy lands of the east where I've only been once. The king doesn't like it there. I much prefer snow over sand. If it comes to picking favourites between your children, I'm certain that Caelina is the queen's. However, Prince Emyr is definitely the king's. He lets them get away with too much to be anything less.

The fae workers help us off the horses before taking them to the stables, and I bow my head as the king gets out of his carriage. While I wait in silence and the vampyres here gush over the king being in their presence, I watch the village. Everything is bleak here. The houses are made of aged, weathered grey stone that stink of damp and rot. The people come out in their grey cloaks, marking them as workers for the mountains. Few of them lift their head and look our way, not daring to make eye contact. Some children peep out of their houses, though, their innocent faces snapping my heart in half.

In some ways, life's better for children in the breeding camps. The children there at least get the freedom of the forests and are mostly left unbothered by vampyres, and they're fed well, as the breeding fae are allowed to hunt for themselves. Here, if children are born, they're called accidental or mistakes, and they stay here until they're fourteen to be sorted. They are left alone all day with rationed food, sometimes all night while their parents work until they die.

Big towering mountains stand behind the village, casting a deep shadow that keeps it cooler here. The mountains are covered in yellow-almost-greenish sand from top to bottom, except for the enormous cave entrance dug out in the centre. They're huge, absolutely gigantic, and this mountain range appears to stretch for thousands of miles.

Finally, the king is done with the chatter, and I walk behind him, my head bowed, my red cloak covering my face. He gets on to a cart, the prince sitting opposite him, and

everyone else, including the queen and princess, is led to the royal quarters on the other side of the village. The queen's red eyes meet mine for a second, and I internally wince. The queen is beautiful, but in the way a child vampyre can be before they rip your neck out for your blood. She is paler than the king, and her silver hair glitters in the braided bun on her head, where a silver tiara sits. She smooths her hands down her black gown, which must be hot to wear in this heat, before taking her daughter's hand and leaving. Her daughter looks just like her but is less poisoned with hate. Prince Emyr clears his throat and snatches my attention. "What are we going to see, father?"

I'm hoping he'll leave me behind and forget I'm here. My bag is handed to a working fae, and I glance at it for a second, knowing the book is hidden within a dress inside. If anyone looks, I'm dead. It doesn't happen very often, but if I pray to the deities enough, maybe they will bless me with luck on this trip.

"Ava, here." The king pats the seat next to him on the cart, and I smile like it's exactly what I wanted. The deities are not all-giving this day, it seems. Reluctantly, I climb on next to him and press myself to his side. His hand latches around my thigh like a snake biting, his nails digging into my skin, branding, marking, owning. He calls it love; I call it chains. I rest my head on his shoulder, giving in to what he wants, because the other option is death. Pretending has become like a well-stretched muscle for me, and I don't even notice anymore.

The prince watches from the other side, quiet and contemplating. His father is intelligent, and that intelligence has definitely gone to his child. Prince Emyr scares me, and he always has done. His obsession with Story Dehana was interesting, though. She clearly didn't care for his abuse, and I wish I could have been more honest with her about how I felt. I don't love the king. How could I? I kept Story's secret about her mother, and I will take that to my grave.

The cart moves fast, two chestnut brown camels tugging it along from the front. The

king taps his other hand on his leg. “I’ve been spending years here, hundreds of years, creating something to keep the vampyres alive. You were not born when dragons reigned the skies and the fae ruled without any competition. No one could stand against them. There were five ruling families. Each one of them was powerful but, well, the Sun and Moon were known most. The Dawn Dynasty, where I came from, was weak. I was the king of the Dawn Dynasty, a young king of a small land. I wanted a way to live forever, and I wanted a way to make sure that we would never be threatened.”

My heart pounds as I listen while he continues his story. “The Dawn Dynasty did not have dragons that could fly or fight. We did not ride them because the deities had cursed us with weakness. We were the only dynasty that didn’t ride, and that made us considerably weak to the others. The Twilight Dynasty were very small in number, but they had the biggest dragons, making them the most formidable. I married the princess of the Twilight Dynasty, but she could not bear me children. She betrayed me in the end.”

Prince Emyr frowns. “I know your history, father.”

“I turned my second wife, and she has borne me very many children, as you well know. Yet my first wife has caused endless amounts of trouble that I cannot forget.” He looks at me and then turns away before I can read his expression. “You know I was the first vampyre, but you do not know how.” Sometimes it’s good to be almost invisible. I’m the king’s whore, his blood slave, and I might as well not have ears for all he cares when he speaks around me. Someday I might have all of the information to be a useful weapon against him.

“The magical book I once had...” the king carries on as we continue rolling in the cart, “there were two of them. One book mirrors the other. In the book that I had, I read everything in it and learnt the ways of dark magic. I learnt how to change myself into a vampyre and live forever like this.”

“We are forever grateful for you, father.” I nearly roll my eyes, but I remember that doing that would be stupid.

“When my first wife betrayed me, she took both the books. One she hid, and I searched endlessly for it. The other she took with her and disappeared with the dragons. I’m no fool. I knew that, one day, those dragons would reappear, most likely with royal riders. One day...I had to be ready. Dragons are not the only large creatures that ever roamed this world.” A roar echoes from deep within the mountain, and I whirl towards the entrance where we are heading. That roar...it sounded horrid. “The dragon’s magic may come from the sun and moon, but there is more powerful magic left in this world. In the darkness. The books dwell in the magic of the dark, and I read about creatures that once roamed this world. I found them as hatching eggs and made sure they would grow strong.”

A weird noise echoes again, something like a roar, but it’s too high pitched. The darkness of the cave entrance swoops over us, and a cold chill settles down my spine. The darkness seems like it lasts forever, and only the noise of the creaky cart is left until blue fire lanterns illuminate the long corridor and tunnels. The screeching grows and I dare to meet the king’s eyes. He is looking right at me, and he touches my hair, like he often does. “You are safe, Ava. I need you. Do not be frightened.”

I nod, my hands still shaking as I grip the wooden seat of the cart, not believing a word the king has to say. He is a liar, and he might say he needs me, but we both know I’m easily replaced. We go deep into the mountain in silence, and Prince Emyr watches the path ahead, his silver flashing in the blue light.

The king never lets go of my thigh the whole way. I hate when he touches me. His touch always makes me feel cold and empty inside, even he is talented at making my body react in the way he wants. But right now, when I’m terrified of wherever we’re going, I quite happily forget he is there. The cart goes past hundreds of workers in grey cloaks, digging into the mountain, walking around carrying bags of rocks, and

once again I realise how lucky I am to be a blood slave to the king when I could have been this. The deities put me here at the king's side for a reason, and I hope I can do some good before I die.

The cart loops to the side and goes down a long tunnel that goes further and further into the ground. I feel like I can't breathe, like the air gets tighter the deeper we go until the cave branches out into a gigantic, wide cavern. In cages that must stretch for miles are creatures like I've never seen. They're huge, made completely of bone and rotting skin...with long wings that stretch out, crackling against the earth as they dig them in. Their mouths almost remind me of dogs, with a massive jaw of teeth that glitter blue, and their spike ears are long and stretched up. They don't have eyeballs, just black pits of nothing, with an eerily blue glow right in the centre.

The bones of these disgusting smelling creatures rattle as they move, and the one nearest makes a screeching noise that hurts my ears. I clamp my hands over them, but the king and the prince don't flinch. I glance at the prince as I cover my ears, and the awe on his face makes my stomach sink. The creatures seem to glow in their chests like dark blue stars.

The king pats his son's knee. "We have four thousand of them, including trained vampyre riders. I kept the biggest and the second largest dragon for you. My heir, my son, to ride next to mine." The nearest creature to us roars, and blue flames spit out of its mouth, pouring into the floor in the cage before it snarls and curls around. They are alive, whatever these beasts are. "We call them the Silkvir, and they are loyal to the vampyres. They will take out what is left of the dragons with ease."

"What about the magical barrier?" Prince Emyr leans back, a smugness in his voice that sends shivers down my spine. There is an emptiness to the prince and a cruelty that I've only ever seen in his father, but perhaps Emyr is worse. I've watched him drain women here, only feeding from red-haired fae and making them scream in pain for hours. It's a sport, death, for princes like him.

“The book will tell us.” My head shoots to him. “I found it only a month ago. Almost like the lost dark deities I pray to have sent a blessing.”

Dark deities? I don’t get more than a second to wonder who he is talking about. There are two deities known to all fae, and as far as I’ve known, the vampyres do not have gods to worship. The prince smirks. “I’m glad to hear they answered your call. They rarely show they listen to mine.”

“The dark deities have blessed us with immortal life and much more, son. We cannot be too greedy.” I only remember last minute to lower my head when the king looks right at me before turning back to his son. “The book is here. I keep it buried deep down in this mountain with my greatest weapons. I want you to see it and speak to the dark deities with me. The book is a connection to them.”

If this book is a connection to the dark deities, does the other twin book to it have a connection to our deities? My heart races as the cart goes past the creatures, past thousands of them that look at me, and I see nothing in the black, empty pits of their blue glowing eyes. I find it easier to focus on the light in their chests than their eyes. The prince looks pleased as we go past, but I look in horror, knowing these creatures will kill hundreds of thousands of fae and will just make the vampyres more powerful than they already are. Are the dragons even a threat to this many Silkvir?

When the cart takes a swift right, I hear it. Something whispers in the back of my mind...like a song.

“My previous wife was smart to hide them from me. Once I find the other book and hold them both once again, I will be able to rid the world of any dragons and fae who stand against us. I will use the dark magic to bend this world to my will, and you, my son, will live in the riches. I admire you.”

“You do?” Prince Emyr looks as shocked as I feel.

“Yes. You claimed your love for that fae and did not break your word. You are a prince of honour and everything I dreamed you would become.” He leans forward. “I am trusting you, my heir, to put the fate of the vampyres first. Our army is all that matters for now. When there is peace again, we will find that blood slave of yours, and you can turn her as you planned.”

“I am yours to command, my king.” Prince Emyr bows, but I get the impression he would do anything to get Story back. I hope she has run for the hills. My heart races as the song gets louder and louder until it feels like a drumming in my head. The cart stops by two doors that launch high into the thick mountain wall, and in front of them is a row of vampyre royal guards in black armour. They open the doors as the king grabs my chin and turns me to him. He leans in, pressing his cold lips against mine. “Stay here, Ava. We will be back.”

I nod once, watching him as he climbs off with the prince and walks through the door, past the row of guards.

“Save me.”

I spin around, looking for the childlike male voice but not seeing anyone close to the cart. The fae driver is a few feet away from the guards, and they are all silent. My eyes tug towards the door. “You must save me. Take me. I am your book to command. Take me to my twin, who has found the other child of Twilight in the trap. Take me, take me, take me.”

The book. It’s speaking to me somehow. The voice dies away when the doors slam shut behind the king and prince. I shiver in the mountain, looking back at the Silkvir. I feel the dark magic wash over me from the voice, like a nasty echo. Dark, horrid magic is all I felt from it. I thought the dragons coming back was hope, but I should have known better. In this world, hope can be as easily crushed as a fire can be extinguished.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:21 am

In Twilight, any descendant can find their true flame...

Ziven, wearing a crown, should be considered more dangerous than a dragon. He's stunning, absolutely taking my breath away. Ziven is dressed fully in tailored black clothes, with beautiful red and gold moons stitched down the side of a thick cloak that falls from his shoulders. His crown is beautiful moons and dragons wrapped around like they're continuously fighting in a braid to make the crown, and it is nestled in his dark hair. His silver earrings glitter in the firelight, matching the deep silver colour of his eyes. The dark moon marking on his cheek seems to glow almost, as he stands before me like a rightful king of the fae. The only king that is standing up to face the fae.

He is standing right by the doors that lead to a metal balcony that overlooks the front yard of the mansion. Another door that's appeared now that the magic is broken. I clear my throat, glancing down at my clothes. I feel overdressed, but I have to admit, I like the top. I have a similar cloak to Ziven's attached to my shoulders, but it's not heavy. Mine has silver moons decorated around the collar before falling down my back. There's a cross pattern on my black top that's very tight and tucked into tighter leggings and black boots. Somehow, Ruelle had all this ready when I got to my room.

Kyrell is with Calix, who's keeping an eye on him. The rest of the Moon Dynasty is still hunting vampyres in the city and rounding up the vampyres who have bowed and given up into a controlled section of the city for Ziven to deal with later on. Most of the vampyres are dead; not many of them, except children and women, wanted to bow to the dragons and fae because they are too used to being in control.

Ziven shuts the door behind me, his eyes drifting over my outfit, and he smirks. "If

only you didn't volunteer us for a speech. We could be alone in my room."

Shivers spread down my spine. "Who said I would go into your room? You're my enemy, remember?"

He laughs and I love the sound as he closes the space between us. "Fucking my enemy is my ultimate desire then, Storm." He tugs something out of his cloak and holds it in his hands between us in the light of the fire. A tiara and it is beautiful. There's a crescent moon straight in the middle, with silver branches and leaves to hold it together with sparkling white and red diamonds. "You need to wear a crown when you stand with me."

"Ziven...I'm not your queen. You can't put a crown on me and walk me out there in front of everyone!" I warn him, but he doesn't listen. Ziven places the tiara on top of my head where it fits so perfectly. Too perfectly. "Ziven..."

The doors flicker open with a flash of moonlight before I can take it off and make him understand that this is a bad idea. We aren't together, or at least we haven't spoken about the many, many issues we have. Ziven can be all-consuming in both hate and love, and I'm not sure I will end up surviving either.

Dragon roars echo from outside as I follow Ziven out into the light, and I look up at the top of the mansion, seeing several Moon Dynasty dragons perched on top of the towers. The sky is still full of dragons. There are dozens flying around, mostly Sun Dynasty, a few grey ones here and there. The sun is rising high, casting beautiful orange and red light across the sky. But my voice seems like it catches in my throat as I look at the crowd gathered around the gardens at the front of the mansion, stretching far into the thick forest that hides them like a dark wave.

Most are covered in ash or have untreated burns, and there are so, so many children that my stomach feels like it's going to drop. One by one, the fae from the city look

up and see a fae king for the first time in their lives. I was one of them, and I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't see it myself. Several gasps and heavy whispers burst out around the crowd, and yet the many, many fae from the Sun Dynasty stand still in a line in front of the mansion with their backs to it. To Ziven. Where is their king now? I don't want to ever see Daegan again, but abandoning his people when they need him is stupid. They might start looking at the moon instead. I stand at Ziven's side, willing because he is right. I love him. I loved him enough for the magic to break.

"Welcome," Ziven begins. "My name is King Ziven of the Moon Dynasty. I am over five hundred years old, and we have been trapped within this mansion and the caverns below all this time with the dragons. When the vampyres took over, a royal decided that us being locked away was the safest way to keep us alive. The world continued on without fae royals, and your ancestors were left to fend for themselves. The vampyre took everything. There's not a single one of us fae here that wishes we couldn't have been there to fight for who was left outside that day. We all lost someone."

The wind blows around me, and I glance up at Ziven, the powerful Moon king who stole my heart. Who protected me? Who would do anything for me? I realise I haven't given him a chance since the mansion came down to tell me everything. I haven't told him I love him and, even if I end up dead, my time with him is never something I regret. I wish he had told me from the beginning, but I understand why as I look at all these fae. They have a chance of freedom now, and that wouldn't have happened without my near death. I know if Daegan didn't use Hettie to distract Ziven, he wouldn't have gotten close to me. A strange feeling settles in my gut at the thought of the rest of the fae in the world who need dragons and royals to fight for them.

"But we are free to fly, and I fly for the fae. These lands are mine. I was a prince of the Moon Dynasty when I was locked in here, and now I am king. I know this means

nothing to you. I know you're standing here by the luck of the deities and nothing else. Every single one of you will have known someone that died in the city in the fires when we took over. Fire consumes and, to win a war, death will be burning through the world. I will burn it to make us a free race!" His shout echoes loudly, and the crowd watches him like he is a god ruling over them all. "I'm not asking you to stand here and believe that I can keep you safe because I'm a king, when the only royals you've known have truly been monsters. You can't trust a fae you do not know or respect, but give me a chance, and I will fight for you with the power of the moon in my blood."

Ziven takes my hand, linking our fingers for all to see. "These are my ancestors' lands, and I am claiming them once more. Anyone within these lands is under my protection and welcomed to the Moon Dynasty. You can come into the mansion where there are healers and food. We will find beds for you all while we hunt the remaining vampyres within the city and the barrier. This is my queen." He lifts our hands high. More gasps and whispers echo out from the crowds. "She's one of you. This is Story Dehana."

He arches an eyebrow and waves me forward. The fucker. I clear my throat and look over at the crowd. "I was born in the breeder camps, and I am half powerborn, half lessborn. The mix of my parentage made me weak in the eyes of the vampyres, and I was sent to be a blood slave for the majority of my life. Now I'm free. Now I'm a dragon rider, and if I can be this, then aren't I a sign of the world changing that you can trust? I side with the Moon Dynasty king because he is a good person. I've seen firsthand that royals are rarely good, but King Ziven will give the fae a chance. A chance we were never born with." I look up at the sky. "I am a dragon rider, and I choose to belong to the Moon king. I hope you join us."

Chatter spreads around the fae as they watch us, and Ziven waits until they have had a chance to speak within themselves. Ziven has to understand the fae here will do anything for a chance of freedom, but they hate the vampyres. "My queen, she has

told me about what happened to you and how your monumental history has been destroyed by the vampyres. Powerborn and lessborn are titles they made up, and they do not exist in the history of the fae. Lessborn are simply fae who are unmarked by a dynasty or they have not found their power yet. Powerborn are luckier and the ties to their ancestors are still fierce in their blood. Every fae has magic. We are magic and I will teach you.” His voice rises. “Vampyres were once fae, and the first vampyre was a Dawn Dynasty king who used dark magic to twist his soul into a monster. The vampyres come from us, and they will end with us too.” Ziven looks at me and I feel the war dancing in his eyes. “We have dragons, and they will not be stopped. The barrier will be taken down eventually, and I invite each of you into my army. We will be ready to take on what is outside the barrier. Come and fight. It’s about time we take back the world for the fae like it once was.”

The silence echoes on and I know Ziven needs help. They don’t want power, not most of them, and I know because I never did. I wanted comfort and safety. I want my body to be mine and to have a choice on what is taken from it. “I feel terrified to face the vampyres, like I imagine many of you are. We were not taught to fight back or rebel. We were taught to be slaves and die.” I catch so many of their eyes, and I see it. I see the fear I’ve felt my entire life. “I was but a slave to the crown prince.” This catches their attention more, and I hear my name whispered loud. They know of me now. “While we follow the rule of the vampyres and live in fear, we will always be slaves. Our children, their children, and it will never end. The royal vampyre family is corrupt, and they want us to be food or labour and nothing else. We will always be killed and tortured and drunk from. It will never stop. It will be an endless cycle for them, and I promise they don’t even remember our faces, let alone our names. The dragon riders here give us a chance. We are all fae, and I stand before you as someone that’s seen both sides of it now, seen what’s inside this mansion, these people, seen what’s outside with the vampyres in charge. Trust me, it’s better for us to know who we are and to fight for our people.”

The crowds murmur before a man steps forward. He’s powerborn, a symbol of an axe

on his cheek, but I don't know what that means. I don't know much about the powerborn where my father came from. "You brought fires to the cities and destroyed the vampyres that owned us, but we lost much. The vampyres heard what happened in the city before your riders could reach it. They killed every fae man, woman, and child in the breeding district so they couldn't escape." Sickness rises thick in my throat. I grew up there. Heartbreak nearly snaps me in two, and Ziven wraps his arm around my waist as the man continues. "You ask us to fight for you, but we are not fighters. The vampyres will slaughter us."

Ziven lifts his head. "I am sorry to hear of the breeding district. The barrier around the mansion fell quickly, and war was swift. Even with no notice, Nightwell city was under my control within a day. You will not fight alone. You will fight with dragon riders, and we will train you."

The man lifts his fist into the air. "For the fae. For the Moon Dynasty. We fight!"

The roars echo loud and I proudly watch the crowds of fae, who are broken just like me, not giving up. They are going to fight. Ziven walks right back through the doors, and the second I follow him, they shut behind with a click of his magic. "Your queen? You can't just declare me that in front of everyone, Ziven!"

He stops to face me, raising a single eyebrow. The smug look in his eyes makes me want to throw something at him. Instead, I walk to the door, and he catches me, spinning me around so my back is against it and his impressive body is pressed into me. We fit so well together, and my body comes to life everywhere we touch. "I can declare you whatever the fuck I want. My queen. My enemy. My storm. My everything because I am done pretending we aren't it."

He kisses me with enough passion to set everything on fire once more. I moan into his mouth as his hands dig into my waist, his tongue sinking into my mouth, and I wish we did take the chance to have a room alone. I would be lying to myself if I

didn't admit how many times I thought about Ziven and me being in heat. He breaks away when I'm dazed and breathless for him. "You're my entwined mate, Storm."

Shock keeps me rooted between the door and him. I nearly shake with that news. "What did you just say?"

He presses his forehead into mine. "I wasn't sure, not to begin with. But fuck, I knew the moment I was inside you when you were in heat. So, yes, you will be my queen. My obsession with you makes sense to me now. It's always been you and me. I fucked up last time by not telling you everything, and I'm not doing that again. You're mine."

The door is knocked twice. Ziven and I ignore it as my heart races, and we stare at each other. It's knocked again and Ziven sighs. "We can talk about mates and your new powers later, I promise, but currently there's a mansion full of new and injured fae walking in here, and the twins are outside waiting for orders."

I can only nod, moving to the side to let him out. Ziven, the Moon king, is my entwined mate. I can't breathe as I watch him walk away.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:21 am

The Twilight Dynasty royals had a secret.

The two legendary books can be held by them without corruption.

Any other fae who touches the books will be lost...

It feels like hours, if not days, until I can finally get back to the Moon Dynasty rooms and get away from everyone. I sit down on the sofa and rest my head back with a thump. It's been chaos in the mansion. Absolute chaos. Everyone is frightened and fear makes even the calmest soul act irrationally. Most people don't want to go back to the city while the fae and dragons are still hunting the vampyres that are hiding. The Sun Dynasty fae are listening to Ziven and his people, but I know once Daegan shows his face, that won't last long. Daegan will cause trouble for us all, and I'm certain if he pushes Ziven too far, Ziven will end his worthless life.

Hettie comes running round the corner, and just seeing her makes my shoulders relax. She is yawning wide, with two cupcakes clutched in her hands. She comes to a stop. "You always appear with cupcakes. I knew there was a reason we are friends."

She smiles so widely. "I was planning to hide and eat them both." She rolls her eyes at me, but she's so cute with her light hair and sunshine smile. "But I'm happy you're here. Where's uncle Ziven?" Her eyes latch onto my tiara and brighten. I take it off and hold it between us. "Ziven is busy, and I'll trade this for a cupcake."

She giggles but happily gives me a chocolate cupcake and takes the tiara off me. Ziven might be mad I traded a priceless tiara for a cupcake, but that's a problem for another day. I'm too tired to care. I yawn, leaning back on the sofa to stuff my face

with the cupcake with no shame. She eats with me in comfortable silence, and I fold the wrapper up, tucking it into my pocket. My eyes drift to her bandaged arm. “I’m sorry Daegan did that to you.”

She touches her arm and frowns. “He’s meant to be my uncle, like Ziven.”

“Listen to me.” I pick up her hand. “He’s not Ziven. Daegan can’t be trusted, and you must not be alone with him again.”

She sniffles. “He was really mean.”

Fury fills my chest as I hug Hettie to me. Ruelle’s stick tapping on the ground gives her away, and she sighs as she comes into the lounge. “I believe Story might need some rest, Hettie. If you are well enough to escape your guards, again, and run off, then you are well enough for some tutoring.”

She groans. “But the doors are finally open! Why do I have to learn?”

I try really hard not to laugh as I turn her to face me. “I saw loads of fae children coming in here. If you study with Ruelle today, perhaps Ziven might let you go and meet them to play. Your uncle is stressed at the moment, and Ruelle is right. I’m tired. Just for a little longer, can you not run off from Ruelle and the guards?”

“Do you promise to ask Ziven?” She puts her hands on her hips. I nod once and she grins, hugging me tightly before running around Ruelle.

Ruelle looks to the ceiling for some deity to help her before she follows the direction Hettie went in. I have so many questions about how Hettie even exists when no other children were born. Why her? What is different? A yawn stops my train of thought, and I stumble through the rooms until I get to my bedroom.

There are still books laid across my bed, and I gently take each off before I get to the last one. The diary. I sit down on the bed with it, touching the cover. “I never believed in rebirth or spells, but somehow, you set me up for this fate. You loved them both, didn’t you? The sun and moon you wrote about was Ziven and Daegan...” I put her diary in my drawer and shut it. She’s dead and she can’t help me now. I don’t think she would even if she could. I fall asleep without even noticing it, and when I wake up next, there is a knocking at my door. “One second!”

I tug the cloak off and wash up in the bathroom before opening the door. Kyrell and Calix are waiting for me, and I grin as I throw my arms around Kyrell, who happily catches me. He smells like goats and blood, and I’m happy he has been fed. The window in my room shows me it’s night, and I must have slept for most of the day. I look over Kyrell’s shoulder. “Where’s Ziven?”

“Busy with the newcomers still. There have been fights and deaths. It’s a mess.” Calix rubs his chin. “I fucking hate the Sun king, but Mazzis and Ziven alone are struggling to keep order over the ten thousand or more fae flooding to the mansion. We will soon have a food shortage if this keeps up.”

Kyrell lets me go. “You left me with the joy of the party, Cally boy over here, and I begged him to let me come and see you.”

“Cally boy?” I choke on a laugh before smothering it with my hand.

Calix touches his sword hilt. “I told you two hours ago to fucking drop the new nickname, vampyre.”

Kyrell winks at me. “I’ve met nearly all the Moon Dynasty people, and I see why you went for the broody king. I need details, Tory.”

“I missed you,” I chuckle, knowing he is deadly serious about wanting to know

everything about Ziven and me. I wouldn't know how to even begin to explain it all to him though. Entwined mates. I don't know much about them except for what Etena told me. She said entwined mates were two people who are linked together when they're born, by the deities, and a mated pair is extremely powerful with the ability to boost each other's powers. The deities choose the people, and they are linked for certain reasons known to the gods alone. They could be destined for true love, or they could be destined for a deep friendship, or to be enemies fated to end each other's lives. Mates aren't always good picks, but their magic will always complement each other's. Most choose to be lovers, but not always.

Males always know—they can sense their entwined, smell her scent—but Etena said it isn't the same for females. I was drawn to Ziven since we met, and I thought it was because we hated each other. But it was this. This entwined fate between us. I've never had anything to claim as my own, and now I have a dragon and a broody king. I need time with my best friend, and I know just the space to spend some time. "Do you want to come and see the library they have here?"

Kyrell goes to answer, but Calix cuts him off. "No. He shouldn't go walking around." I frown and stare at Calix. He sighs and rubs his chin. "No one's in the library. It's the only place that Ziv's commanded that no one's allowed to enter. None of the new fae can go in there so it is safe, as we must protect the ancient books. But Kyrell shouldn't be walking around alone."

"He won't be alone. You and I will be with him," I remind Calix. "And Ziven won't even notice us taking a short trip there and back."

"If he does, I know Story will calm him." Kyrell wiggles his eyebrows at me.

Calix groans. "By the deities—fine. Come on, then, and for fuck's sake, vampyre, don't lower your hood until we are inside the library."

The ground floor below where Maeve used to be is completely covered in rocks, but someone has made a makeshift staircase out of wood that goes to every level in this place. I'm guessing one of the powerborn has a skill over elements and helped with this. The glass is all gone from the pathways, and instead, there are fae everywhere. Kyrell tugs his cloak tighter as we walk through them, but he needn't have worried. They all stare and point at me, some going as far as bowing. I want to tell each and every one of them not to do that, but I can't risk stopping with Kyrell at my side. Ziven has well and truly dropped me in it now.

My eyes drop to the rocks covering the entrance to the Decidere. "I'm guessing there's another entrance to the Decidere?"

"Yes, in the forest, there are many, and we have a few tunnels here too," Calix fills me in. I still haven't gotten over how Maeve was right in front of me the entire time, and I never noticed her. I knew she was a dragon statue, and I stared at how beautiful she was, but she was mine. She was waiting and watching me in the Decidere with the other dragons. I truly felt I wasn't worthy of a dragon after the Decidere ended and I came out without a dragon...but now I ride Maeve. So much has happened since I was a scared blood slave who wanted to die. I'm glad I decided not to die in the end, and a lot of my decision to fight is because of Kyrell. He might not look like my bright, alive best friend anymore, but he is here, and I will fight to the end to keep him safe.

He has died for me once before. I don't think I could take losing him again. My mother might be gone for all I know, and I haven't seen her in so long that sometimes I think I've forgotten what her face looks like. Kyrell is my family. My brother. I touch his arm, the coldness of his body so easily felt, even through clothes. I remember how cold a vampyre feels from Emyr, and I push down the fear his name strikes in my chest. "How are you feeling now you're like this?" I ask him when we come to the silent corridor to the library, which is guarded by Sun fae who let us pass.

“Different and empty.” He touches his stomach with his hand. “When you first wake up...everything’s different. My senses as a vampyre are like a fae, but I’m faster. Sometimes it feels like I just forgot how to feel warm and I might suddenly remember. Everything else about my body, I can get used to, but the cold? It doesn’t end. I feel it in my mind and soul.”

“I’m so sorry,” I tell him softly. “I wished to see you again, but I wouldn’t have wanted this vampyre life for you. I did everything you asked, you know? I lived, I dated, I made the most of the chance you gave me and fought for life. You told me to burn it all, and I might not have tried to do that, but it happened.”

He places his hand on my arm. “You will change everything, Story Dehana. I will be proud to watch.”

The doors to the library are heavily guarded. Surprisingly, they’re guarded by a team of ten Sun Dynasty guards, including Etena. She tenses when she spots us, her hands clenching as her eyes flicker over Kyrell, then Calix and me. Etena looks tired, a little less perfect than she usually is. The sun marking on her neck catches my eye now that her long hair is braided back. She is all in tight brown leather clothes, and a sword is strapped to her hip. “Did Daegan send you here?”

Etena bristles. “My king is currently busy, but I’m sure he will return, and his first command would be to protect the library, like King Ziven and King Mazzis suggested.”

“Good idea,” I murmur, looking into her eyes. She is worried about Daegan, and she might be the only one.

Calix grins. “Still think you’re on the right side, Etena?” He lowers his voice. “The sun doesn’t seem to be shining down on you like it usually is.”

She glares at him, and I awkwardly glance at Kyrell. He looks as uncomfortable as I feel. “I don’t want your opinions on any part of my life.” She stubbornly lifts her chin. “None of you are welcome in here, so you can leave.”

“Story Dehana is always welcome in the libraries.” Mazzis’s soft voice comes from behind Etena, and his footsteps follow until he steps into the light. Dressed head to toe in orange robes, he smiles kindly at me. A sting fills my chest. He lied to me, too. Etena rolls her eyes and steps to the side. Mazzis smiles like the dawn sunlight, beautiful and bright. “Please come in. We need to talk.”

“We do,” I agree, rubbing my arm before joining his side. “I wanted to show Kyrell the libraries. He is a very good friend of mine, and he knows how much I love to read. He used to sneak me books sometimes.”

Kyrell’s eyes soften, but there is a glimmer of pain there. His lover used to get the books from outside the castle for me in the end, and he loved reading like me. I touch his hand and he nods once before following me past Etena. She stares at me, but she doesn’t say a word. Mazzis looks over his shoulder at Calix. “The guard can stay out here. This is currently the safest place for her.”

Calix’s shoulders tense. “The vampyre is?”

“I’m not as weak as you are suggesting. I am still a king, boy, and I will be perfectly able to protect Story from a single vampyre as weak as he is.” Mazzis’s tone holds a bite I’ve never heard from him. My lips twitch with a smile, and Calix doesn’t dare say a word more when we follow Mazzis through the tunnel entrance. Mazzis moves to step back to my side. “I want to begin with an apology. I find Dawn is always in the middle of the Sun and Moon, two powers that are all-consuming.” I nod, knowing exactly what it is like to be between them. Part of me still feels like I am, even if I hate Daegan with every part of my body. “I wanted to tell you the truth, and I begged them both, but I was outvoted. I have so little family left, Story. Did I ever tell you of

my two sisters?”

I shake my head as we all stop. Kyrell gives us space, waiting by the wall and staring at the library. I turn to Mazzis. “It is not you I’m angry at. Daegan has a lot to answer for.”

Mazzis takes my hands in his. “I tried to tell you the truth through the books I gave you. To give you hints without breaking the promise I made to the other kings on the penalty of death. I like you, Story. I believe people like you are the key to a better world. The people who read, who imagine and cry for words on a page, are the ones who will lead us. I thought maybe the books would give you some connection to the Dawn queen. She was family to me, after all.” He sighs. “I was a distant cousin to the crown, and my Dawn blood ran weak. I had two sisters from my mother’s side: neither one of them had a touch of royal blood in them. It was my father who made me king. You remind me so much of one of my sisters. She was a reader.”

“Many call her the princess, not queen,” I remark.

“She was the queen of the Dawn Dynasty for a time, and I dislike that is forgotten in light of the prophecy made,” he says with a sigh. “But, yes, the curse always talks about the princess; therefore, she’s usually given that name. You might be reborn of her, but who says each of us is not reborn of someone? They do not shape who we are. I know I must earn your trust back, and I will do everything in my power to make sure you have a long life, Story. You deserve it.” He walks around me to Kyrell. “And please do tell me your background, Kyrell?”

“I am Story’s best friend, and that’s the only part of my past that is worth explaining.” He turns his pale eyes on me. “And she feels guilty that I’m like this, but it’s not her fault. I want the same as you, King Mazzis. A long life for Story.”

Tears brim in my eyes. How did I get so lucky to have him as my friend? True love is

one thing, but a deep friendship is just as powerful. Mazzis looks between us, and his smile is sweet. "Please come in, Kyrell."

The library is just as I left it last, which feels like years ago with how much has changed in such a short time. It's like it's been untouched by everything that happened to the rest of the mansion when Maeve and I rode out the top of it. Librarians are still walking around with their carts, sorting books out and so calmly it's like they aren't aware of how everything changed in here. The tables are all empty at the front, and no one's reading in here, but soft orange light glows across the room.

Kyrell looks in amazement. "There's so many books. I once travelled with the prince to the king's home in the Lightsun lands." Mazzis looks at him with a clear question of how? "I used to be the prince's guard. I went to the libraries to guard him. The king has a massive library like this, locked away deep underneath the castle in the Lightsun lands. No one's allowed to go into them, and the fae workers there look like they never leave. I never saw all of it as I stayed by the door, but there were hundreds of thousands of books." He looks at me and the shock on my face. "Telling you about a whole library full of books and unable to get you a single one would have been cruel when you were..." He drifts off. When I had given up wanting to live, he means.

"I've been reading so much here. About fae, about legends, and I can't wait for you to read them." The excitement I feel just comes out with every word. "The history of our race is extraordinary."

Mazzis goes over to a cart by the wall and comes back with a book. "Now that you know the truth, I thought maybe you'd like to learn more about the Twilight Dynasty, where you came from, where the princess was from. There aren't any other books on the Twilight Dynasty here because they kept to themselves. Their secrets too. But this is a traveller's history written from someone who lived in the Twilight Dynasty for a

time. It speaks about how most of them had red or black hair with a red glow. They had powers of flame and were not governed by the sun or moon for their strength.”

I take the book and touch the black cover. “You think I’m from the Twilight Dynasty? Or my ancestors were?”

Mazzis nods. “We might never know, but I personally take joy in learning about the ancestors of the Dawn Dynasty, and I think you should read about the Twilight. They may be gone from the world, but people like you could keep it alive.”

“Story...I’ve missed you.” I spin around to face Kyrell as the black bleeds over his eyes. The black moves across his eyeball like a wave, and a cruel smirk twitches on his face. Something about that smirk looks familiar to me.

My heart leaps in my chest as I take a step back. “Kyrell...what’s...” Kyrell jumps for me, teeth bared, and red light flashes in my hands. Mazzis pushes me back and Kyrell’s teeth latch straight onto his neck instead of mine. I scream as Mazzis goes almost floppy in his arms, orange light flickering from his body. “STOP!”

Kyrell doesn’t stop and I’m frozen in shock. Calix is by my side within a second, ripping Kyrell off Mazzis, who slumps to the ground. I catch Mazzis as Calix fights Kyrell across the library. The pair of them are powerful, but Calix is better. He swiftly grabs Kyrell around the neck, flipping him and slamming him onto one of the tables. It snaps in half, and silver light similar to Ziven’s flashes out of Calix’s hand into Kyrell’s face. Kyrell slumps, passed out as I clutch Mazzis tightly, seeing his chest rise and fall.

Etena shouts from the tunnel. “Get a healer! The Dawn king is injured!” I stare at Kyrell, unblinking, as I remember that smile. It reminded me of Prince Emyr.

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It is said the deities are the very light of the titles of the dynasties.

Sunlight, Moonlight, Dawnlight, Dusklight and Twilight.

Only one of the deities we pray to is listening.

I pace up and down in front of the dungeon doors while I wait for Ziven and Ruelle to come out. Ziven was furious when he turned up five minutes after Kyrell attacked Mazzis, but he calmed when he saw I was okay. Mazzis is recovering in his own apartment with his own healers, and he will be fine, but Kyrell...he didn't look good. Calix had knocked him out instead of killing him, and I'm thankful he did that. I know he did that for me, because if any other vampyre had attacked Mazzis, they'd be dead.

It's been an hour since Ziven went in there with Ruelle and told me to get the bloody clothes off while she worked. I showered quickly and scoffed a sandwich and cake on my bed before getting changed in black leggings and a dark crop top with my boots.

Ziven finally comes out the doors, and I frown at the hard line on his lips. I just know he is going to say something I don't want to hear. "Don't ask me to let him out, Storm. He is dangerous."

Kyrell is not dangerous. Whatever happened to him back in that library was. I haven't told anyone how Kyrell smirked like the prince did before he'd hurt me. Before he punished me for any reason he could make up. Somehow, the prince controlled Kyrell, and this is all to hurt me. I know it is. I ran from him, and any hope that he had forgotten about me just disappeared.

“You don’t get to make that choice for me, Ziven,” I snap, trying to walk around him, but he stops me.

His eyes darken until they remind me of a night sky. “You’re mine,” he growls, leaning in. “So yes, I fucking do make the choice on this. You’re thinking with your heart and not with common sense. Kyrell doesn’t want to hurt you. Even if you don’t want to listen to me, listen to him. Think about what he must feel like, knowing he nearly killed you!”

We glare at each other, both of us as stubborn as each other. I know he is right, but this is Kyrell. Kyrell, my best friend, and I can’t watch him live in a dungeon. My shoulders drop and Ziven steps closer, tilting my chin up with a finger. “Storm, I’m not giving up on him. He kept you alive and got you to me. I owe the vampyre, and I don’t intend to keep him in there forever.”

“He saved me,” I whisper.

Ziven runs his hand around to the back of my neck. “Trust me, Storm. I know I’ve done nothing to earn it yet, but I will.”

Trusting Ziven has always been the problem between us. He is hundreds of years old and far more experienced in life than I am, but it makes him stubborn and resistant to change.

Ruelle comes out the doors, shutting them behind her. She rests on her stick in front of her, watching me as I step away from Ziven. “Is he well?”

“He has a bed, and he’s safe with two guards. We’ve put blood in there, goat, for his comfort, but I’m sure he’s already well fed.” She sighs. “I am not an expert at healing or reading vampyres, but that poor boy has been through much. His heart is missing, and in its place is a shard of wood that my magic reeled from.”

Ziven crosses his arms. "Reeled from?"

"Yes. I've never felt magic like it. There's a darkness wrapped around his soul from that wooden shard that is easily controlling him. Something's very wrong and I'm sorry to say I sense he will not have long in this world. What he is...it is not normal even for vampyres. I wish I had better news for you, but he is not in pain."

Ruelle touches my shoulder as I walk past her to the door and place my head against it. My voice breaks. "He's going to die?"

"Yes," Ruelle plainly answers. "We won't give up on your vampyre friend, and I do like a challenge. I will send people to look in the libraries with Mazzis. We don't have much history on the vampyres, but maybe on dark magic, resurrection and that wooden shard. There might be something to be found and an answer to keep him alive longer."

A desperate thought fills my mind. "He said the prince turned him. That means there could be clues in the castle where I was before..."

"My old castle." Ziven's voice is bitter. "Where I was born."

I didn't know he was born there, and something about the years I spent being used in that horrible place doesn't make me feel any better about Ziven's connection to it. "We should go there for answers. I can fly Maeve to it."

"It's not been cleared yet, but yes, we can go together." He makes the point of the word together, and I nod once. I feel like I can't breathe for a second. Trapped in this mansion, forced to watch Kyrell die. Another trap, another place I won't be able to leave. The prince turned him to punish me because he knew he would die again, and this time it might be more painful than the last. All of this...it is to get to me, and it's working. Ziven's arm wraps around my waist, and he's leading me out before the

panic can truly set in. I don't have the energy to ask Ziven where he is taking me, but when we get outside, past the endless faces of fae who bow, smile or wave at us, I suck in a deep breath.

The air, the freedom of being outside, does make everything feel a little better. "Where are we going?"

Ziven leans down to my ear. "I want time alone with you. I want you distracted from this shit world we are in." He rubs his thumb on the small of my back. "You are a rider now, Storm. A powerful dragon rider that will be remembered in our history. We haven't spoken about what that means for you, and we have so much to discuss. I want to remind you what it means to be on a dragon and have only the skies to look down on us."

Ziven leads me to a long-forgotten pathway into the forest. There are hundreds of tents with campfires in the forest in every direction, but none are near here. The dragon roar and the rattling of the trees that follows, it lets me know why. We go past the stream where people are gathering water into buckets, and they watch us with wary eyes, but Ziven almost pretends they don't exist. "Are we going on dragons, then?"

"Mine, yes," he leans into me. "I've never taken another on my dragon. It is seen as a ritual for entwined mates. Ride with me, Story."

The chilly breeze blows down my spine, cooling my blood when it feels like it's on fire. A ritual? Something about riding a dragon together feels very personal. "I will, but you need to answer something first."

"Anything." He lifts me over a broken log, his hands purposely sliding down my ass before he lets go. I would complain, but I like it. "I'm not lying to you, Storm. You want answers, then you ask and I will give them to you, even if it fucking kills me."

“Why didn’t you say anything after you knew I was your entwined mate? Why weren’t you still on my side afterwards?”

“Because you were with him.” He pauses right at the entrance to the dragon pit. The moonlight streams through the trees into his eyes, casting a glow around his body that is beautiful. The look in his eyes is the opposite to that. The jealous, fierce look sends shivers through my body. “You were with Daegan, and fuck, I hated him more, but I understood. He is the Sun king, all light and fucking sunshine. Easy to love.” He wraps his hand around my waist, tugging me against him. “And I’m the one you called your enemy. The Moon king in the darkness, who is fucked up and complicated. I can’t give you what he could. I thought he had chosen you over his need for war and you’d chosen him.” He gulps as my heart races. “And as much as I hated it, I wondered whether you had fallen in love with him. Whether... Even when I’d been inside you, even when I had you, I felt like I hadn’t gotten close. I was too fucked up for someone as beautiful and pure as you to love.”

The dragons roar around us, shaking the very ground under our feet, but we don’t look away. Even as we stand literally in the mouths of the dragons, it doesn’t matter when I have to tell him the truth. “I never loved him. I only ever saw you.”

He grips me tighter. “You kissed him back.” Fury marks every word. Every breath between us. “And deities above, I’ve never wanted to murder anyone as much as I did him.”

His lips slam into mine with enough passion to burn a fire through my soul.

When he breaks away from the kiss after thoroughly destroying my ability to think about anything and anyone else but him, Ziven takes my hand before we walk together, straight into the dark dragon’s cave. The opening is tall and narrow before stretching into an immense dome, where every curved wall is a shimmering black stone. It spreads everywhere and sparkles in the fires in puddles of burning oil dug

into the ground. It reminds me of the Decidere. There's a pit, a massive black circle with a red ring around the edge. I hear wings when I'm close, but Ziven doesn't stop, leading me past. "Is that where the dragons come from?" I question, pointing at it.

"No, they are over here." Ziven leads us into a big tunnel entrance full of jagged edges.

My eyes tug back to the giant pit, and there's a strange tug in my chest towards it. "You do not go down there," Maeve snarls inside my mind, and I jump.

Ziven frowns at me, and I explain. "Maeve doesn't want me to go down there...but why?"

"I believe these caves existed far longer than we did, and the truth of them was only known to the Twilight Dynasty. This might have been my land, but the mansion and caverns belonged to the Twilight Dynasty. My father told me once that their claim dated back to the beginning of our race and we should never argue it. They were here before the fae walked our world—Pennitan. The caves that the dragons live inside look like roots of a tree, and that is the deepest part. There are some places you don't go. Sometimes I hear dragons down there, but no one who has dared to go down has come back." He meets my eyes. "My mother said dragons that are made of shadows live down there, and they're not alive and they are wild. My dragon warned me never to go down there too. Every dragon warns their rider not to."

"Shadow dragons sound terrifying, though," I admit.

"Who knows if dragons even live down there? Our dragons do not speak of it, and Maeve's demand says enough. Whatever's down there, they're dangerous." I find myself still drawn to it as Ziven leads me further into the cavern.

I turn around as I hear a whoosh of wings, right before Brythan comes flying out.

He's a beautiful dragon, and he suits Ziven in every way. My head whirls to Ziven as he starts singing in a language that I've never heard before. The singing's almost like a chant, a beautiful sound, and his dragon seems to be calmed by the echoing song. Brythan lands right in front of him, and a huff of smoke floats around Ziven's feet.

He looks powerful. Unstoppable. Every inch a dragon-riding king of the Moon Dynasty. When he stops, I clear my throat, oddly affected by the song. Or him singing it. "What's that language?" I ask.

Brythan sniffs me, blowing my hair around my shoulders in a smoky huff, and I try not to be super intimidated by this giant dragon. Ziven reaches out to stroke Brythan's snout. "I was taught it by my mother. She had a slightly strange history. My mother was born to witches, or at least, that's what people used to call them. They knew this language, and she taught me the songs when I was young. They are lost to most now. They can calm dragons. I've never heard many from the Sun Dynasty sing the old song of the dragons, and I assume they don't know them." He strokes my arm. "I'll teach you."

"Thank you," I whisper back, knowing how much it must mean for him to share a part of his mother's history with me.

He nods to Brythan. "Come."

"You want me to ride your dragon?" I blurt out. His silver eyes settle on me, his hand still touching his very big, living dragon. Riding Maeve is scary, but Brythan? When we don't have a bond?

"Yes, with me. You're my entwined mate, and we can be guests on each other's dragons. They see us as one person." Good to know, and very romantic, but still I'm not convinced he won't throw me off in the sky. I have a suspicion Maeve would do that to Ziven if he tried to ride her. Ziven tugs me forward and Brythan surprises me

by leaning down, lower than he does for Ziven. It's kind of cute. "If he didn't want you to ride, he would have made that very clear by now. He is as mean as I can be."

"No wonder you two get along, then," I mutter. Ziven laughs as he pushes me up by my waist, and I have no choice really but to climb up. The back of Brythan is rather smooth, almost like a saddle shape. It's been etched into the spikes and smooth back. I climb up, moving towards the front of his neck. Ziven is behind me in a second, and I nestle myself back between his thighs as he holds me.

"Fly," Ziven commands. We both know he could have commanded in his head, but it's a warning for me to brace myself. Brythan charges out of the dragon cave and jumps up, flapping his wings and diving into the skies. I can barely breathe at the force of his takeoff, but flying with Maeve got me used to this. I laugh into the wind as Brythan speeds across the forest tops, slowing into a glide towards the sea. I gasp as Ziven turns my head to the side, his lips trailing down my neck to my collarbone, his hand sliding under my shirt in the same breath.

"What are you doing?" I shout over the wind.

"Taking what I want." His words get into my ear and send shivers down my spine. The good kind. His hand cups my breast, slipping underneath the bra to rub over a hard nipple until I gasp in pleasure, unable to do much but let my head fall back to his shoulder. I'm equally as on fire with need as I am cold with fear from the flight. The mixture of the two is mind-numbing until I can only feel the intense pleasure. We are thousands of feet up, on a dragon, and doing this was not something that I thought was possible. Ziven doesn't seem to care as his other hand sinks below my leggings too, finding me absolutely soaked for him. He groans into my ear, and I shudder as he slides one finger, then two, deep inside me.

"Fuck," he whispers in my ear. "I'm desperate to be inside here, to fuck you until you're mine."

I am his. Fuck is definitely the word for this. Mind-blowing pleasure starts building inside me as he pumps his fingers in and out, his thumb grazing my clit. Teasing, pushing, and it's all too much. I scream to the wind as my orgasm hits, and I clench around his fingers, my orgasm so intense that I feel like I'm going to pass out. Ziven is dangerous for me. I've known it since the moment I met him, but moments like this?

He marks every inch of my body and soul, and I would have it no other way. If he is danger, then what does that make me for loving every second of him? I almost forget where we are as I come down from the high of my orgasm, an orgasm so intense I nearly blacked out. He isn't even inside me yet, and he can do this. I feel like a shaky mess as he removes his fingers, and Brythan dives on a silent command. Ziven's dark chuckle echoes in my ear as I see the cliff appearing. Brythan lands on the edge of the highest point, which overlooks the entire sea for miles until it hits the barrier of magic.

I want him. I need him.

Ziven climbs off first and I slide down after him, right into his arms. The world fades away as he picks me up and I wrap my legs around him, feeling him hard as he presses into me at the same time he slams his lips onto mine. I moan into his mouth as he carries me onto the smooth stone ledge by the edge of the cliff, kissing me deeply enough that the cold stone at my back doesn't register. His dragon takes off, leaving us alone in the night, and I swear the moon itself hangs brighter, higher as we lie beneath the stars.

He tears at my clothes, and I pull his until he takes them off. I stare up at him, my mouth going dry as I take in every inch of the Moon king. Of my mate. His hard length is just as impressive as I remember, thick and long and damn near massive. There isn't an inch of anything soft about him, from his rippling muscular lines on his stomach to his chest and arms, to his shoulders. Everything screams power except for

the way he looks at me. There is burning desire, want, and when he looks at my body, his body tenses. My scars. Ziven leans down and kisses them, each and every scar, until I'm panting for him.

He kneels and parts my legs, lining up the tip of his cock at my entrance. He slips in just an inch, and I remember exactly how he stretches me. Ziven cups the back of my neck, tugging me up to meet his lips as he pushes further inside me. He pulls out, just a bit, before slamming right into me all the way, and I gasp as my back arches. He groans.

"Fuck, Storm. You're so fucking beautiful and tight around my cock." He grabs my chin and makes me look at him. "Do you know how many times I've stroked my cock thinking of you, remembering being inside you when you were in heat? Do you know how fucking insane you've made me feel?" He thrusts into me again and again, pushing me right towards another orgasm.

"You make me feel the same," I whisper, and he groans again, kissing me as the pressure builds up. He reaches between us, his thumb swirling on my clit, and I scream his name to the skies as I explode around him, taking him with me. Ziven fills me with one more thrust, kissing me breathless until we're both left staring at each other. "I love you."

He kisses me very softly and not like I'd ever expect a ruthless fae dragon rider to be able to kiss like. "I love you too, Storm."

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Chapter Ten

Page Ten?—

As I write this book, I am in the Twilight Dynasty watching the royals dance and celebrate the birth of a new prince. The second born. I often wonder when the dynasties will fall to their own greed, and will our magic be lost?

The mansion is crammed with fae, and too many of them look at me like I'm their saviour. I'm not. The smart ones look at me with fear. I reluctantly leave Story behind when news of Daegan coming back gets to me. I know my apartments are safe. That she's safe and alive. I almost lost her once, and I've never felt fear like it. I can still taste her on my tongue, still feel her wrapped tight around my cock, and the urge to make her my mate is hounding me in my blood like fire. I roll my neck until it clicks as I step around a group of fae in ash-covered clothes. Calix clicks his tongue. "When were you going to tell me you fell for her? That you're mates?"

He's my second-in-command for a reason. He is usually the one who knows me the best. He is my closest friend, and we were born in the same year in the court. His parents were high up nobles, and there weren't many kids around the castle. We used to fight like brothers way before everything went to shit. Calix told me straight that I was a fucking moron from the minute that I met Story for not telling her the truth. He was right. He usually is right, and I should listen to him more. "I love her."

I don't need to tell him anything else for him to understand what that means. I think back to the day that I threatened Daegan in the corridor and she accidentally got hurt with my magic. I warned the Sun king then and there that she was mine. I didn't give

a shit anymore if she wanted to be with him. I was going to do everything in my power to make sure that she was mine, even play dirty. When she went into heat, being inside her only made the obsession grow and become clear to me what it was I was trying not to feel. Mates.

When I was young and a fool, I thought it would be easy when I found my entwined mate. The full force of the mate bond smacked into my chest when I held her in the shower and saw the scars. I wanted to kiss each scar and vow revenge on her behalf. I wanted to go to my knees and beg her to forgive me for it all. It had been so long since I felt anything real...not since my sister died. Story and I, we are similar in a way I don't think she understands yet. We both gave up and then chose to fight again. Chose to live.

I lean over the banister to watch the blond-haired Sun king bastard as he is adored by his people who think the sun shines out of his asshole. "Fucking prick," Calix curses.

I grunt, agreeing with Calix. Daegan looks up straight at me, sensing my stare, and I smirk just to unnerve him. A silent challenge of what I would do to the fucking murdering cunt if I ever got my hands on him. "Shame he doesn't have an heir so we can just replace him." If he did have an heir and killing him painfully wouldn't cause me a headache from his people, then I'd probably have killed him by now. Either way, he isn't surviving to have a happy ending. I'm a lot of bad things, but the one thing I pride myself on is ending assholes' lives like him. But, for now, he's the last Sun king, and the majority of the riders follow his rule. We need the dragons and their riders in order to win the war against the vampyres.

Calix turns his eyes on me. "The last thing we need is a rebellion within ourselves when there's war outside. We both know the barrier will come down one way or another." I growl at him and he holds his hands up. "I don't mean by killing Story. I mean by the book he has. We need the alliance we have with him to stand more than ever before. I like Story, but killing Daegan for her is a dangerous move."

“I’m aware, or I’d have his head on a burning spike in the middle of the mansion by now.” I’ve dreamt about that once or twice. “As long as he doesn’t go near her again, I can keep myself in check.”

Daegan’s grating voice echoes loud. “I am sorry I’ve been away and I haven’t met you all. I am King Daegan of the Sun Dynasty. I will lead you all into freedom with the dragon army I lead.” Prick. “I made a dear sacrifice to open up the mansion and free the dragons, but it didn’t fully work. I am still processing that we are trapped within magic once more.”

He made a sacrifice? Not Story who literally bled and nearly died? “I hate this fucking guy.”

Daegan isn’t done. “I wanted to oversee the locking up of every vampyre that has been left alive; whether they’re woman or child, they are vampyres and they are our enemies. When the sun rises, we will rid ourselves of them once and for all.” My grip tightens on the banister.

There he goes again, making the choices we haven’t discussed and choices I want to murder him for. I’m not letting him kill thousands of women and kids because of what they are. If we do that, we are just as bad as the vampyres we are trying to stop. Calix looks at me, and I nod. Daegan is a problem. I knew the fucker had a dream of war and being some beloved king. He fucked his way through half the fae in here and made all of them love him. None of them know the real him, what lies under the pretty smiles of sunshine. At least I don’t bother hiding who I am.

“Now I will find a way to bring down the barrier to get back to the Lightsun lands, which I’m sure will welcome their king home.”

“He’s fucking delusional,” Calix mutters. He isn’t wrong. Calix’s entwined mate stands at Daegan’s side, and she doesn’t even look up at her mate. I was there the day

that Etena lost her memories and watched how it was like a sucker punch to the throat for Calix. They were in love, really in love, and obsessed with each other. Then it was just gone, and Etena is a puppet for Daegan now. She acts like the bond between them doesn't exist, like none of it did. It would crush me if that happened to Story and me. I don't know how Calix managed to stand after losing her like this. Etena might have been from the Sun Dynasty, but she spent nearly all her time in the Moon until she was hurt.

The crowd cheer for Daegan, and I grit my teeth at the smug smile he gives them all. My eyes flick to Calix. "Now that he is back, Story is not to be left alone. Hettie either. Shadow them when I'm not there, and make sure the guards are continuously watching the entrances and exits to the apartment. We have to be ready for whenever he decides to attack."

"I will treat her like my queen until my death." Calix bows his head. "What is your plan?"

I glance at Daegan walking away. "The book is a problem. His riders are the easier task. I am going to take everything the Sun king loves, and when I'm done, he might do us all a favour and end his life." I smile. "I've never seen or opened the book, but he has. He keeps it locked away, but I want it now. I should have taken it sooner."

Calix rubs his chin. "He's not going to give it to you."

"I don't give a shit." I shrug a shoulder. "But the key to getting the barrier down might be in those pages. The more time we spend locked in this land, the more people will hear the tale of Story and the rumour of her death being the key to escaping. I don't want to murder every fae here to keep Story alive, but I will."

"The book is a better option," Calix jokes, but he knows I'm not kidding in the slightest. Everything burns if they try to hurt her. "Ziv...there's a chance here, a

slight chance to remake our world, for you to be king of a great dynasty that will be remembered. We lost a lot and we won't survive losing any more of us. Please, don't do anything rash. I love you like a brother, but I know, when it comes to her, you don't think straight." He touches my shoulder. "I saw you when the news of the mansion doors appearing and Maeve flying out the top came in. The panic, the look on your face, reminded me of when you lost your sister and everything that happened then. Fuck, Ziv, you scare me when those you love are at risk, and I know I wouldn't stand a chance of stopping you. The deities brought her here. They set all of this up and linked her to you. She is your mate, and that must be for a reason. The princess never was your mate."

"She was entwined mates with Daegan..." I admit. I hate fucking saying it because there is a chance it means Story could be the same for Daegan. If he has any claim on her, I don't care what it means for my people, I'm killing him.

"Entwined mates are complicated." He looks at where Etena just was. "It's not always love. It can be a worse fate. If he is linked to her, it's not the same as you and her. You're real...you have something. She is good for you."

I pat his arm before walking away, not giving him the reassurance that he probably wants. I can't promise I'm not going to do something rash, because when a threat is hovering over my mate, I will destroy it. Protective desire and blinding fury are all I can feel.

I head straight back to the dungeon before I see Story again. The doors are guarded by Astrid and Estrid. Astrid—I think, as I forget who is who—bows and opens the door for me before staying on this side as they shut me in with Kyrell. They know I don't need their help. Kyrell is sitting on the bed, his head buried in his hands. Mazzis's blood is still on his shirt, and he smells of the Dawn king. Mazzis will survive and I owe him a debt for saving Story. Kyrell looks up. "How is Story?"

I cross my arms and lean against the wall. “Upset about you. If you put her in danger again, then it’s over for you. Do you understand? You’re staying here under my protection, and you will follow every fucking rule I give you because threats to her die.”

Kyrell looks dead. His skin is pale, too pale, and everything about him seems to have been drained away. There is a brightness in the pits of his eyes that seems like an echo of the male he was before. “Because you love her?”

I nod once. He leans back, still looking at me. He is smart enough not to take his eyes off mine when a part of me wants to destroy him for being a threat to Story. It’s part of the reason I didn’t go after Daegan. I don’t trust myself alone with him. The feral part of my soul wants to drown the fucker with moonlight and watch him die. “I love her too. Not in the same way you do.”

I know. If I thought he was a threat like that...well, jealousy is a small word for what I’d feel.

“I always wanted a sister. Any sibling, really. My mum told me about Story before I met her. She told me about this girl who she had to send to be a blood slave but she had promised to keep her safe. My mother told me about Story’s father, who led a fae and vampyre rebellion with my uncle too. They were raising people in secret to try to get some freedom. He was known as one of the bravest powerborn, and he even convinced hundreds of vampyres to side with him in secret. They wanted the world to change.”

He sighs before continuing. “Her father had elemental power, and he was in the army. Unstoppable, some said. Of course, they were found out, and they were ripped apart by the vampyres for sport and to show everyone that freedom is a dream that will never come true. They hunted all the families, anyone who knew, throughout the city. It was brutal, horrible, from what my mother told me. She said, to this day, she

doesn't know how we survived and how Story did with her mother when all the other families were killed. But, apparently, her father stood there in the end and told them all that one day a fae is going to rise and burn all of it down."

He lifts his eyes to look me straight in the face. "When I first met Story, I knew it'd be her. She was scared, terrified, but she never truly gave up, even when she said she did. I saw in her eyes she didn't. I told her to burn it all down because those were the words from her father. Because she is brave, courageous and special. I don't think there's probably a single person in this world who will ever deserve her love, but you have it."

He stands up and walks right up to the bars that stand between us. "For that reason alone, I'm going to ask something of you."

I nod once, curious about what he could want from me. "Ask."

"When the prince turned me and I woke up, he informed me that he had Story's mother. I thought she was safe and kept a secret, but clearly not." He touches the bar. "He said that if I didn't bring Story to him...he's going to turn her into a vampyre."

"Why didn't you tell her this?" I bite out. That fucking prince is dead when I face him. Story's mother is all the family she has left, and I know she loves her. Fuck.

"My mother told me all about Story's mother and how fierce she was about protecting her daughter. She wouldn't want me to tell Story, because we both know she would run to the prince to save her mother without a second thought." My blood runs cold. "Story might hate me when she finds out the truth, but it's a risk I am taking."

"And making me take too."

“You love her, and telling her would mean you lose her.” He shrugs as I grit my teeth. He is right and I hate it. “Here’s our deal. I won’t tell her anything that the prince told me about her mother, and you make the deal to kill me if I ever become a threat. If something happens again—you end my life. I didn’t die and go through all of this to keep her alive for nothing. I can’t end it myself, but you can end my life quick. The prince is cruel, and he plays games. His obsession with her probably rivals your own.” He looks away. “Make the deal with me, Moon king, to stop him from ever touching her again.”

She’d hate me for agreeing to this when I just promised no more lies. “Fuck!” I rub my face. I know she’d absolutely hate me if she knew I was making this deal. But there’s no way in this world or in the next that I will let her go running to the prince. I think we can get the barrier down, and then we’ll go after her mother together. It’s not a lie, but a way of buying some more time before I tell her. It still feels wrong. “You have a deal, Kyrell.” I turn and touch the handle. “And no one loves Story like I do. I do this to keep her alive, even knowing she might never forgive me. The prince, when I get my hands on him, he’ll know a worse fate. He won’t ever touch her again because he will be too busy learning what it is like to be ripped apart by the moon.”

Chapter Eleven

Page Eleven—I search for the books.

I search and wish they would find me.

I wipe a line of blood from my arm, dripping from the fresh bite mark on my shoulder. It's a sore spot that will hurt every time I move, but it will heal eventually, like all the others. Sometimes I run my hands over my scars, the thousands of them that litter my body like artwork, and remember the time when there were none. When I was a starving kid in the orphanage, who just wanted someone to love her. Sometimes I wish I had died in that orphanage. Other times, I'm glad I was chosen by the king.

The king lies naked next to me on his stomach, and there is a dead fae woman on the floor. He killed her before having sex with me, and I did nothing but smile. I did nothing but pretend I don't feel sick to my stomach every time he is inside me. Every time he drinks my blood and groans how perfect I am. How he would turn me if he didn't love my blood. If he didn't love me. I don't think he understands what love means. I don't think I do. No one has claimed to love me except for him, and if this is what love is, then I don't want it. I'd rather spend a lifetime without love.

I stare at the only marks on the king's body. Burns in a decorative mark, and sometimes I think the shape almost looks like a tree with strange symbols woven into the branches. I've never been brave enough to ask him what happened.

I only know he is a king of a race he created and dark magic must have been

involved. That book still haunts me, and it's been two weeks since I heard it last. I've made every excuse I could to avoid going back into the mountain because I don't want to hear that voice. I don't want to see those creatures, even if they are flying in the skies day and night. Those awful screeches fill the silent night, and I wince. I've struggled with sleep since getting here, and I doubt I will ever sleep well while the Silkvir fly above me.

Will I ever be free? Or is this the life that I'm going to have now and absolutely nothing else? I climb off the bed and go back to the bathing rooms to clear off the blood and other things from my skin. I'll never truly feel clean, but it helps. The water's freezing as I wash myself, but I'm not waking any fae to get hot water. They are all run off their feet helping the Silkvir riders that have started to appear. Thousands of them, and all the vampyre riders ride their Silkvir well enough that I know the king has been training them for years like he claimed. They are fast, trained and deadly. There is going to be a war, and the dragon riders have no idea what is coming.

I scrub at my skin, again and again, desperately trying to get rid of stains only I can see. The feel of the king on me. My skin is red raw when I finally drop the scrubber into the dirty, bloodstained water and climb out. I dress lightly in a thin dress that was given to me by the workers here. It wraps around my shoulders, glossy soft material, and it covers me from my neck down to my wrists, hiding all of my scars. It will also stop the bugs from snapping at me in the heat. It's never truly dark here, but the light fades to orange in the middle of the night, and I prefer it. I head outside the front of the tent, just for some fresh air. The hazy, thick, humid air slams into me like a wave of the sea.

I remember swimming in an oasis in my village as a kid. It was my very first memory and last one I have of my parents being happy. My mother's shiny red hair, my dad's cheeky smile. I remember this heat, how good it felt in the warm water, and for a moment I let myself be back there. My wet hair falls around my shoulders, and I hear

a dripping noise. I assume it's my hair, but something makes me look at the royal guard vampyres outside the front. They don't move. I frown at them, wondering why they're so still until I find the source of the dripping noise. Blood is pouring down from their necks, and I stumble back. A gasp is the only noise I can make before a slender hand wraps around my mouth. I can't scream.

The queen leans into my back. "Silent." She tightly wraps her arms around me, and everything moves so fast that I can't breathe. I gasp in the air, trying to focus on anything at all as I'm dropped onto the sand. The queen stands over me as I crawl backwards, the hot sand burning my hands. We're far outside the village, and no one will hear me scream here. "Don't scream."

"Please don't kill me." I put my hands up in the air. "Please. You know I don't want to be with him. It means nothing to me. I want to live and I..." I search for more words she wants to hear. "I'm just a toy to him. You're his queen."

She laughs and if it wasn't this woman, I'd say it was a pretty sound. The queen's silver fangs flash in the orange light, and they match her soft locks of hair that fall down her shoulders. "You believe I'm a monster, and I am one. I crushed every inch of my good heart until it never beats. I did that to save my life and that of my children. You do the same every time he touches you. Am I correct?"

My heart races so fast, and a cold sweat drips down the back of my neck. "Yes. Are you going to kill me? Drain me?"

She sweeps out the red gown she is wearing, moving to a rock and perching comfortably on it. "Do you know every blood slave that he's taken to his bed has red hair? Every single one looks like his previous wife. His obsession with her never ends. He chose me because I reminded him of his home in the Dawn Dynasty, where I was born. My mother, she married a distant relation to the crown and had a prince before she remarried and had my sister and me. My brother would never have taken

the throne, he didn't have enough royal blood, but he was invited to court often. I had no royal blood in me, not a single drop, but I was dragged along with him. I wish my mother and brother never took me." She looks up at the sky. "In the Dawn, the stars used to look like orange burning flames at a certain time of night. I haven't seen that in so long. He never allows me to travel to my old home because he knows if I look into the past, I might remember who I am underneath the monster."

She pulls a metal box out from under the rock and slightly opens the lid. I feel the horrid magic from the book hit me in the chest, and I put my hand up between us. She shuts the box before the book can talk to me. "You know what this is and what it means for me to have stolen it. I cannot stop the riders of the Silkvir, but I can do this. My husband thought nothing could remind me of home, but he didn't look at our youngest daughter for long enough. She looks just like my mother and sister. She is my home and my reminder." She lifts her head high. "I have done terrible acts and I do not regret them. I had to pretend in order to keep my daughter alive and to see out my plan. I knew he would find the book in the end."

"Why are you telling me all of this? Why take me?" I question, climbing to my feet with confidence that I don't feel. The queen is talking about her "terrible" acts like they aren't mass murder and torture of thousands of fae. I've heard what she is, and she has always scared me more than the king. "I don't understand what you want."

"You need to leave, and I need you to take the box with you. There are few fae with the power in their blood left to be able to travel with the book and not be turned by it." The queen rises to her feet. "There's two horses in the palm trees behind you, and my daughter is on one of them. She knows not to touch the box or the book and to let you lead. She's going to protect you as far as she can, but she has her own way to go to make sure her father can't find her again. Take this book, go to the mansion, to the dragon riders. It needs to be returned to them before the king flies."

"Why don't you just take it yourself?" I wave my hands out. "I'm just a lessborn fae

blood slave, and you're trusting me with this?"

"I will die this night, but he will not find you. It will hurt him more to have you betray him alongside me." She smiles like a woman scorned, but sadness bleeds into her lifeless eyes. "It's been a long time since I've done something that's good. I've killed endless amounts of your kind just to try to feel something again. To be the cold-hearted queen he wished for. When I was changed, all emotions bled out of me, more than I bled out at every delivery of the royal children that he made me keep having. He corrupts them one by one. My youngest daughter—she's different. She was not born corrupt, and the king never paid any attention to her. She is the only child I chose and could love. She made me want more for her than this life. My son, the heir, he is very much like his father, and he will not stop. Something must change this cycle. I had given up hope that anything ever could change. I stopped praying to the deities the day I was changed." I didn't know that vampyres hoped for anything. "I was fae once. I was alive. I lived and loved my family. Like this," she says, gesturing to her vampyre features, "all I want is death, and I definitely will dance with death tonight."

I think she wants to die. I will end up dead with her when the king catches up to me. "No distraction is going to be long enough for me to get away. He has flying creatures to chase me!"

She places the box at my feet. "I am not alone, stupid girl. You will have a few days' ride ahead of him, and he won't find you. There is a boat waiting to take you close to the Nightwell city. There is a barrier, but that book will get you through it. Just take it out and walk in."

I shiver even thinking of touching that book. It feels wrong. "Again, why me? I don't believe you that hurting him is the reason you are using me."

"Check the bag on the horse," she cryptically offers. "I've been watching you and

your family for a long time, Avaluna.”

My blood runs cold, and she waves to the thick palm trees about a mile away. “Go and fucking smile, young one. You’re about to be free.” She tilts her head to the side. “You look the most like her. Except for that one blood slave my son found. Her name’s Story Dehana. Did you meet her?” I nod. “I tortured her myself and I tasted her blood to see...I was right.” She pauses as she talks so casually about hurting Story. “And when the king gets his hands on her, it won’t matter what my son wants. If you find her alive, tell her to run and hide before my husband ever sets his eyes on her.”

The queen leaves; nothing but a rustling of the sand is left and that box. I look down at the box, feeling the immense power stretching out of it before reaching for it with shaky hands. Even touching the box feels wrong, and I shiver from head to toe. My eyes widen as I see the mountain shake, right before rumbles and blasts explode into the night. The entire mountain caves in on itself, black smoke pouring into the air as I stumble back. She blew it up. She wasn’t alone. The king should have never underestimated his queen. She might be a monster, but she isn’t right at this moment.

I turn and run straight for the palm trees and the princess waiting for me. I’m still surprised to see her, two black horses waiting in the middle. She is all in black, a cloak hiding her silver hair, but her clear blue eyes find mine. “We must leave. We have a three-week ride ahead of us, and it takes two weeks to travel the sea. Anything could go wrong and if you aren’t up for this, run away now.”

Caelina is the last person I thought I’d be running away with. I don’t know her or trust her, but here I am. The best chance I’m ever going to get. I’m back in the forest. A black cloak lies on the saddle of the horse I’m taking, and I grab it, chucking it on to hide my own red hair. I slip the box into a bag attached to the horse’s saddle, pausing when I see the other book in there. The Twilight book I was hiding under the bed. The queen knew I had it. I frown as I close the bag and climb up onto the horse,

thankful for all the travels the king took me on.

He taught me how to be a blood slave, but also how to ride, how to be fast, and I am using that to escape. I look at the princess, the one who looks so much like her mother, who just saved my life. “My name is Avaluna. As long as you keep your teeth away from me, princess, I won’t run.”

The princess nods once. “Caelina. Not princess. I want nothing to do with my royal blood. It’s the name my mother gave me in secret, and I’m using it now. I hope you can ride well.”

I nod before I touch my horse’s neck and silently thank the deities as the sky fills with black smoke, and the ground shakes so hard the sand shifts under my feet. My heart leaps as I look at the desert stretched out in front of me and lead my horse into it. She runs like she can feel my heart race, like she knows what this moment means. I finally let the rage I’ve held deep down burn through my blood, and I promise never to dampen it again.

In all the years I’ve breathed the warm air of the Lightsun lands, it suddenly tastes like freedom.

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A laugh of mine gets swallowed by the wind as I sweep down past the barrier of magic that's wrapped tightly round the burnt city. It's almost see-through, a shimmering veil of white, but I can't exactly see outside it even when I'm flying this close on Maeve. Her red wings glitter in the sunlight, rays shining right through them, and I smile at how beautiful she is. I follow the line of the barrier straight towards the coast, Maeve easily flying, guided by tilts of my body as we are getting used to each other. I know that this is freedom for her too. She was trapped there, unable to see anything but the inside of that mansion. We both are free now, even if Kyrrell is not.

My stomach sinks as I think of him and the fact I can't get him out of the locked room with guards there twenty-four seven. He is safe, I tell myself a hundred times a day, and I will find a way to fix this. I glance behind me at Ziven's night-black dragon, who commands the sky even in the middle of the day. Brythan looks like endless darkness of a starry night as he flies fast across the air, and I watch him with a grin on my lips.

Even when they are a suitable distance away, Ziven's eyes stay fixed on me and even through the space, I can feel some buzz in the air between us. Maeve sweeps down suddenly and I nearly fall off, a near scream echoing from my throat that I refuse to let out. The first time I yelped when I actually fell off and Maeve had to catch me, Ziven laughed for the entire evening. That asshole is not getting the satisfaction. We might not be enemies anymore, but damn, he can annoy me better than anyone else.

I'm slightly getting used to the turns and manoeuvres Maeve takes, so I don't feel like I'm going to fall off at every swift dive or turn into the currents of the wind. My feet dig into her scales, holding on, as she suddenly rears up just before the water's edge of the sea. Her claws rush through the water before she flies back up into the air,

heading straight back towards the mansion.

“Why do you always do that?” I question. “Touch the sea?”

Her soft voice answers me when we are getting close to the mansion. “The Twilight Dynasty lands are wrapped around by sea, and I was hatched on a beach. I miss the lands I lived in and my family, who are all gone.”

Sadness nearly overwhelms me, mine mixing with her emotions. I lean down, almost lying on her back, and give her the best attempt at a hug. We don’t talk often, as Ziven explained, it takes a great deal of their magic to communicate with us. “I’m sorry you lost them all. I wish...well, I wish they could have been hidden, too.”

“The vampyres will pay.” I smirk at the revenge in her voice, and I realise that I haven’t been frightened since I became a rider and nearly died. I’m not scared of the prince finding me when the barrier is down, not now that I have Maeve as my dragon. “He will be the first one we burn until there is nothing left.” I sense she can see my memories, or she somehow knows, because she often replies to me when I haven’t spoken. It’s something to get used to, and I don’t disagree with her. Seeing him burn alive would be considered a dream come true for me. I don’t like death, but some people deserve it.

My bones ache with the amount of strength I’ve had to use to hold on, and I’m glad for all the training Ziven made me do so I actually have muscles to hold on with. Flying every morning and evening has been one of the hardest training sessions, and I actually miss the training rooms. The training rooms are now a home for homeless fae, so it’s not possible to go there. Ziven still has everyone doing laps around the forest and flight training every day. Daegan hasn’t been seen flying since the day the barrier came down, and neither has his army. It’s been six weeks since the mansion spell broke, but it feels like years. Six long weeks which have been nothing but political arguments and stopping Ziven from ending the lives of all the Sun Dynasty

people Daegan sends with messages.

Getting out of the mansion is my only relief from the constant stares. The people are divided between following Ziven, the one who was there for them, or following Daegan. Most have sided with the Sun, and Ziven doesn't seem to particularly care, so his charming self isn't persuading many. He's not let anyone actually join the Moon Dynasty, whereas Daegan is offering up a place for anyone who's willing. Ziven's only interest at the moment is making sure Daegan stays far away from me, Hettie, and the rest of his people. I know with absolute certainty he doesn't want to deal with any of this.

I look down past Maeve's wing at the field of tents in the thick forest, so many of them that they merge into one large red fabric covering. As we start to go lower towards the clearing in the forest where most of the dragons land now, I look across the tips of the city in the distance, like I can see the fenced in area where the vampyres are and they're starving. Daegan's made it very clear no one's allowed to give them blood, and that includes the children, so they're locked in there like animals.

Most of the fae want them dead, but some of them do not. Some of them were treated kindly and cared for, like the professor was with me. Sometimes I wonder whether a death would be nicer for them at this point, because if we're trapped in here permanently, then the fae will end the vampyres out of spite and hatred. I don't know if anyone could stop Daegan if he turned his army on the trapped vampyres. The people are angry and they want revenge. Now that they're starting to learn the truth about everything, about what the vampyres did to erase our history, our royals and power...they want the world back.

It's a rebellion powered by dragons, plain and simple, but when they are free, they will burn through the world.

Maeve lands in the clearing with a ground shaking thump, and the nearly dead leaves on the trees fall off around us. Her big claws rake up mud from the ground as she lowers herself closer to the ground for me. Brythan lands as I slide off Maeve, and I stumble a few times before managing to stand straight. Maeve taps my back with her wing as she stomps over to the entrance, pushing herself up against Brythan, who walks in after her. Ziven walks over to me, and his lips twitch. I hold a finger up. “If you laugh, I swear I’m asking Maeve to eat you.”

The bastard smiles. “I’m not laughing.” The twitch of his lips tells me he desperately wants to. “But I’d prefer to eat you.”

My cheeks burn, and he circles around me like a predator, enjoying tormenting his prey. “If I annoy you, you could leave Maeve out of this and try burning me yourself.”

I cross my arms, catching the end of my braid. I quickly learnt you don’t ride a dragon with your hair down unless you want to be blind and have a rat’s nest on top of your head. “I told you I can’t make it happen again.”

This argument between us isn’t going away. Training my powers has not gone well. In fact, they just don’t work, and Ziven doesn’t know how to train someone like me. “The princess had that magic, fire and red light that could burn. It was a power of the Twilight Dynasty.”

We both don’t bother pointing out there is no one alive who is from the Twilight Dynasty who could show me how to use my powers. I thought we were close to killing each other in the training before. Now, it usually ends in angry sex, and I end up wanting that outcome. He crosses his impossibly thick arms, and I rest my hands on them as I step closer to look up at him. “We’ll figure it out. Maz is looking for books on the Twilight Dynasty to read over at the same time as looking for a way to help Kyrell. The answers have to be in that library.”

“Maz?” Ziven hums, lowering his arms to grab my back and tug me up against his chest. “I don’t like you giving other males nicknames, Storm.”

The heat in his voice sends shivers down my spine, and my lips part. His eyes zero in on them, and I purposely run my tongue against my lower lip. “He isn’t a threat. I only want you, Ziv.”

His eyes impossibly darken and he leans down, brushing his lips against mine. “We are going back to my room, and you can call me that while I’m inside you. Again and again as you come around my cock.”

Filthy, dirty-talking Moon king. I shouldn’t love it, but I do. My body definitely does. A throat clears and Ziven immediately tenses. His arm links around my waist, and I swear, a flash of silver seems to take over the world, like the moon is just there waiting at Ziven’s back, daring anybody to go close to me.

I know I should be independent and defend myself, but I want Ziven at my side. I actually like how he protects me. I’ve had devotion before from Emyr, but it was different. His devotion was desperation wrapped in what he thought was love. His need for control, yet the mixture of obsession with me, was overwhelming. He liked to see me in pain. When he realised he couldn’t control me, hurting me was his way of breaking what was left of my soul so that he could have every bit of it that was remaining. Ziven doesn’t do that. Yes, he’s obsessed with me, but he also respects my space and only demands what he knows I will give him. He makes me whole with his actions and words. He doesn’t let me break. The most important thing in the world to me is that I never feel scared when I’m with him.

I don’t have to be frightened anymore.

Foster waits between two trees, the sun literally shining on his sun mark on his neck. His blond hair looks brighter than I’ve seen it, likely from dragon riding. He inclines

his head to Ziven before turning his gaze to me. “Ziven, Story.” He clears his throat. “Daegan instructed me to come and ask Story to see him in private.”

“Tell him to fuck off,” Ziven snarls.

Foster quickly holds his hands up. “Fuck, I’m the messenger, don’t... Please don’t fucking kill me.” He bravely moves his eyes off Ziven. “We weren’t all pretending to be your friends or lying to you when we didn’t have a choice. Daegan cares about you. That wasn’t a lie.”

I huff. “He tried to kill me... He lied to me and made everybody in that mansion lie, too. You think any of it was real? Are you that brainwashed by him that you can’t see he is a monster?”

He lowers his hands. “Fine, yes, Daegan lied to you, but he also cared. Ziven lied to you too, and he’s standing right there at your side.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Ziven didn’t try to kill me because a magical book told him he had to. Ziven didn’t play with my feelings and try to get me to fall in love with him just so he could break the spell. Ziven”—I blow out a breath—“is the king you should be bowing to, Foster. You’re on the wrong side, and I don’t want anything to do with the fucking Sun king.”

Ziven looks at me with pure pride, and it makes my heart feel like it’s going to burst. Foster clears his throat again, and Ziven’s had enough. “Didn’t I tell you to piss off? Want me to make you?”

Foster looks down at the ground. “We all know it’s fucking complicated when it comes to them, and you are right bang in the middle, Story. Daegan, for all his faults, isn’t a true monster. You know that. This isn’t all black and white. It doesn’t matter who’s the villain in that mansion when I’ve listened to the lives of the fae who lived

under the vampyre rule. They know what true monsters are like, and they have all suffered. Endlessly. They are our kind, our family, and at this point, neither the Sun nor Moon king deserves to be our leaders. Not while they are like this.”

“Careful,” Ziven warns.

But Foster’s words hit me in my chest. He is right in a way. It is complicated and Daegan might be a murdering asshole, but he tried to kill me to free his people. He did it for the fae, and he isn’t an inch of what Emyr is like, what most of the vampyres can be like. Foster looks right at me. “The princess was close with both the Sun and Moon. She married the Dawn and was the link between all four dynasties. She killed herself to save them all, and if you don’t speak to Daegan, what was it for? Nothing?”

Maeve’s emotions fill my mind, her sadness over the princess’s death and the sacrifice. My shoulders drop and Ziven grits his teeth. “Don’t ask me to let you go in there, Story.”

Yeah, using my real name. He is mad. Foster keeps talking, completely unaware Ziven is close to going all “protective entwined mate” on him. “Anybody would go mad trapped inside that mansion for all those years. Daegan, he definitely did, but the book...things have been worse since he kept opening it. What Etena told you was true. We need your help. If you don’t care about him, I get it. Don’t come with me, but if there is a part of you who wants answers, please come. From what I’ve seen, you want to help our race become more than what you were born to be. We don’t achieve that by having the two most powerful kings at each other’s necks while we go to war.”

Ziven growls low. “Don’t you fucking dare blame her for the rift between our dynasties. Daegan was once my best friend and a brother in everything but blood. There’s a lot of past here that doesn’t involve Story. We will never be in any kind of

agreement, but there's an alliance to make sure we don't slaughter each other, and that alliance is wearing extremely thin. If you try to guilt her into seeing your bastard king again, I will start a war by killing you."

My heart races as I link my hand with Ziven's. I don't know what happened, but I didn't know Daegan was ever Ziven's best friend. Whatever happened must have been big for them to hate each other so much now. "She's not going."

I pull Ziven aside and away from Foster. "We should see him. I don't want to go, but Foster is right. This is bigger than us. Come with me. He's not going to hurt me if you're standing right there, and you can make sure I'm safe."

"He wants you dead, Storm." He tightens his hand in mine. "It takes every bit of strength I have not to hunt him down and make him painfully pay for ever touching you."

"I don't know what he wants, but we need to get close to the book. The book is the only reason I'm willing to listen to him," I remind Ziven. "It's got to be near him, and for what it is worth...Daegan is the leader of a big army that we need and the owner of the magical book. He knows this and was waiting for us."

"He is a manipulative bastard, and I don't want him near you." He grits his jaw.

I lift my other hand and run my fingers down his cheek. He leans into the touch. "I'm not going to end up dying on you. Not when we are together."

"Stay at my side." He leans in and kisses my forehead. I didn't expect him to agree with me and make any compromise, but he did. We walk up to Foster together. Ziven straightens. "If your fuckhead king attacks her, I'm killing him and then hunting you next."

Foster pales. “U-understood. I’ll walk you there.”

It’s hardly Foster’s fault if Daegan tries anything, but it’s already awkward as we head through the forest. Foster can’t help but make small talk, unaware Ziven isn’t a fan. “It’s nice being outside, and the weather is good for riding. How has it been riding, Story?”

I elbow Ziven in the stomach before he can say a word that matches the bored look he gives Foster. “Amazing. Thank you for asking. What’s it like being outside?”

“I didn’t realise how trapped I felt until I stepped out. Until I rode my dragon into the skies and breathed.” He sighs low. “I guess we all went mad with pretending we were fine in there.”

Whether Ziven agrees with him or not, I don’t know, but he doesn’t stop Foster from chatting about everything from the food shortages to the tutoring lessons that the fae in the mansion have set up daily for the other fae from the city to learn about their history. I’ve stood at the back of a few of them, and I’m glad people are finally learning and knowing the truth. Foster stops speaking to me when we get in sight of the mansion and the doors, where a few dragon rider guards from the Sun Dynasty are standing. I don’t know them, but their faces are vaguely familiar.

The silent walk back through the mansion is as exhausting as usual. I’ve gotten used to the feeling of eyes on me nearly all the time now since I first came here. It’s a bit harrowing and unsettling, especially when so many of them definitely want me dead to escape, but Catherine’s been telling me that not all of them do. Some of them were massively in disagreement about killing me, no matter what the cause was, and think my death will signal a curse—not freedom. Some of them actually idolised Atilia for keeping them safe from the vampyres, now that they’re learning how bad it was outside of here. I don’t want any of their attention and maybe that book is a way of getting all barriers down so I can get the hell out of here and away from all of this

pressure. I'm not Atilia. I didn't choose this.

The Sun Dynasty apartments are heavily guarded, the twins in the middle who look at me once with slight wariness before they move aside. They don't give Ziven the same warm look.

"He's in the living quarters by your old room," Foster claims at the door, waving a hand forward. He pauses. "Come and catch up with me sometime. I'm glad you're alive, Story."

Ziven growls low in warning, and I tug him away before he can finish off Foster for being nice to me. "Stop being possessive."

He leans down, touching my chin with his thumb and forefinger before brushing his lips across mine. A brush that sends heat spiralling through my body, and I flush. "Never, Storm. I'm selfish, possessive and an asshole when it comes to you. I won't apologise for it. For loving you."

Every time he says it, it makes my heart jump. It makes me feel more alive than I ever have before, and I softly smile at him. Ziven lowers his hand, almost like he is remembering where we are and what we have to do. He knows his way around, because I don't have to tell him the way to the room, and we head in together. A flash of light shuts the doors behind us, leaving us in the warm lounge with a blaring fire and a betraying Sun king seated in front of it in a chair that looks like a throne.

I glance at Daegan sitting in a chair by the fire, and for a moment, all the times I trusted him flash before my eyes. Every time I let him kiss me, every time we held each other in front of fires like this, and our dates in the greenhouse. Only everything is tainted now, like the greenhouse, because it is now the place where he tried to kill me. The warm fire casts a glow over his light hair, his golden skin still looking like sunlight even when I see nothing but a monster who doesn't deserve the light at all.

When he turns to face us, I notice how he looks thinner. There's a five o'clock shadow growing across his jaw, and his clothes are looser than he usually wears them. He looks up at me with those eyes that I once thought were beautiful and kind. Now I can't see anything but darkness in the depths.

His eyes drop to our entwined hands, and something flashes across his face. It's gone too quick for me to even register it existed. "I heard you claim she was your queen. Are you mated? Do you have a moon mark hidden on you somewhere to go with the dragons?" I almost touch my dragon markings on my wrists. I never liked being marked by anyone, not when my skin is littered with vampyre bite marks. I never wanted the dragons...but I am proud of them. They are earned and mine. If I choose to join the Moon Dynasty, that will be another mark I want. I choose. When you've never been able to choose how your body is used and marked, getting the choice is everything to me. He looks right at me and smiles like we are friends. "Did you forgive him that easily?"

My heart hurts, not because of how he hurt me, but because I trusted another male. I should have learnt my lesson with Emyr years ago. I won't be making a stupid mistake like that ever again. "That is really none of your business. Unless you have called us here to talk about the mansion, the people or something important...I. Do. Not. Want. To. Talk. To. You."

He blanches a little at the hate he sees on my face. Good. I'm not naive, I'm not a fool, and he has tricked me once before. Sunlight might shine off him, but if I look closer, I see it's nothing pure. When he doesn't say anything, I tap my foot. "You asked to see me. What do you want?"

"Story..." He stops and climbs off his seat to stand in front of us both. Ziven tenses, just slightly, and if I didn't notice just about every little detail about him, I wouldn't have seen. "I want to tell you the truth. I think we should all stop lying to each other before we destroy the dynasties for good."

“Now you suddenly care about the people?” Ziven laughs, but it’s hollow and lacks any humour. “Fuck off.”

Daegan grits his teeth. “Every action I have taken was for the people here! For our people, trapped for hundreds of years and never changing. Never aging, never having children or being anything other than fucking trapped because of her?—”

I cut him off. “Stop with that bullshit. I am not her! I didn’t make her choices or lock you in here. You had every opportunity to just tell me the truth or use the magic book left here. You could have shown it to me?—”

“No one touches the book. Especially not you!” he snarls at me.

Silver moonlight dances around the room, and it’s beautiful as much as it is deadly. Silver might be slowly becoming my favourite colour. Like snakes about to bite, the light sharply lashes at Daegan until he is surrounded by the streaks of silver light. They are the very image of Ziven’s eyes, which glow with his power. The dragon markings on his hands move and glow silver too, and I struggle to even look away from him. Daegan’s eyes widen slightly, and he glows a bright, warm yellow that pales compared to the beauty of Ziven’s moonlight. Ziven’s voice is colder than the middle of a snowy night. “If you ever raise your voice at my queen again, Sun bastard, I will rip you apart and crush your crown under my foot.”

Daegan stares right at Ziven, who holds his stare. “Fine.”

The moonlight fades, and the room seems less without it. “The book...I wasn’t aware you knew of it, Story. It would be a bad idea to take you to it when I know it wants you.” He clears his throat. “The book talks of dozens of prophecies, it talks of magic older than time itself. It talks of truths, lies and everything else that makes this world turn around. It knows languages that have never existed and should not now. Yet it asks for you. Over and over.”

A shiver spreads down my spine. “What exactly did you want me here for, Daegan?”

“To warn you,” he answers.

Ziven’s hand tightens in mine. “That sounds like a threat. You threaten her, and you’re dead. You’re walking on a very thin line of sunlight right now. Careful, because there’s darkness all around you, and that’s where I play.” He sneers at him.

Daegan steps right up to Ziven. “It’s that easy for you, isn’t it? You’ve hated me after what my brother did, and now I did the right thing with Story, and somehow you’ve twisted me into a monster for that too!”

Their powers seem to spin around them, and I jump out of the way of the two powerful kings who seem to have crossed a line. Or Daegan has. Ziven looks ready to murder him for good this time. “I warned you never to speak about my sister.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Daegan shouts. “I am not my brother, and I did not like hurting Story!”

“Liar. You enjoyed it.” Ziven cocks his head to the side. “I see through you, Sun king. Every single one of you is rotten, and rot spreads to everything you touch. You still hurt Hettie. And you still fucking tried to kill Story. I warned you. I warned you in that corridor that she is mine and not to go anywhere near her at the price of war. In the ballroom, I told you to not fucking touch her and that it was over. That I was going to tell her the truth and we could work together for a solution. You agreed with me and yet you still used Hettie as a distraction and then went after her.” He shoves his hand into Daegan’s chest and Daegan stumbles back. “What the fuck did you think would happen when you killed my entwined mate? I’d thank you?”

Ziven is furious, literally shaking with anger as he continues to unleash his rage. “You wanted a war, and you never would have gotten one if she hadn’t survived,

because I would have killed you all. The only reason you are still standing is because of her. You should be on your knees, begging for her forgiveness, and you're not. You're here, being you and assuming the world owes you a debt. Sometimes I think you're actually insane enough to push me because you want to die."

Daegan doesn't say a word, but hurt flashes across his eyes. Ziven doesn't care and I honestly don't either. Moonlight seems to trickle in from outside even in the dead of day. It might not be Ziven's time to be the most powerful he can be, but it certainly doesn't stop him. "We both lost everything once, and I won't let you doom us again. What Atilia did was because of you and you fucking well know it?—"

Physically exhausted from training, I lean against the bookcase on the wall, only to fall right back as the floor swirls around and I stumble into a new room. A secret room. The walls are all weathered stone, and it's cold. Cold enough I know I'm somehow not in the Sun Dynasty apartments, but in a place that is quite different. It smells like damp earth, and there is a darkness to the room that makes me think I am underground. I spin to touch the bookcase, but I find a stone wall and no door. No bookcase in sight. There's a magic similar to the barrier outside wrapped around the room, and I know right away I'm not alone.

Slowly, I turn and face the feeling of someone or something watching me. Right on the pillar in the centre of the room is a book. I love books; I love reading and escaping into a world I can never fully see any other place than in my mind, but this book makes me want to scream and run away. It feels wrong, on every single level, and I can't shake the feeling as I stare at it.

A strange foreign voice speaks right into my head. Loud, direct and terrifying. "I've waited for you, Story Dehana. While the Moon and Sun were distracted, I wanted your time. The Moon never lets you far from his sight or protection."

The voice in my head is female, but it sounds old, like ancient, like it's from another

world. My feet are moving on their own as I walk straight up to the book, and even when I'm screaming in my head not to do it, my hands don't stop as I open the book right in front of me. Glowing, almost translucent tree branches stretch out of the book and slam straight into my arms, into my chest, but it doesn't hurt. The translucent, beautiful branches are red, like a burning star, and I stare in amazement as they sink into my body and spin around the room. Roses of the deepest black and the brightest yellow bloom off them, but the thorns are a dark orange. "Close your eyes."

I don't have control over my body, and my eyes slam shut. Suddenly I'm not in the cold room, but instead, I'm standing in front of a gigantic red tree that has roots sunk into lava that pools around the ground. The tree is so tall, so tall that I barely see even the tips of it that hide in the thick grey clouds. The bark itself bleeds something like red tears, and the leaves look like Maeve's wings. "I will bring you here when you need guidance. You have two entwined mates, and they're fighting right now to get to you, so we do not have much time. The fate of the people is in your hands, but you will die soon."

My blood runs cold. "Die? Two mates?" I shake my head.

She laughs like it's a funny matter when it's really fucking not. "Death is not final and you have a habit of rebirth at the right times. Many will die before I am united with my sister."

"The other book?" I question, wondering if that's who she means. I never thought of a book being alive and talking until now, but here we are.

"You are linked to both the Sun and the Moon, but I come from your homeland. Your blood comes from the Twilight Dynasty of my lands, and you will take me back."

I highly doubt it. "Why did you call me here? Just to scare me with promises of death?"

“Because we are linked forever. Part of your soul is in my pages, Story. I will have your soul by the end.”

“You will not,” I instantly reply. Sharp pain cracks down my spine like whips, and I cry out, falling to my knees in the lava. It flows around me.

“You do not tell me what I see. I am time, I am dragons, I am magic, and I made you. We will work together.” I’m tempted to say or else , but she keeps speaking. “Bring me to the other book and connect us as one.”

“And why would I do that?” I’m arguing with a book. A magic book, but this doesn’t make me seem less mad.

“That is how you break the spell around the barrier. I fear it will be broken long before then and my sister stolen.” She pauses and carries on. “Only when we are together will the fae win. Otherwise, I see futures of endless death lords.”

“Vampyres?” I question, my fingers touching my stomach on instinct. Touching the scars I have.

She doesn’t say yes to that, but I assume that’s who she meant. “The Sun king, your entwined mate, he is within my trap and he will do anything I ask. Do you know there’s a curse put on this book? Every time someone opens it, a sickness like no other comes out and claims lives to keep me powerful. Every time my sickness touches, it destroys. If you do not bring me my sister when she comes here, I will kill more with his help.” My blood seems to freeze. “One of your mates is weak, the other can not touch me.”

I have a million questions, but I can’t voice them. Not without speaking to Ziven and Daegan. “What is the prophecy? What were the words exactly that were used to bind the barrier? And how do I break it?”

“Bring my sister to me.” I am pushed straight out of the book, and it hurts everywhere the branches were, like invisible scars. I fall backwards, the surrounding temperature changing as quickly as the smell of damp earth fades into smoke. My eyes widen as I look down at the flames licking my boots. Daegan grabs my arms, pulls me straight out of the fireplace, and I stumble into his chest. “The book has never asked to see anyone but me. You lived here for months and it never bothered you. Why? How?!” He frowns, but this close up...he looks broken and sick. Etena was right, the book is doing something to him. I’m ripped out of his arms, straight into Ziven’s, and he cups my face. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” My heart’s racing as I tug myself out of Ziven’s touch, but I don’t leave his side. “You’re one of my entwined mates, and you tried to kill me.”

The world seems to wait. Daegan looks right at me and lies. “The book can’t be trusted, and that is false.”

It’s not and we both know it. It explains why I trusted him when I’ve barely trusted anyone in my life before. Why I felt so at home when I was near him, and why I wanted to spend time with him. It’s not the same connection I have to Ziven, not anything of love, but the base is there. The link between us is there. “Does it lie about the sickness?”

Every emotion on his face tells me the truth. Guilt. Shock. Disgust. I shake my head and look up at my other mate. “Did you know about him being my mate?”

“I suspected,” he answers, and I clamp my teeth down before tugging my hand from Ziven’s. I walk away from them both and straight towards the dragons. I need Maeve.

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I found a way to pray to the deity of Twilight.

It will take my soul, but I give it willingly and wish for only one gift.

My feet dig straight into the sand as I sense Ziven on his dragon, right before I hear the telltale flap of wings. Maeve roars, her anger only fuelling my own as Brythan lands with a thump, sending sand dust up into my face. I keep my eyes on the sea, on the waves touching my feet and how cold they are. I always imagined the sea would be warmer than it is. I don't bother looking at Ziven as he comes and sits down next to me, his boots sinking into the sand as the waves wash against them.

"It's not safe for you out here alone."

I grit my teeth and dig my nails into the cold, damp sand. "Lies, on lies, on more fucking lies. I'm tired of being used by royals and thinking for a second any of you are different!" Ziven reaches for me, but I move away. "Don't."

His hand lowers. "I didn't lie to you. I couldn't know for sure that you were entwined mates, and if you want honesty? I fucking prayed to the deities he wasn't, because he had you." My chest moves fast as we stare at each other. "You were around him so easily, and when we were together, you outright hated me. You were the key to getting the few people I had alive out, and I shut my mouth for them. I stayed away from you the best I could for them and convinced myself Daegan was doing the right thing. I tried again and again to convince myself that it couldn't be true that Daegan was your mate too. I tore myself apart with the lie until I fucking believed it. It wasn't a lie. It was a prayer to deities who set this all up in the first place."

My voice breaks. “Did you know about the Chilgrave sickness and what Daegan was doing?”

“What about the Chilgrave sickness?” I search his confused eyes, and my shoulders drop. I don’t think I could handle being anywhere near him if he knew about it.

“Every time Daegan opens that book, that is what causes the outbreaks. The death of fae from the sickness feeds the book. It’s a payment and Daegan knows. He still opens it.”

The way Ziven goes still and pure shock registers on his face tells me enough. He really didn’t know. Ziven runs his hands over his face before meeting my eyes. “From the beginning, I knew the deities were screwing with us. Atilia suspected I was her entwined mate, and she wouldn’t drop the idea. I was not. Daegan was, and he happily used her, and it broke her. He refused to become her mate and marry. It’s not uncommon for royals to not marry who they were entwined to, even kings and queens ignore the will of the deities in the face of duty, but they don’t usually make their entwined mate suffer by making them fall in love. That bond was not there between me and the princess, I assure you of that, but she was my friend. I liked her and trusted her.”

A wave of stupid, irrational jealousy fills my chest. Ziven doesn’t like many people, and something bothers me about him ever liking her enough to call her a friend.

“I suspected you and Daegan were linked, because of how easily you two...” He pauses. He can barely say it, and his hands clench. “Unless Daegan screamed it from dragonback, I wasn’t going to tell you something that I wasn’t sure about. As for the sickness, I didn’t know, but it doesn’t surprise me that it was something that was caused by the Sun Dynasty. I believe Hettie is the only good soul to be born of that line.”

“What happened back then to cause this hate between you both?” I know this feud between them goes back to his sister, back to Hettie, and I only have Daegan’s side, which I don’t believe now that I know Ziven. “Daegan told me his brother went into heat around your sister and they shared a night. He told me you killed his brother for it.”

“That’s not true. Not all of it.” Ziven’s voice is hoarse. I take his hand and move closer to his side, needing to touch him as he tells me. I knew it wasn’t true. “My sister was the kindest person I’ve ever known. She would spend all of her time with the animals in the greenhouse, and she loved to care for them. Everyone said she was the twin of me in looks, but I know she was every bit of my mother. They both had this kindness to their souls that made them vulnerable in this world. It was my job to protect my sister, like my father protected her and my mother.” He lifts our joint hands and closes his eyes. “I never told you about my sister, about everything that happened, and I think it’s time you understood. Daegan’s older brother, Teritus, was a monster. A spoiled, prancing prince who got everything and anything he wanted. There were no limits, no rules when it came to him. He took what he wanted and didn’t give a shit. Then he set his eyes on my sister who he believed belonged to him and that they should marry.”

Coldness leaks into my blood as he continues. “I said no. That it was her choice who she married, and she was waiting to meet her entwined mate. Later that same day, he raped her and claimed it was because he was in heat. He brutally beat her and left my kind sister a shell of a person.” His teeth clamp down. “At first, she wouldn’t tell me about the rape, only that she had been beaten and she didn’t see who it was. The fucking bastard was bragging to anyone who would listen that he’d had her, and she broke down and told me everything.” He looks out across the sea like he can’t look at me as he tells me the next part. “That night I went and found him. I tortured him for hours for what he did to my sister before I killed him. I marked his body with the moon to make sure everyone knew.”

The rage I feel is only slightly dampened now I know Ziven got revenge for her. “Good. He didn’t deserve anything less.”

“Ruthless, my Storm,” he murmurs, kissing my knuckles. The simple way he uses my in front of that nickname has my heart pounding like a drum. “Daegan was furious the next morning, and suddenly the new king of the Sun Dynasty. He didn’t want that. A war broke out between us, and a lot of people died because of what I did. I don’t regret killing him, he deserved it, but the war? It was messy and my people were surprised. I hadn’t been the king that they’d deserved. I hadn’t trained them, and I let my people live as they wished. My people were weak and spoiled, too. The war finally ended when Hettie was born. Daegan and I came to a truce in her name. We’d lost enough people that we felt that we were even. For the sake of the innocent baby that had been born into this bloodshed, it should be stopped. I warned him not to come anywhere near Hettie and that she would be mine to protect, along with my sister. He agreed.”

That’s why he trains them every morning. That’s why he made me train...all of it because he doesn’t want to lose anyone again. I once thought the Moon king had no heart and maybe there was just a rock, like what I suspect the moon in the night sky is made of, in his chest. I think it’s all a ruse to hide the golden heart he does have. I love that he doesn’t hide who he is from me anymore. “And then my sister got sick. I couldn’t save her, and I lost everything except for Hettie. She kept me alive, raising a toddler and then a small child. I...I admit I’d given up on wanting to live.”

My throat dries. “I felt the same. I understand why your sister became a shell, because I did too. The first time...when I lost my virginity.” I pause, barely able to get the words out. “I wanted to die more than I ever did before because I felt disgusted with myself. I wanted to tear my skin off and hope that would help with the feeling.”

Ziven cups my cheek. “Tell me you don’t feel like that anymore. The only disgusting

thing is him . Not what he did to you.”

His words ring through me, and even when I’ve said them to myself, they mean more when it’s someone else speaking them. When it’s him. “There was a time, near when I escaped, that Kyrell’s boyfriend got killed trying to save me from the queen when she stopped an escape. I watched him die, and she tortured me. She broke me with the prince.” I gulp past the feeling of pure fear that engulfs me. “Kyrell was my Hettie. He saved my mind and then every other part of me by getting me away from him. I made a decision when I ran through the forest that I’d never be a slave again and I’d always fight. I’d try to find a future, freedom and a life. I found you.”

I can never fully read Ziven’s eyes. Maybe they are too beautiful for me to ever be able to, but right now I can see how he feels about me. Love. The simple word doesn’t seem to be enough for what lies between us; it’s too powerful and wild to be described with a single word. Tears fall down my cheeks as I stare at him with every bit of myself open to him. I don’t hide anything, any vulnerable part, nothing. He has me, completely, and I want him back.

“I’m so sorry about your sister and for all the people you lost. You were the first person I ever chose or wanted, Ziven. Even when I claimed I hated you, it wasn’t true. I wanted you and hated that it was you, the man who seemed hellbent on calling me weak or a traitor, forcing me to train and be in a dragon riding test. I wanted you, Ziv.”

“Fuck, I wanted you too. I called you those things because I felt weak for how I felt. I have never felt like this for anyone.” He tugs me to him with a growl. “I feel like I’m losing my mind when I’m near you, when you touch me or shout at me. I want anything you will give me, and I want you forever.”

“Forever is a big promise,” I whisper, clutching at him as I stare into his silver eyes. “I love you, all of you, even the parts you try to hide from me. I see it all, Ziven, and I

want to be at your side too. This is more than just the bond.”

“It was always more for us, and I’m never letting you go, so I’m glad you feel that way.” He grins playfully at me and his smile takes my breath away. “Entwined mates...being fully together like that is risky when you can’t control your powers. I want you, fuck, I want every inch of your body and soul as mine, but first you need control.”

“Spoilt sport.” I stick my tongue out at him.

“I know a very good use for that smart tongue, Storm,” his husky voice vibrates across my entire body. He goes serious for a second. “I know you’re not aware of much of what mates are, but it’s not always for love, it’s not always what we have. Sometimes, entwined mates are two people that are destined for a great impact on each other’s lives. Daegan, I hate the fucker, but there must be a reason the deities bound your soul to the Sun and Moon. Why you saw red and claimed the most powerful Twilight Dynasty royal dragon ever known. Why you have been circling the royals of this world for your entire life. Story...” He almost never uses my name, and each time he rarely does, my body comes to life for him. “We need to tell everybody about what Daegan has done with the book. The sickness took my sister and my people, but it’s killed hundreds of Sun Dynasty fae. If they knew...maybe they will see what is happening to their king.”

“You almost sound like you care,” I point out.

His lips tighten into a thin line. “You care about him, Storm. I saw it today.” So he cares too. He won’t kill him because of me. “What did the book say to you?”

“It wants the other book. Its sister, apparently.” I shiver even when it’s not that cold.

Ziven wraps his arms around me. “The princess hid it outside, somewhere in the

world that's far from here. She was the last one to have the books together. I don't know where it is."

I don't dare tell him all the other creepy things the book told me. They can't be true. It's a book, not a future-telling magic being. It wanted to scare me into helping it, and that kind of did work. "The only way we are going to get the barrier down without my death is with that book."

He brushes his lips across mine. Teasing. "I don't want you near that book again, Storm. There are legends about it, and none of them are nice fairy tales. The book is evil."

"I have no intention of going anywhere near it again." Ziven kisses the tip of my nose in a cute way he has never done before, only making me want to push him back onto the sand and see what places I can kiss he might find more than cute, but he stands up, offering me a hand. "Finally, you're agreeing with me and not arguing. I'll make the most of it with some training while we are alone. You've been slacking in your training."

I shake my head after standing up. "You're all work and no play, Moon king."

He curls a hand, with a smirk on his pretty lips. "Land a hit and I'll play any game you wish, Storm."

Heat burns through my body at his promise. It doesn't take long for Ziven to let me hit his arm, and he smirks as he runs his eyes down my body. "Come with me?"

I frown, wondering where he wants us to go, but I trust him. We fly our dragons back to the mansion, and Ziven leads me into the Moon Dynasty rooms, right past my room and what I assume is his. He opens it up and I go inside, looking at the dark room. The walls are a deep silver, matching the fourposter bed with silver swirling

wooden posts. The bedding is black and there are crescent moons embroidered into a comforter on the end of the bed.

Ziven shuts the door behind me, not before I see the full-length mirror on the other side of the room. “You stay with me now. I wanted to give you some space, but move in with me. I might actually get some sleep rather than sleeping on that shit bed of yours.”

I smile at him, looking at everything in his room. There is only one chest of drawers, and his crown is casually thrown on top of it. He follows my gaze. “Has Hettie given you my mother’s crown back yet?”

Spinning, I face him. “Your mother’s? Why didn’t you say?” I wouldn’t have traded it for a cake otherwise.

He walks to me, pulling me up against his chest. “I didn’t think you’d wear it if you knew it was a thousand-year-old crown only worn by Moon Dynasty queens. Hettie is fine to have it for now, but it belongs to you.”

I push him away and walk around him, rubbing my arm. “You’re right, I wouldn’t have worn it. That’s a lot of pressure and I’m not?—”

“Not what?” he challenges.

I wave a hand at myself. “I’m not born for this. I’m not a royal princess or anyone you should consider, really. You’ve seen my body; I’m ruined and I can’t be?—”

“Come here.” He tugs me in front of a mirror. I gasp as he tugs off my top, then my bra and leggings until I’m bare in front of him. I can barely look, instead I choose to stare at him.

His hand runs across my stomach, across every one of my scars. I flinch, looking at us both in the mirror. He is flawless and beautiful. I'm broken and scarred. How can he want me like his? How can he desire me?

He roughly grabs my chin, forcing my gaze back to the mirror. "Look at yourself, Storm. See how fucking beautiful you are? These scars make you beautiful. They show me how you survived every bit of pain they were caused by. I want you to keep your eyes on your body as I fuck you and show you exactly how breathtaking you are. Don't for a second think any less of yourself. You. Are. Mine." He throws me onto the bed, on my knees above him. I'm forced to watch in the mirror as his tongue sinks into me, and I cry out, digging my nails into his chest. My eyes close on instinct, and he stops. "Eyes open and watch yourself. You are my queen. Not some broken thing you believe yourself as. The crown belongs to you just as much as I do, so be a good girl and watch the mirror as you come on my face. I want to taste my queen."

I blush, but I don't dare take my eyes off the mirror as he sucks, licks and teases me until I'm shaking with pleasure. He doesn't let me finish, not until he wants me to, and when he does, I cry out his name as intense pleasure vibrates through every tiny part of my body.

"Ziven," I moan as he pulls me off him. He pushes me down on my hands and knees, tugging my ass up and plunging every inch of his thick cock into me. I'm still shaking from the orgasm as he slams into me with a vengeance, just as punishing as it is perfect. He tugs my body up, my back to his chest, with his hand curling around my neck to hold me to him while his thick cock sinks in and out of me. I can see us in the mirror, my hair flowing around his arm, his hand on my neck and hip. His cock driving inside me, over and over. He reaches down, parting my folds and running his finger across my clit. It's like magic, like some control he has, and I moan as he pushes me into another orgasm and my body tightens around him. He roars, gripping my hips as he finishes, filling me as his head falls to my shoulder, his dark locks of

hair touching my cheek.

Breathless, he turns my cheek so I face him. He softly kisses me once, twice. “I will never not want you, Storm. Never. Stop thinking I will.”

He lays me down, only to begin kissing my stomach, and he spends hours showing me that there isn't an inch of my scarred body he doesn't love. With each kiss, I start to believe it, too.

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Chapter Fourteen

Page Fourteen?—

The people of the Twilight Dynasty are doomed unless I help.

I 'm glad to be off the ship, and my stomach turns as I think about the choppy waves that threatened to pull us all into the watery depths. I pat the black stallion I'm riding, glad to be given such a good horse. He is fast and easy to lead, making the journey so much more comfortable. The queen's plan so far has worked out perfectly, and I know she must have been planning it for a long time.

My body aches everywhere as the princess slows down into a trot, and I see why she is. The magical barrier stretches up out of the trees of the forest, where the trees look like giants, the tips hovering in the clouds. The magical barrier is tightly wrapped around the Nightwell city lands, and this is where the dragons must be. It's where I belong , a voice whispers into my mind. Not a voice, the book. It can't harass me from its box coffin, but it whispers sometimes, and each time it does, I purposely ignore it.

The princess looks over at me with her pale blue eyes and empty expression. Her silver hair is as messy as mine, falling over her shoulders under a black cloak. Her horse is silver too, and I think they kind of look like each other. "I'm gathering that your answers are in there with the dragons, Avaluna."

She hasn't spoken to me much in our entire journey, and I might as well have been travelling alone. We've been travelling for over a month, by my count, and I couldn't

tell anyone a thing about the princess. Other than the clipped directions and instructions of her mother's plan, she is silent. I don't mind, I'd take any silence from anyone to escape her father. I don't know anything about her, other than her title, but sometimes she looks at me with such horror that I find myself wondering what broke her. I want to hate her like every other member of her family, but she hasn't bitten me. She hasn't bitten anyone, and she drinks from flasks stored in her bag. I think it's the longest I've had without being bitten. Ever. "This is where we depart from each other."

"Where are you going?" I question immediately. Almost like some deep part of me actually cares. Her eyes tell me everything. She's not going to answer. Whatever plan her mother had given her will send her away, and it will keep her safe. "Why don't you feed off fae? That ship had fae blood slaves. I saw them under the deck." I wanted to free them, fight for them, anything, but I knew I couldn't. If I dared, I would end up dead, and I have to get this book to the dragon riders. "Your family?—"

"I am not my family," she quickly interrupts me with a snarl and a bare of her silver teeth. "I know you've seen the worst of my kind, but maybe you can remember me. I do not like to bite anyone for food, and I prefer animal blood to fae. There are thousands like me and thousands who do not want to serve my father." Maybe that's where she is going. "I had a lover, a powerborn fae who could beautifully make patterns in just about anything. He was a kind soul, and when my older sister found out, she murdered him for loving me. I told my mother what happened when she caught me trying to kill myself." I freeze at the truth in her voice, at the break. "She gave me a path that leads to freedom from my family. She gave you the same, and for her, I'm asking you to remember that not all vampyres are monsters."

Just most.

"At least you were given the chance to love anyone. I was never allowed that

privilege.”

We stare at each other until she nods her head to the barrier. “Maybe you will find love in there with your people.” Her eyes drop to the book. “Finish your task, Avaluna.” I follow her gaze to the box, hanging in a bag attached to my horse’s saddle. The book can’t do more than occasionally whisper through it; whatever that box is made of keeps it well and truly protected in there, but I still feel the weight of it like it’s heavy, not in a physical sense but in another way. A weight on my soul. I’ll be glad to get rid of it. “My father...he’ll come for you. Do you know that? You’ve not fulfilled your life in the way that he wanted, and by running away... It’s an insult he will not accept. I imagine he took flight the second he could, and those monsters are not far behind us.”

I shiver and not from the cold. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to unsee those creatures. The thought of the king, my abuser, chasing me on one...deities no. “I’ll make sure to keep a dagger next to me at all times because I’m ending my life before I let him take me back. He’ll come for you too, princess.”

She pats her thigh, where a dagger is clipped in. “I know, and I’d do the same. He’ll never find me. No one will ever again. I want to fade from this world and not have a title anymore. My mother, she died to make sure I could have this. She won’t be remembered as anything but some horrible queen of the vampyres who did evil acts, except in my memory. Because to me, she had two sides. One she was forced to be to survive, and the other was a mother.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say something, anything, but I don’t find the words. She finds them for me. “Isn’t it funny? Every woman I know in this world is a victim, not a warrior, not a fighter. Then I met you, and you fought all the way here. You ran with me for a different future. Maybe there’d be a world where women aren’t just victims. Fae or vampyre.”

“Wouldn’t that be a dream?” I respond. The princess leaves unceremoniously, her horse as fast as a shooting star. I watch as she goes, disappearing into the thick forest in the opposite direction of the glittering barrier of magic. The howling wind is cold tonight, and I swear there’s a taste of snow drifting in the breeze. I shiver, even with the thick black coat wrapped around my shoulders. The weather is such a stark contrast to the sandy deserts of the south, where I have spent most of my life. I remember when I visited these lands last, and it was cold then.

Time to get through the barrier and find my freedom. I lift my chin and lead my horse straight towards the barrier that looks brighter, pouring light through the dark trees so I don’t even need a fire to see. The forest path is jagged and hard to ride through, and it takes me longer than I’d like to navigate through it. I can’t even see through the bushes and trees, but I know I’m getting close. The box starts shaking from side to side, vibrating almost all the time. My horse neighs and riles up, nearly throwing me off, but I hold on as he settles. The box doesn’t stop vibrating. I pat his black mane. “It’s okay. Calm.”

Something more startles him. He stops, digging his hooves in, neighing loudly. I have to pull the reins tight to push him forward with more gentle encouragement, and I force him to go close to the barrier. He doesn’t want to, but he does, thankfully. When I’m a footstep away from the barrier, I reach out to touch it, but my hand just slips straight through like it doesn’t exist. The queen was right. I turn my horse and lead him into the barrier, and he manages to walk straight through with me. When I come out on the other side, there’s silence, followed by the sound of wings. Giant wings.

My eyes widen as I turn my head up, a shadow covering me like a thick cloud of rain, and I see a dragon. A real, alive dragon. The huge dragon flies straight across the sky. A magnificent, sparkling creature that looks like the purest grey tinted diamonds. I watch in awe as it swiftly flies through the sky above, and I spot a person on its back. A fae. Gods, it’s all true.

I look in awe, in absolute awe of the magnificent creature before more fill the sky, all of them flying around. These dragons are bright yellow or gold, and much smaller than the grey one. They fly like they are in a formation, like it's an army. An army getting ready for war. They definitely need this. I wonder if the sickness will be able to get through this barrier behind me. I need to tell whoever's in charge of all this. They need to know what is coming behind me.

I follow the dragons through the forest. It's easy to track them with the way they rustle the trees. Soon I start coming across tents, rows of tents and fae who have made their homes here, cooking and cleaning clothes to hang on lines between trees. Some cautiously watch me, and I notice right away that I'm attracting a lot of attention. I tug my cloak hood up and push my horse on down a cleared road. The box isn't shaking anymore, and I don't know if that's worse than it shaking, but I feel like it's happy, like it wants me to go this way.

Deities above, I hope I'm doing the right thing by bringing it here. I didn't have anywhere else to go, unless I found my sister and her family. But going to them is a risk, and I know they will be safe with the rebellion. They are masters at making fae disappear—the odd vampyre too.

I don't get much further before a huge man steps into my path, and I freeze. He's stunning, absolutely breathtakingly every inch of what a male should be. Heat floods my body from my cheeks to my toes. I don't know what to make of it as he stares right back at me with a cold unflinching gaze, with brown eyes so deep in colour that they don't seem real. He's tall, coming up on my horse's neck, but it's the way he holds himself that tells me he is well trained.

He has perfected himself. His dark hair is tied at the back of his neck, but some locks curl around his forehead. My mouth goes dry as he walks right over, smelling of smoke and wood. The smelling of all things forbidden and burning a desire in my stomach I haven't felt in a long time. "I haven't seen you around here before. Where

exactly are you from in the city? And why are you coming close to the mansion? This path is to be kept clear. You must have heard the rules.”

Speak, Avaluna. Use your words. “I came from outside the barrier.”

His lips twitch. “Are you joking? You may be pretty, but not everyone’s going to believe your stories.” I grit my teeth, and his humour disappears when he realises I’m not joking with him. “You need proof or you need to leave the path. Go somewhere else.”

“I have a magical book in my bag, here.” I pat the bag. “Hidden in a box. If you take it out, it’ll start talking to you and make you go mad. I know what the vampyre king is doing right now because I was his blood slave and have been for years. The vampyre queen got me out and paid with her life. She sent me here to try to help. She sent me messages with warnings. The longer you and I stand here talking to each other, the longer the vampyre king out there has to amass an army, which we should all be very fucking fearful of. Please trust me and take me to whomever I need to see. I’ve travelled for a month straight to get here.”

I don’t know why he believes me. I wouldn’t if I was in his shoes, but he does. “I’m Calix. You?”

“Avaluna Lurion. I like to be called Luna.” I don’t want anyone to call me Ava again. That was his nickname for me, and I’m done hearing it. Luna was what my mother called me and what my family does too.

“Well then, Luna , I’ll lead your horse through. You can talk to my king. I don’t think you’re lying, but if he thinks you are, you’re dead.” A shiver goes down my spine, and I gulp, even when I have nothing to be scared of, because I’m not lying. I stay silent on the ride, sneaking looks at the handsome fae with spiked ears and a perfect jawline. Calix’s eyes drift back to me a few times, and I feel this draw to him, a

strange draw to him.

I don't usually like men, not in that sense. I am very much attracted to the male kind, but after all the years of abuse from the king, I've never dared look at another male, never dared let my eyes stray to anything that I could want for myself. But this male, this huge man, has my heart racing. Maybe he thinks it's in fear, but I can't seem to pull my eyes off him. The way he looks back at me, I feel like he's having the same problem. Two strangers, staring at each other for no good reason at all. As he leads me through a forest full of tents, of fae who stare at him with nothing but respect in their eyes, I wonder what happened here. Children's laughter echoes along with dragon roars, and no one so much as blinks at the dragons flying high above. There's a quietness, a stillness, even with dragons, that I've never seen before. Maybe it's because there are no vampyres here.

Calix leads me up to stone gates, which are broken, smashed in, along with a stone wall used to mark the property outskirts, but now it's nothing but dirty stone and ivy. There's scorched markings on the ground that we walk over, nothing but black lines in the grass. He takes me through, down a cleared path, and I stare up at the giant old mansion that seems to appear out of nowhere. It's got towers, tall structures, and hundreds of windows. Fae are walking in and out of the front door with ease.

I slide off my horse, only to see a familiar face. I recognize the woman handing out blankets. I don't know the handsome man at her side, but he immediately steps in front of her, protecting her. "Who the fuck is this, Calix?"

Story Dehana turns to face me. Her eyes widen when she sees me. "Avaluna? Is that really you?"

I'm as shocked as she is, but words escape me. I can only nod. Calix frowns. "You know her?"

Story rushes over to me and pulls me into a tight hug. I didn't know how much I needed that hug until I let myself sink into her embrace. "Hi."

She grins at me as she pulls away, searching my face like I might have the answers to the questions written there. There are strange dragons drawn all over her arms in black ink, but her hair is braided in the same way she usually does, as she had it when we met. There's a light to her eyes that I've never seen there before. She looks healthy, less pale, less downtrodden. Her skin is glowing, her bones are no longer sticking out of her cheeks, and she seems to have filled out. Freedom suits her. She doesn't look like someone who's drained every day of blood and fucked until they feel like they can't walk anymore from the pain.

I smile softly at her until I dare to move my eyes to the intimidating fae man who is standing close. I gulp. There is a black moon on his face, black soft locks sweeping into his face, but there is a scary feeling to him that makes my stomach drop. "This is King Ziven of the Moon Dynasty. The dynasties were what split our lands years ago and ruled us in peace. The vampyres hid our history and took our power along with it. It's all here, in the books and the people." She steps back into King Ziven's arm, which possessively curls around her waist. "What are you doing here? How are you here?"

The way this king holds her, the way she sinks into his touch without an inch of fear...I want that. I want to have someone I can trust like that. I clear my throat, the pressure of them all staring at me making me want to shrink. "The queen of the vampyres." I notice how Story tenses. How badly did the queen torture her? I carry on. "She turned against the king for her youngest daughter's freedom, and she freed me too. I didn't expect it, we had no relationship or friendship prior. She decided that she was done being his queen. I don't know why, but she packed up everything and made a plan. A foolproof plan for me and the princess to get here."

King Ziven looks at Story, and something crosses between them. He finally looks at

me with a coldness that outright scares me. “Where’s the princess now?”

Story nods, gently encouraging me to go on. “I don’t know what the rest of her plan was, but she left me a while ago. She didn’t come in through the border.”

“How did you get through the border?” Calix asks, his thick arms crossed.

“The queen claimed that anyone from the Twilight Dynasty bloodline could easily walk between the borders of magic, that the books don’t have control over children of the Twilight Dynasty. She said I was clearly from there. So I just came in. She told her daughter all of this to repeat to me on the journey.” I rub my arm. “But I have to tell you something. The king’s been breeding creatures for years. They’re...they’re monsters. Skeleton monsters with wings that he flies on, with teeth and claws.” I go back to my horse and pull out a drawing I did of them. I hand it to Story, and they all look at it.

Story’s mouth parts. “These are real? How many does he have?”

“Thousands,” I breathe out. “And vampyre riders too. He’s bringing the army of them here. Maybe the barrier will stop him, but I’m not sure. I’m here to warn you that an army is coming, and dragons will not be enough to stop them. Maybe they will, I don’t know, but I’ve seen these creatures, and they are horrid, powerful beasts with riders who will kill any fae in their way. Any dragon too. The king and crown prince have the biggest Silkvir.”

Story goes pale at the reminder of her former owner. The one who is still obsessed with her. I go back to the horse to give her a second, and tug the box out. I hate holding it, the awful feeling it gives me. “The queen stole this,” I explain and walk back over. They all stare at the box, like they can sense what’s in there. “I’m not going to open it, but there’s a magical book in it. It’s how the king made those beasts. How he made vampyres, I think. It talks to you, and it is yours to do with as you

want. Please, just take it away.”

King Ziven walks up and takes the box from me. Story’s mouth parts before she looks at King Ziven. “We can bring the barrier down now.”

“With those things flying here, we can’t. We need to plan an evacuation of all the fae and ready the dragons,” King Ziven replies. A king, sharing his plans with a woman? I’m not sure what to make of it. He turns to me after placing the box into Story’s hands. She stares at it like I do, like she can feel it. “What do you suggest we do with her? Can she be trusted, Story?”

Story looks right into my eyes. “She knew about my mother and never told a soul. She can.”

My heart leaps with her trust. I would never have told anyone her secrets, even if she was a stranger to me. We blood slaves have a shared understanding that no one else could understand. I turn to King Ziven. “You’re a king, a fae king, and I didn’t know those even existed. If Story Dehana is standing there at your side, then I believe in my soul, that you must be a good person. Because she’s been through what I’ve been through for years. What so many blood slaves have survived, but the royals are a particular brand of cruelty. I don’t know if there’s a way to pledge myself to you, to follow your lead, to fight for you in any way that I can, but I want to.” I wince. “I’m not a great fighter, as I’ve never been allowed to fight, but I’ll try. Either way, I offer my service to you, whatever is left of me, and hope that I can stay here. If I go out there, he’s definitely going to kill me.”

King Ziven looks at Story and she nods once. He lets her go to walk in front of me, and he is even more intimidating up close. “Avaluna, I offer you my thanks for the information you have brought to us.” I nearly shake from head to toe from the full force of this fae man being anywhere near me at all. He is definitely a king. There is something old and yet terrifying about him, even when he is beautiful to look at too.

He reaches out, his hand glowing silver like the actual moon. I take his hand. The silver light seems to spread straight into my arm, into my veins, and something burns on my neck. When I touch my neck with my other hand, I feel nothing though. “Welcome to the Moon Dynasty, Avaluna. There is a mark on your neck of the moon. It marks you as one of my people, and you have my protection. I will train you to fight, and I expect you to use the skills we teach you to defend my queen.”

Story sighs. “You really have to stop calling me that when I’m not?—”

“Yet,” King Ziven smoothly cuts her off. She glares at his back, and my lips twitch at them.

“I will protect her with my life.” King Ziven sees the determination in my face and nods once. He drops my hand and returns to Story, who immediately begins arguing with him as he tugs her into his arms. He kisses her instead, and I blush as I turn away.

Calix laughs. “If you just signed up to protect Story, get used to seeing that all day and night. If they’re not arguing, they’re fucking or kissing like teenagers.” I look up at him and blush. “Welcome to the Moon Dynasty, Luna. I’m the second-in-command to the Moon Dynasty and his best friend.” He points his thumb over his shoulder at King Ziven. “You’re one of our people now, and we look after our own. I’d love to train you.”

“Thank you,” I respond, looking into his brown eyes.

We stare at each other for a few seconds too long. He tugs his gaze away first, and for some reason, my stomach drops. “You look like you could do with some rest and food. We don’t have much food because there are shortages with the amount of fae here, but I’ll find you something.”

“Oh, I can live without eating today. I ate last night,” I offer. “I wouldn’t want to take from someone else.”

He frowns at me. “You’re not. But I demand you eat more than once a day, Luna.” He almost sounds like he cares. “I mean, training will tire you, so I want you to have strength.”

Of course, he doesn’t want me passing out. He waves to the open front door to the huge mansion, and we walk together towards it, another fae coming to take my horse. I glance at it and remember. I rush away from Calix to the horse and pull out the book my nephew gave me about the Twilight Dynasty. Story and King Ziven stop as I go to them. “This was given to me by my family. There is a rebellion growing, and they wanted me to get this book out. I can’t read, so I don’t know what it says, but the title I worked out. The Twilight Dynasty .”

I hand it to Story, and she runs her palm over the cover. I smile at her and go back to Calix, who waits for me a few feet away. “You can’t read?”

My cheeks go red. “It’s not because I’m stupid before you suggest it. I was not given the chance to learn. I was the king’s blood slave, and reading was not something he taught me.”

He opens and closes his mouth. “I’m sorry. For the record, I never thought you were stupid. You’re standing here and not dead. A stupid person would be dead.”

We walk in, and there’s a slender woman watching by the door in tight brown clothes that show off her slim body, the opposite to the curvy one I have. She has long bright blonde hair, and she is exquisite in a way I could never be. She looks between Calix and me, but mostly him. I wonder if it’s his girlfriend, and I wonder more why that fact seems to bother me. King Ziven calls. “Calix.”

Story replaces Calix as we wait in the entrance hall with a small dragon stone statue by two doors. Story sighs. “He is sending Calix with the box to the library, and a friend there can keep it safe for now. Until we decide what to do. The other book is with the Sun king and...it’s complicated.” She touches my arm. “Are you okay? This must be overwhelming. I’ll explain everything to you and tell you everything over food.”

“I honestly thought I’d never see you again.” I can’t find the words to explain that I am okay. Yes, I’m extremely overwhelmed, but I’m safe. That feeling of safety overwhelms me more than anything else does.

“Is your sister safe?”

I nod. “Yes, and her husband and her son, too. I wanted to tell you about all of them, but I couldn’t. I hope your mother is safe too...” I have to correct something. “When I told you I loved the king, that was a lie. I need to tell you that.”

She takes my hand. “I know. I knew back then, too. I told myself a hundred lies to survive too. I told myself them so much that I thought they were real. But I know it wasn’t.”

“It’s funny that, isn’t it? What we tell ourselves so that we can survive.”

We look at each other and just smile. We don’t have to lie anymore. We are two royal blood slaves who are free, standing on the edge of war, but even if we die in it, we are not theirs. Maybe it’ll be us that finally stops them.

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Chapter Fifteen

Page Fifteen—I stole a royal prince from them.

The deity of Twilight commanded this path for my life,

and it is the only way the royal line will continue.

“ Y ou have to actually go into the water!”

Hettie sticks her tongue out at Calix, and two little fae girls on the other side of the river giggle from their spot on the rocks where they have been watching us for the last ten minutes. They are Hettie’s new friends, and she has been playing with them for a solid week. Ziven agreed to let her have more freedom around the mansion as long as two Moon Dynasty guards are with her at all times. Or Ziven himself.

Right now Astrid and Calix are guarding us both, and Astrid is leaning against the tree, looking bored. Calix was happy to get in the water once I explained I want to teach Hettie to swim. Hettie wasn’t too keen on the idea though. Someone should teach her and it might not be my place, but I’m growing fonder of Hettie every day that passes. She makes us all laugh at breakfast every morning, and by dinner, she has snuck out chocolate cakes for me and her to eat alone. They might be our last ones because of the food shortages but we have donated nearly all of our other food until we are on barely anything to get by. It’s become a ritual of ours and I don’t want it to end. This little girl deserves the world, and I want to give it to her.

It begins with learning to swim. Calix is not helping much with his bossy attitude.

She takes my hand as I hover by the edge and smile at her. We are both wearing dark swimsuits, but the darkness doesn't suit her tanned complexion and long blonde hair. "It's okay. I'll hold you up if you struggle."

I'm still not feeling great, and my cramps have begun today in full force, but I've not bled yet. Ruelle, clever as she is, immediately began healing me to keep the pain at bay. But even she knows the next few days will be difficult for me. I absolutely know my cycle is coming, and the cramps are just the warnings. But every day is a treasure, it's a day of freedom, and I'm not going to feel better by leaving Hettie to learn to swim without me. With how Calix is bossing her about, she might never get into the water at all. I patiently wait for Hettie to make her own choice. If she doesn't want to get in, then she doesn't have to, and I won't make her. We can try again another time.

Her bright hair whips around her, and for a second, I see Daegan in her features. I wonder if Hettie's biological father looked much like Daegan, being his brother, because she looks so much like him. I love Ziven more for how much he adores her, even when she is the image of her mother's attacker. Thankfully, Daegan has stayed well away from me, and I'm happy he does now that I know everything. I'm half tempted to just punch him for all the lies, for what he did to Hettie and me. I think he stays away because of the book. I don't know if it frightened him that the book somehow took me when I was close. It frightened me too, enough not to go anywhere near his apartments.

Hettie dips her legs in and shivers. "It's so-so cold!"

I laugh, splashing her, and she squeaks. "Of course it is! But you don't notice after a while." Eventually she lowers herself fully into the river and holds onto the edge of the rock wall, as the current slowly flows past us. This is a great place to learn to swim because the very gentle current will pull her along. Calix dives into the deeper area like a big kid, his head sticking out seconds later. "Come on." I take her hands and lead her into the deeper part, staying close as I show her how to float her body up

and how to move her arms and legs. She struggles a little, but soon she gets the hang of it.

She swims circles around me and soon joins her friends in the shallow part, giggling and laughing with them like kids should do. Calix watches from the embankment and I swim over, pulling myself out, and he hands me a towel. I watch the girls, but I can't help but see the scars on Calix's body. He has hundreds of them. "Ask. You have that face where you want to ask, but you don't think we are close enough. I'm saying we are, so ask."

"It's not that. It's just none of my business, so I don't want to be nosy."

"You ask far too many questions to be considered anything but nosy." He laughs and I chuckle. Fine. We're slowly becoming friends, and I can see why Ziven trusts him so much. He's loyal and kind. "Maybe we should talk about our past, all the crazy shit, to bond or something like that."

"I have scars all over my stomach from bites. Vampyre bites cannot be healed by powerborn magic, and he oddly didn't like to bite my neck or wrists often. My skin healed there, but the thousands on my stomach and chest? They won't ever heal." My shoulders drop as I share this with him. It feels good to tell him in a way, like it's not a secret weighing me down anymore. "I used to think they made me ugly, but Ziven...he restored my faith that they don't." I shiver as I remember the mirror.

He gulps as he watches Hettie and the children play. "I got these scars from falling off my dragon on our first flight. I was cocky and didn't listen to a word of warning from my parents. I got my dragon, flew too fucking high, and she had to catch me with her claws to save my life. It was embarrassing, and Etena..." He pauses. "Back then, she was worried sick. She laughed though, once she heard I was fine and I'd survive my idiotic mistake."

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask how things are between them, but I don't. That's for him to figure out, and it's crossing a line. Right before I hear leaves crunching under heavy boots, I feel him. Ziven. I glance over my shoulder, seeing him stalking through the woods like a dark, grumpy storm. He smiles when he sees me looking, and it makes my heart jump. There's a playfulness to his face, a lightness sometimes that only I get to see. It's nearly sunset, and there is a red light dropping all over the sky. I sniff the air when he comes closer and frown at the ash all over his fitted black jacket. He sits down on the rock next to me. "Why do you smell like burnt wood? Or do I not want to know?"

Calix coughs. "You don't want to know."

I glare at him. "Were you the distraction?"

Ziven takes my hand and tugs me closer. His eyes trace down my bare legs and up, like he can see through the swimsuit and towel. "Don't blame him." I can't anyway, because Calix has dived in the river to avoid me. "I went and burnt down the castle." My heart feels like it stops. I look at him with wide eyes. "Don't worry, I searched all over for a way to help Kyrell, and my people have been for weeks. We didn't find anything." He touches my cheek. "I don't want you going back there, because we both know it holds nothing but nightmares. I don't want you reliving any of the memories of that place."

"That's your old home, Ziven," I whisper, my throat clogged with shock and so, so many emotions. Relief, joy and love. He did this because he loves me.

He lifts me onto his lap, and I curl my arms around his neck. "You are my home. You are the only person I want to build a home with. When you're ready, you can help me design and build us a new home with new memories. A home for us." He smirks. "And maybe Hettie too."

“Ziven...”

He leans down, our faces inches away, and his silver eyes stare into my soul. He can claim me with one look. “I want a future with you.”

A wave of pain hits me hard in the stomach at the worst time, and I slam my hand over my stomach. He pulls his jacket off, wraps it around my shoulders, and picks me up. He looks over at Calix. “Get Hettie back inside before it’s dark.”

“Got it!” he shouts back as Ziven begins to carry me to the path.

“I can walk,” I mutter. He shakes his head at me. “I’m fine. It’s just sometimes a bit sore before my cycle begins.”

“You should have been resting.” He says it softly, but I know he is mad I’m not in bed.

“Hettie learning to swim is a big thing, and she asked me. I wanted to have a first with her that we can remember,” I admit, biting my lip. “You realise my monthly cycles, what I go through, means that I won’t likely be able to have babies. At least that’s what I’ve been told by many healers. I’m broken, Ziv. You are the king of the Moon Dynasty, and you’re talking about a future I might not be able to give you.”

He pauses, putting me down on a fallen tree. Ziven kneels in front of me and tucks a strand of my wet red hair behind my ear. “I don’t care. Fuck, I don’t even want kids with you because they’ll take you from me. They’ll take your attention and they’ll take your time. I don’t want that yet. But if you were to get pregnant”—he touches my stomach—“then fucking hell, I’d love that too. I don’t know what the deities have planned for us, but you are not fucking broken. You are not something that I need to fix, or repair, or wish for better. Your infertility is just another part of you, but it is you that I want. All of you as my mate, as my queen, and fuck, I’ll kill anyone that

dares to ask about our future plans.”

There he goes, ruining me for anyone else. Stealing my heart could be an art form for Ziven, and branding it his day job. “You’re a king...”

“And you’re going to be a queen. Fuck the rest of them.” He cups my face. “I understand why you love Hettie so much and want the firsts with her. She loves you too and you never have to explain yourself to me. If you want us to try to get pregnant, then stop drinking the potions from Ruelle, and I’ll fuck you every day.”

I grin. “To make a baby or just for fun?”

He winks. “Both. If you want that, then ‘mother of my child’ will just be another honoured title among the many you own. I don’t care if we never have kids, I just want you. All of you. I’m a selfish fucker when it comes to you.” I know he means it and I love that he has clearly thought about this. “You’re mine. You’re all I want.”

“Where do you get the cakes from?” Kyrell questions from the other side of the door.

I chuckle. “Hettie bribes the cooks, and she always gets the best cakes. The novelty of being the only royal child around.” I shove another one into my mouth to appease my cravings, wishing that I could climb through the door and hug the sadness out of his eyes. I can see him through the bars of the dungeon door, but there’s a shimmering magic holding him back that can only be broken by unlocking the door. Not that Kyrell has ever tried to get through it...yet. I can’t shake the memories of what he did in the library out of my head when I see him. Sometimes I don’t see the Kyrell I loved, but a ghost of him. He looks sick and drained of colour, of everything that made him Kyrell.

Kyrell looks paler than he did when he first got here, and I know he’s not drinking much blood like he should. Ruelle has been in many times and said she thinks it’s

because the body he is in is too broken, too damaged from the king's attack, and she isn't sure how long he actually has left. He can't die. I won't let him. There has to be a cure for vampyres; after all, they were made from fae. They must be able to be unmade. Or something. Anything. I glance at the bottles of blood on the side of his bed, wondering if he's going to pick them up and drink eventually. "Are you okay? I kind of feel bad sitting here eating sugary foods like an animal while you can't eat them anymore."

"No, carry on. I like seeing you this happy, little Tory." His nickname makes me smile around more cake. "He makes you happy, right? The Moon king with the dark eyes, grumpy attitude and pretty face?"

I nod. "We had a hard path getting here, but yes, he does. I love him and it's real. He is everything, Kyrell."

"No, you are everything, Story. Don't you fucking forget that because of some good dick," I blush at his crude words. "But that dick does happen to love you, too. I'm sure of it."

"I wish I could get you out of here. It just... There's nothing in the libraries. Nothing to help with changing you back or saving you. Yet." He winces when I say library. "Mazzis knows it wasn't you. It wasn't your fault, Ky. It's not like you went for him on purpose."

He looks away. "It still doesn't mean it won't happen again, and I had no control. I don't even remember it, but you know what I hate the most?" I shake my head. "That when I came to, I could taste his delicious blood, and I wanted more. I craved more." He laughs at himself, at his plain hands. "I can't be safe around you because even now, I can smell your blood and I want to bite you. My magic's gone, do you know that?" He turns his hands over. "I spent my whole life dedicated to healing people. I never hurt people and I never wanted to. The prince never made me until he turned

me into this and sent me here. I felt my magic every day of my life until I was turned, and then it was just gone. Sometimes I feel it under my skin, like I can reach for it, but I just can't."

"I'm sorry." My heart shatters because he saved me, and yet, I can't save him in return.

He softly frowns my way. "Hey, don't cry. I get to see you again. We get to talk. We never really got that in those last couple of weeks, did we? I never saw much of you until that day I got you out and it all went wrong. Every plan that I had went wrong, but you still ran. I was so proud of you for leaving me, Tory. It must have been hard."

"I watched him kill you from above," I admit.

He pales even more. "I remember the pain, and his face. I don't think I'll ever forget that face." He shakes his head.

I change the subject to the future. He needs hope, and I can give him that. I can give him dreams. "When the barrier comes down, we could get you out of here, and we could find your mum. You could see her, and she is a fantastic healer. I'm sure she will help us search the world for a cure. Maybe, in time, she can find a cure."

"Always dreaming and reading." He softly smiles. "And hoping. Ziven is right, you are a storm. Everyone should fear the power of a reader with a stormy mind full of hope and dreams." I want to reach for him as he stares right at me, like he can see that future. "I'm proud of you, you know that? For literally everything you've done. I know it must have been hard."

"Why does it sound like you're saying goodbye?" I accuse.

"I'm not." He looks away from me, though. "I just want you to know that, that I'm

proud of you and that I love you. I told you to burn it all down. I didn't think you'd literally go and get yourself a dragon and accomplish that task with flair."

I laugh with him. "She's a pretty dragon, right?"

"All red, the very colour of your hair and of flames." He wistfully sighs. "I hope to see you flying high in the skies, Story."

There is that sadness again. That lack of hope that I want to fix for him. Kyrell was never the sad one of the pair of us. He was sunshine.

"Is there anything I can get you?" He shakes his head. "No, but you should get out of here. I can see you're not well and you look pale. I'm guessing you snuck down here when you're meant to be resting."

"You know me too well." I wrinkle my nose. "Don't give up, Ky. I will never give up on you."

He waits until I'm at the door and almost through it to reply. Only, I think he didn't want me to hear. "That's what I fear the most."

Chapter Sixteen

Page Sixteen—What have I done? Why are the dragons lost?

My mama's laugh echoes loud enough for the entire apartment block to hear, and I turn to watch as my papa's face lights up at the sound. Many people mistake my mama for my sister because she stopped aging only ten years older than what I am now, and my papa is the same. They both have dark hair the same shade as mine, but I often wish I inherited my papa's gold eyes. They shine brightly as he watches mama continue to giggle at whatever joke he must have told her. When she calms, she smiles at him in a way that sometimes makes me feel jealous. Do I want that? Yes. The simple answer is yes. I've read a thousand romance books in the library, lost myself in the heat and passion of strangers on paper, but I just know it wouldn't compare to something real. Someone real. Is that even possible for someone like me to have that? I'm not beautiful, not in the way my mother is, and I'm not funny like my father to make up for my too many curves.

Story sighs. "Five hundred years stuck in here, and they are still love-sick puppies. I really love coming to lunch with your parents." She looks away and to me. "All the laughter reminds me of my mother and the meals we used to have. She believed laughter and unhealthy foods are key to happiness."

"Maybe I'll say the same to you in, like, fifty years about Ziven." She blushes like a teenager in love.

I smile at her, bumping her shoulder with mine. "I'm happy for you. But in all seriousness, are you okay? We haven't had much time alone to just talk." She told me

about everything, everything that's happened, but usually there is a Moon Dynasty guard a few feet away or our dragons are waiting for us to fly. Learning to be a dragon rider has no doubt been the most rewarding part of my life, and I don't ever want to stop riding through the skies. I know war is coming, I know the vampyres are going to come after us, but when I'm on my dragon, I feel invincible. For a girl who has always had every one of her weaknesses written across her body, I feel like I'm let out of my cage on my dragon when we are flying. I'm grateful to Story; if it wasn't for her and the Moon Dynasty, I wouldn't have had any instruction on how to ride. The Sun Dynasty is a mess, and our king...well, he is licking his wounds and not ruling like he should be.

"When I'm with Ziven, I am. I can see us having a future, but then I see someone from the Sun Dynasty, and it stings. I trusted him." Daegan. She means him.

"That was the bond, not just your judgment, and you shouldn't doubt yourself. Entwined mates are literally bonds between souls, a deep connection that cannot be felt by anyone but each other. King Daegan made the choice to betray the deities' wishes and you." I rest my head on her shoulder, my long hair falling down her arm. She rests her head on top of mine. "There is a reason most fae here fear entwined mates as much as they desire to have one as their own. Entwined mates are power, and they are destructive with love."

"You're very poetic sometimes, Catherine. Maybe you should write a book about all of us." She lifts her head. "Any chance we can escape before your parents ask me any more questions?"

I wince. They have asked her a lot. "I'm sorry, they?—"

"Don't apologise. It's not them, I'm just tired. My monthlies have been especially hard," she whispers. "I need to rest."

I wish I could magically heal her, make it better. I suspected she wasn't feeling well this morning because she looked so pale, but she waved me off, and she is very good at pretending to be okay when she is not. I'm her best friend and I have to get better at seeing the signs. I watch her climb to her feet and go to hug my parents goodbye. I know the deities have a plan for us all, but what is mine? Why is hers so complicated? She has been through hell, and she told me everything that happened to her, from the professor to the evil prince who kept her captured. If anyone deserves an easy life, it's her.

I always suspected the kings were her mates. I've read so many books on the history of entwined mates. Most are love stories, but also there were warnings of the most devastating tales too. It doesn't always mean a happy ending just because they are mates. The impact on your life will always be gigantic when you find an entwined mate. You don't walk away from them, and Daegan will regret what he has done. With how depressed he is seeming at the moment, maybe he already does.

After I say bye to my parents and promise to be back for dinner later, we leave the apartment. The corridor is surprisingly quiet, and I wonder if it has something to do with the Moon Dynasty twins standing by the doors waiting for Story. "Can you ever forgive Daegan?"

Her eyes sharpen. "I will never forgive him. Not ever for what he did, but I've decided I can't be the one to kill him. I won't let him die in front of me, but I won't be the one to take his life, and neither will Ziven unless he comes for me. The deities put this bond here between us, but he ruined it. He ruined everything I ever felt for him."

"Did you ever love him?" I genuinely question.

She shakes her head, her answer instant. "No. I loved Ziven, and he was all I saw. I claimed to everyone that I hated him and he was a monster, but my heart shouted

another word. I should have listened to my instincts.”

“I’m sorry for all the questions. I live through you.” I tuck my hair behind my ears as we get to the twins. They open the doors as Story says hello and thanks them for waiting for her.

Her eyes sparkle with life. It’s one of the reasons she is my best friend, that sparkle that never dies even with the life she has been given. She finds the strength to continue, and I admire her for it. We stop at the conjunction of the apartments. “I think my mum would like your parents. Thank you for inviting me over. It helps me feel like there is a chance I’ll see my mother again.”

“I hope I get to meet her one day. Wherever she is.” My brow furrows. If her mother loved her so much, why didn’t she come after her? I guess I don’t think there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for my child.

“I just want to see her again,” Story admits, tugging on her bottom lip with her teeth. “She did everything for me, you know. I look back, and I realise that literally everything she did, even with a broken heart, was for me. She kept going. If I lost Ziven...” She pauses, her voice thick with emotion. It’s like the thought of losing him can’t be something that crosses her mind. To love like that—it’s extraordinary. “I don’t know how I’d keep going and fighting forever. But she did, after losing my father. She just kept going even when she told me she loved him so much. She told me I looked like him, and yet she smiled at me every single day. The breeding camp was cruel to her, and she took many, many lovers to try for another child. I remember staying at my mothers’ friends and seeing how tired my mother was each morning. Sometimes there would be bruises all over her, too.”

She shakes her head and my stomach sinks at what I am forced to imagine. Story doesn’t speak about it, but I know she went through similar—if not worse.

“I want to thank her. Just once, I need her to know it wasn’t all for nothing. That I’m here and a dragon rider she can be proud of.”

“Story.” I wrap my arms around her. “I might not have met her, but I know she was proud of you regardless of if you have a dragon or not. Just for being you. For surviving.”

Her cheeks are wet with tears, and so are mine when we break away from each other. “Deities, I didn’t plan on crying today. I’m going to go to the library with Mazzis. He is teaching me a new card game today, and he has baked a cake for us to eat. Are you coming?”

“No, but it is tempting,” I chuckle. Mazzis knows more card games than anyone alive, I’d bet. He is also a brilliant cook. “I’m going to go out into the forest for my walk. I like to go out every day for at least half an hour just?—”

“To get out. Ziven goes flying once a day with me for the same thing,” she offers. I nod. I know that she will understand the theory at least. I’ve been trapped in here my entire life, so many years, and it felt like an endless existence until Story arrived. I don’t remember anything from when I was a child, only the after. The trap. The years all seem to have blurred into one endless mess. Yet, in all those years, I never called anyone my best friend. I’ve never had a lover, never had anyone to call mine. But I have my family and I have my best friend now. I consider myself extremely lucky for both.

She pulls me into a tight hug one more time. “Be careful out there. Do you want me to send a guard with you?”

“I’m okay and I like being alone with the forest,” I tell her. Being alone is rare and I cherish the time I get. It’s always quiet this time of day because the lunch is being given out at the front of the mansion, and the huge queues there take a while. The

food will run out in a matter of weeks, and I don't know what anyone can do about it. There are always a lot of fae out there in the forest and many guards walking around too, but I get the false sense of being alone, anyway. Daegan has left some guards doing rotations of the forest, but I doubt they are doing a good job when their king is slacking at everything else.

Leaving Story with her guards, I head out of the apartments and into a pathway that is pretty silent. I will see Story later when I go to work. I love my shifts in the library, the quiet, the stillness that I find there. After I take the side door out, the brisk cold air slams hard into me and the wind whistles. The clouds are grey and thick. A storm is coming. I head out through the tents and the crowds of fae who are eating in silence. Some smile at me and others don't make eye contact. I've spoken to a few of them and heard their stories, enough of them that it makes me agree with what my parents have always said, that we were the lucky ones trapped in there.

So many of these fae are covered in bite marks. They are broken and trodden on like used and discarded dolls. I can see it in their eyes, whether they're powerborn or lessborn. Disgusting titles, and I hope the kings get rid of them when this war is over. The powerborn have slight powers that don't remotely compare to some of the powers I've seen in the mansion. They're all slaves and I hate that for them. The few babies that cry are the only ones that have a chance of knowing a world that the vampyres don't rule in. I saw how broken Story was when she first arrived, yet she ran with me into the Decidere.

She is so brave and I want to be like her.

I head down past the river, enjoying the soft sound of the water hitting the pebbles and the lap of the waves in the thicker parts. After I cross the old wooden bridge, I wind through the darker parts of the forest until the tents all but fade out, and I'm finally alone in the stillness of the forest. I don't know how long I'm walking, but when I see a bridge coming up and the sound of thunder slams across the sky, I jump.

I've not seen this area before. I spin around, and I just see the mansion in the far distance, and the panic in my gut settles. It's quiet here, not a bird chirp or a bee buzz. Suddenly I hear something, something that shouldn't be there. A male groan. I swirl around and I hear it again, but this time I hear pain in the noise. Is someone hurt?

"Hello!" I shout out, wondering if someone's there. "If you're here, come out! I can help you!" Let's hope the fae is a nice one, or I'm going to have to start screaming. Someone will hear me. I'm not far enough away that they wouldn't. I'm not the best fighter, but my dragon will come for me if all else fails.

The groan echoes in my ears again, with a slightly whispered word. "Help me..."

My head turns towards the river where it's coming from, and I rush over, wondering if someone's fallen in. The heavy smell of blood slams into my nose as I get to the riverbank. I look down, my eyes widening and a shiver snaking down my spine. There's a vampyre man on the creek bed. There's a sword embedded straight through his stomach. A glistening gold sword that sliced through the thick black leathers he is wearing. He's barely conscious, muttering to himself as his red blood pours onto the pebbles and into the river.

He has short, curly silver hair that touches his forehead, and his silver fangs are tipped red, but they shine. His skin is pale, so pale. It's probably from all the blood pouring out of his stomach or the fact he is a vampyre. I've only seen dead ones brought in to be burnt from the city and only from a distance in the crowds. My eyes drift to the wound. He must be from the city, where the river starts, and I'd bet he got dragged up here by the current. The river is high from all the rain we have had recently. I steel my shoulders as I look down at him, wondering what to do. If I shout for help, someone will come and they will kill him.

Why does that thought make me feel sick?

Deities, what do I do? I can't help him. He's a vampyre and my natural enemy. His eyes open like he can hear my thoughts, and his eyes are so pale blue as he stares right up at me. "Help me."

Something in my gut makes me stop. Makes me not turn and run away. I should. I absolutely should. But if I go back to the mansion and tell them there's a vampyre out here—he's dead. That's it. He could very well kill me too. Anyone else would run away for help, but I can't make my feet turn. I can't make myself actually leave. What am I doing? I reach for my dragon in my mind, seeking his advice. Ululia chose me in a Decidere, and so far, as long as I've known him, he helps me...the few, very few, times he's chosen to speak to me. "What do I do?"

His grumble echoes in my mind. "We help the weak and look to the deities to judge us. You know what you must do."

My jaw drops and I look at the sky above, the thick swirling clouds. I'm shocked silent and I know Ululia isn't going to give me any more advice. My dragon, who would die to protect me like I would for him, just told me not to leave this vampyre. To help him.

I look down at the handsome vampyre, and my heart feels like it's clogged in my throat. He is handsome. At least six foot five with tall, long legs and too many muscles on show, even injured. He's covered in rippling muscles and quite a few scars that look old, like they never healed. I don't even know if he'll survive me helping him pull that sword out of his stomach. Then what? What do I do with him? I gulp before making my decision. A really stupid, reckless decision. But I've never been reckless in my life except for the Decidere, and I felt like that was the right thing for me to do. This is the right thing to do. I follow the rules. I do everything I'm told usually, but maybe I'm done with that.

I listen to my dragon. I always do and I always will. With my decision made, I slide

down the embankment. Stones, pebbles and sand stick to my leggings as I make the descent before I can stand in the shallow water that seeps into my boot. Tugging my cloak off, I spend a few moments ripping the fabric with my teeth. I'm going to have to tie the fabric around him somehow to stop bleeding. I remember the wars in the mansion, and I know how to pack a wound. My mother, she's good with stuff like this, and she taught me.

The vampyre doesn't move when I nervously step closer. He's so pale and I wonder if he will die no matter what I do. My eyes catch on the bridge a little further down the river. If he survives this, I can take them there to hide him. "Hey, vampyre, nice to meet you, I'm Catherine, and I'm a dragon rider from the Sun Dynasty. You're my enemy, the villains we had been destroyed by, but I guess you're lucky I found you. I don't like murder, and I can't walk away from someone who is hurt and needs help. Please do not bite me." I wrap my shaky hands around the sword. "Brace yourself." I yank it out in one swift pull, and blood sprays across my leggings. He screams for a second, and I lean down, shoving my hand over his mouth, feeling the tips of his fangs press into my palm. He doesn't bite me though, his startling blue eyes widening right before he passes out again.

He will be lucky if no one heard that scream. I'm kind of glad at least he's unconscious now, though. I kneel down by his side, carefully putting the sword on the bank. I glance at the strange symbols on the very expensive sword that is heavy, and it might be pure gold for all I know. Where in the deities is he from? Carefully, I manage to shove bits of the cloak that I've ripped up into the gaping wound to stop the bleeding before I get a strip underneath him and tie it hard around his stomach to hold it in place. It's not hygienic or really any good, but I don't have another choice. I'm sure vampyres heal fast, but I wouldn't know.

He flinches in his sleep, but he's not strong enough to wake up. I glance around me to make sure no one's looking before grabbing his arms, and I pull. He is heavy and massive, and tugging him along proves to be one hell of a workout. I'm sweating

after even a minute of pulling him across the sandy, pebbly beach. I grunt and tug until I finally get him underneath the bridge and collapse at his side, breathless. “You’re too muscular for your own good, vamp.”

I push back to my feet with a groan. I get what’s left of my cloak and the stupidly heavy sword before kicking sand over the blood marks to hide them. The bridge is big enough that no one is going to see him unless they come down here. Thunder crackles loud above, and the second I step out from under the bridge, the rain comes down. The river might get higher, but I can’t move him anymore. I’m not left with a choice but to leave him on the edge of the stone path under the bridge. I throw the cloak over his shoulders and leave the sword pressed against the wall.

“I don’t know if you can hear me or if you’re remotely with it, but I hope you live. I will come back tomorrow with animal blood for you, but don’t you fucking dare attack anyone. I think you’re safe here to recover. It’s far enough away from the mansion for them not to find you. Please don’t make me regret this.”

Just when I turn to walk away, his gravelly voice hits my ears. He has a perfect voice. “I owe you my life and my thanks, fae.”

I can’t make myself look back at him, as my stomach turns with my decision to help this stranger. Did I really just save a vampyre’s life?

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Chapter Seventeen

Page Seventeen—I found an old fae who claimed

that the first living person on this world was half fae and half dragon.

What a strange thought...

Luna is nearly as clumsy as I was when I first started training, but she doesn't give up easily, and I admire her strength. I watch her train with Calix, who seems to have taken over personal responsibility of making sure Luna can defend herself. He's ruthless, as Ziven still is with my training. I'm proud of myself when I don't keel over and heave like I've inhaled a barrel of smoke. Luna is nothing but a sweaty mess, shivering on the mat after Calix has just flipped her over his shoulder. I internally wince and pick up a glass bottle of water, taking it over and offering her a drink.

"Thank you!" She gasps with a smile, taking a deep sip. Ziven stops close at my side, crossing his thick arms as his body presses into mine, and his scent wraps around my senses, luring me to him. He's not wearing a shirt and I've been drooling since the second he got in here. We've been training all morning, after a late night of discussing with Mazzis what we should do with the books. Putting them near each other is a bad idea when the barrier could be the only thing holding the Silkvir back when they get here.

The idea of Emyr riding a beast and coming after me sends a cold sweat down my spine. I woke up four times last night, nightmares of the past smacking into me, and

each time, Ziven held me, reminding me that I'm safe with him. That Emyr is never going to touch me. I focus on Ziven now and try not to drool over the display of tight, thick muscles. I can barely look at him right now, but I'm itching to drag him away.

"Her training is more painful to watch than yours," Ziven comments, and poor Luna nearly chokes on her drink. She is scared of him, and I don't blame her. He scared me too at the start. Ziven leans into me. "I really fucking enjoyed seeing you all sweaty and breathless under me. I was rock hard all fucking day after training you. Every fucking day, Storm."

I shiver and meet his eyes, batting mine innocently. "Want to do some more training?"

He loudly laughs, the sound amazing to my ears. Calix shakes his head at us both, but there is a huge grin on his face. "I've never heard Ziv laugh like that unless he was drunk."

"I'm happy," Ziven claims, the two words warming my heart. He is unapologetically proud of how I make him feel. He shouts it for the world to hear, and he doesn't give a shit what that might make him look like.

"So am—" I pause as I see Etena run through the training room doors, her eyes wide. I don't think I've ever seen her scared.

Ziven moves like a gust of wind, straight in front of me, and Etena comes to a halt. "There are creatures hacking the barriers, and we need you. Daegan needs you." We all tense. They can't be here already, it's too soon. It's only been a week since Luna arrived. Luna steps to our side with Calix, and Etena looks right at him. "Please listen to me. Daegan is going to fly his dragon straight to them to fight because that fucking book has his mind warped into thinking he is indestructible. He isn't. Thousands of our riders are going with him." She looks to Ziven and bows her head. "We haven't

always gotten along, but we need a leader who isn't being used by the book."

"Ask her," Ziven replies to Etena, looking right at me. "If you tell me to save him, I will. If you tell me to fly our people out of here with you, then we will do that. The barrier is coming down. We can get out."

He will leave for me. There's a bang in the distance, and the entire mansion shakes. I want to leave Daegan to it to let him have his war and see what the real consequences are, but I can't condemn them all to death. Maybe a small part of me doesn't want to see Daegan dead because of this bond between us. Ziven doesn't need my answer. "Fuck, okay." He looks at Etena. "Go and get your dragon. Fly near us."

Etena looks once at me. "I want him alive. I don't care about the rest." There is some vulnerability in her voice that shocks me more than her asking for help in the first place.

Calix goes deathly still, like her words are daggers to his chest because he hates Daegan because of Ziven. She is so loyal to him and in a way, choosing her cousin over her mate. He doesn't say anything as Etena meets his eyes just once before she runs away, where Foster is waiting by the door. He smiles at me and I smile back. We're both running out of the door not long after, into the crowds of fae who look confused and lost. We didn't have time to inform everyone of the new threat and make an evacuation plan for them.

Ziven climbs onto the broken banister that hasn't been fixed yet. "Everyone listen up!" His sharp shout stops the crowds, and every single fae turns to look at him. Many bow. "Beasts with wings, flown by vampyres, are taking the barrier down and attacking. The dragon riders will fly to fight them and buy everyone time. Get into the forest behind the mansion and run. Keep going until we find you."

Shouts and whispers burst out in the crowd, but Ziven is done warning them. He

jumps off and takes my hand, leading me over to a quieter corner near the new bridge. Calix and Luna catch up seconds later, crowding around us. “Get on your dragons, all three of you. We thought we’d have some time before they got here, but we were wrong. They must have flown immediately after she left and not stopped.”

“Hopefully, that means the Silkvir are tired,” Calix points out, crossing his thick arms. “And they will be untrained in combat with dragons. We might have the advantage yet.”

I remember Luna’s drawing of the beasts. Vampyres don’t tire like fae; could Silkvir not tire either? Ziven curls his hand around the back of my neck and tugs me to him, his other hand plastering to my back. For a second, just a second, everything fades away until it’s us. It’s us against the world. “Go and get Hettie. Get the book too. Daegan’s probably got the other one and flew with it when he heard they were here, so that doesn’t matter.” I breathe in his scent to calm myself, even when the thought of him flying to Daegan and a war with the vampyres makes me want to be sick. “Take Hettie through the barrier where it’s clear of Silkvir and vampyres. Please.”

My heart cracks. “She’s safe with me.”

“I love you, Storm,” he breathes, leaning down so our lips touch. “And don’t you dare come back if we fall. I vowed to the deities you would know about love and freedom. Even if we can’t be together, you will find it.”

My heart races with anger and desperation. I’ve never felt more desperate to see him again. I need to. “That’s not going to happen, Ziven. You fucking fight your way back to me. Do you understand?”

He smirks, so softly too. “I’ll fight death to hold you forever, Storm.” His lips take mine, a passionate kiss, and he pours his emotions into the kiss, into every stroke of his lips, until they stain my heart. He stains my soul. I can’t see how death could ever

take away a stain so deep. We are forever. “And when this is over and I have you again, I want you to join the Moon Dynasty and swear in as my queen.”

“It would be my honour.” I touch his cheek. I mean every word. I’ve never wanted to serve anyone, to be loyal to any throne or man, until I met him. He is the love of my life, my entwined mate, and I don’t want a future without Ziven at my side. “My king.”

He groans, kissing me once more, his hands tightening on my back and my neck until it feels like no one could ever part us. The ground shakes again and I taste magic in the air when he breaks away from me. Hettie. I have to get to her because she will be scared. Catherine runs over and nearly knocks into me. I catch her arm. “I ignored the call from Daegan to find you, Story. I’ll fly with you or no one. What do you need?”

Her loyalty makes tears brim in my eyes, and I quickly hug her. “We have to get to Princess Hettie and protect her.”

“With our lives and our dragons,” Catherine firmly replies. She loves Hettie as much as I do, even if she has only met her a few times around the mansion with me recently. She knows Hettie is the princess of her dynasty too.

Ziven steps away from me, and I miss his touch immediately. It feels wrong to be away from him. Luna looks scared. “I will find the fae and go with them?—”

“You’re riding with me. You’re a target for the king, and it’s not safe for you,” Calix cuts her off with a protective snarl. I blink at him and the way he near enough steps right up into her space. “You will be safe. Come with me.”

I expect her to say no or just plain faint from how worried she looks, but instead, she takes his offered hand, to my shock. They’ve known each other for just a week, and she will get on his dragon and ride with him. I’m surprised his dragon will allow her

to ride. They run together towards the crowds, heading to the door of the mansion.

“Stay safe?—”

“Kyrell!” I grab Ziven’s hand. “You need to get him out before you get on the dragon and fly out there to Daegan. I can’t get close to him, but please just let him out. Tell him to run and we will find each other when this is over. If you leave him locked up and we lose the mansion, he will be killed. I can’t?—”

“I know what he means to you.” Ziven locks his eyes with mine. “I’ll go and you get to Hettie. Ruelle took her outside to the river. They will still be there, I’d bet, or Ruelle would have taken her to the dragons. Either way, you’ll find her on that path.” He kisses me like it’s the last moment we’re going to kiss each other, and it feels so wrong. I watch him leave me, and I run straight towards the Moon Dynasty apartments.

Catherine takes my hand, and she pulls me with her. Even though it feels like my heart is running in another direction to my body. There is a door to the river at the side of the mansion, and it’s crammed with people flocking out, carrying children and supplies. Hopefully, it’s clear when we need to go through it. First, I have to get the book. Catherine must know the plan, because she doesn’t question me as I turn to head over the bridge, hiding in it as the ground shakes under my feet. I feel Maeve in my mind, not her words, but her warning to hurry. She wants me with her, and I feel the same.

I rush down the tunnel to the library, my favourite place in the world. I wish I had more time here before I have to leave. The library looks like nothing is happening outside; the librarians are still pushing carts around and Mazzis is sitting on a chair, waiting with the box next to him. “You need to evacuate,” I tell him as I come to a stop, a little breathless.

He looks out at the library behind him. "I will never leave here, and all here have chosen the same fate. I will never leave the books." He lifts his chin. "I am no rider, but I am a reader. Both are powerful. I will stay here and protect the library. Even if it's the last thing that the Dawn Dynasty king does."

Tears fill my eyes as I look at the books. There isn't time to get the books out of here, and he knows it, too. "Maz, please...you can't stay here."

"Dear girl." He rises to his feet and takes my hands. "We both know, apart from the dragons and your mates, these books are the biggest threat to the vampyres. They are information on who we are, what the fae are meant to be, and each book is a page of hope." He knows, and I'm not sure how. Mazzis might be the smartest fae I've ever met. "Go. The Moon Dynasty needs a queen, and someone to remember me by. Get out of here and on that magnificent dragon of yours."

A sob echoes in my throat as I throw my arms around his shoulders and hold him tight. "Thank you."

He hugs me back once, just for a moment, before pushing me away. It's time to go. I pick up the box that he had waiting for me all along, the one we entrusted him to keep safe. I know I won't be able to get him out of here, and Catherine is sobbing as she hugs him. I let them talk quietly, and whatever he says leaves her shocked.

"I'll pray to the deities for you. For the library," I whisper. I pause to look back. "Did you finish that book, the one on the Twilight Dynasty?"

"Yes, and it's yours, Story. Read it when you can. It's in the box." My eyes widen. "I opened it, yes, but I've been lost to the magic of books for a long time. I'm not as weak as I seem. I am the king of the Dawn Dynasty, Story Dehana, and we royals can even challenge the deities for power."

I hope he is right. Ziven needs all the luck of the deities to survive tonight. I know I can't live without him because he is mine. I belong to him too, and I should have completed the mate bond when I had the chance. I don't know what I was waiting for, what final step I needed to be able to fully trust him, but I do.

I leave Mazzis to run out with Catherine, and the side door is finally clear enough for us to get outside of the mansion. The door might have been empty, but outside is not. It's madness, with crowds of fae running in every direction like no one has a clue where to go. Horses are loose, running amuck, and dragons are swooping across the skies, casting dark shadows along the earth, even in the middle of the day.

Catherine takes my hand and we link our fingers before we dive straight into the crowd and painstakingly make a path towards the river. On the way, I hand her the box with the book and I know without a doubt, she will protect it if I can't. I hope Ziven is right about Hettie and she stayed there or Ruelle took her to the dragons. In this chaos, I'm not sure how I'd find her. It feels like forever before we clear out of the crowd and see the river sparkling in the distance, with only a few shadows of people around it. We run the final part, and thankfully she's there. I spot her blonde head as she stands with Ruelle by a tree, looking up at the sky. Her eyes drop and she breaks away from Ruelle to crash into my open arms.

"What's happening?" she blurts out. "Where is my uncle? I'm scared. Why are the dragons?—"

"You're safe." I hold her shaky body to mine.

Ruelle gets to us, her stick clicking on the ground. "Tell me everything."

Catherine does as I kneel and try to calm Hettie down, to no avail. Catherine looks at me. "Walk with them and I'll go ahead to the dragons. Meet you there."

I nod and she is fast, disappearing down the path towards the dragons, while I lean down and pat my shoulder. “Climb on.”

She shakily nods and jumps onto my back for a piggyback. Ruelle and I begin down the path, and she tells me, “I’ll go and ride at his side. He will not die while I’m there.” I almost forgot she is a rider. She touches my arm. “I’m assuming he sent you here to look after Hettie.”

“Yes, she...” I pause, lost for words to explain what Hettie is to me. “She’s the future. I love her, and Ziven didn’t need to ask. I would have always come for her.”

“I know.” She pats my arm. “Hettie refused to leave the river until you came. Almost like she knew.”

It takes us longer than I’d like to get to the entrance to the dragons’ home, but I don’t regret carrying Hettie. She is shaking like a leaf, and I know she would have just frozen up. I would have done the same at her age, faced with war.

Catherine is waiting by the entrance, and she nods at me. “They’re coming up.”

Ruelle leans on her walking stick. “Sun Dynasty doesn’t suit you. Change sides when this is over. You belong with us, girl. You’re protecting the future of the Moon Dynasty right now, and I’ll find you if you fail.”

Catherine once would have paled and ran, or she might have cried. She doesn’t now. Becoming a dragon rider has changed her for the better. “Hettie is the heir to the Sun Dynasty too. By staying here, I’m protecting them both. I don’t want to be pulled between them like...” She stops. Like me, she means. “I belong to the Sun, even if my best friend is destined for the Moon.”

I hear Maeve in the distance, her roar and heavy stomps as she comes out. Her red

scales seem to move like living flames in the sunlight as she looks up, arching her neck to the sky. Catherine and Ruelle leave to find their dragons inside. Hettie falls down my back, and she looks tiny as Maeve comes up to us. So tiny in the face of a dragon. “I haven’t been on a dragon before, and I’m scared.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you. We’re family, Hettie.” I stroke her back. “You said you wanted to be a dragon rider when you’re older. Here’s some practice.”

That seems to calm her a little, but I doubt anything could truly make her feel safe at this point. I look up into Maeve’s purple eyes. “Are you okay with Hettie riding, Maeve? I need to keep her safe.”

“Henrietta is a child of the dragons” is her answer, and I swear it’s sarcastic, like I’m meant to know that fact.

I frown at her as she crouches down. Dust flies in a huff around my legs. “What does that mean?”

“Maybe it’s not the time for us to discuss the child.” I roll my eyes at her cryptic answer, damn well knowing she will ignore me when I bring it up in the future. I still can’t figure out what is different about Henrietta, how she managed to even be born when no one else was. I push Hettie up so she can start climbing the scales, and climb after her, looking up at the skies that are slowly filling with dragons but none of the beasts. I don’t want to see one because that means they got past Daegan or Ziven.

It means we are losing, and a deep part of my soul knows I don’t want either of them dead.

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This is all his plan. The Twilight will rule.

The Dawn is dead and gone.

The mansion is falling apart, and Storm isn't at my side. I hate running in the other direction from her, even if it's what she wanted. If Storm had told me to leave with her, to abandon the fucking foolish Sun king, I would have without another thought. I don't care what happens to the world as long as I have her. I never claimed to be a hero; fuck, I don't want to be one. I want to be whatever she needs of me. I slow down as I get to the dungeons, which are shaking, and my guards have left to get their dragons. I never ordered them to stay if the war began, not to protect a vampyre, no matter who he is to my mate.

Mate. The animalistic side of me wants to grab Storm and fucking just leave with her. Let it all burn. It feels wrong about leaving her at all. Gritting my teeth, I unlock the door and step in, pushing the maddening thoughts of the vampyre royal prince getting anywhere near Storm when I'm not there. She has Maeve, and Maeve is not going down without a fucking fight. "Kyrell, we are being attacked and Story sent me. You need to run into the forest with the fae and get the fuck away from here. There is no side to this war where you'd be safe, but we both know my woman would fight them all for you."

Kyrell doesn't move from his bed as I unlock the bar lock, and the magic drops away with my touch. "Kyrell, I don't have time for you to fuck about. Get up!"

He doesn't move. Fuck it. I need to get on my dragon, and the door is open now. I did what Storm asked. I walk three steps before Kyrell moves around me in the blink of

an eye, using his vampyre abilities, and blocks the door. Now he chooses to get up? He cocks his head to the side, his body shaking. “Where is Story Dehana?”

Something is wrong. “Getting her dragon. Where else would she be, Kyrell?” I can sense a change in him, and it’s the same one that was in the library. Whatever or whoever is possessing him is here, and Kyrell is not. “Whom am I speaking to?”

A big smile tilts his face up. “My name is Prince Emyr of the vampyre race, and I’m coming for you all. Story Dehana is mine.”

A fierce wave of destructive possessiveness washes over me at his claim. Like fuck she is.

I look into the eyes of the shit poor excuse of a man that caused my mate to be brought up as a slave, to be tortured and bitten, to have been used and broken. He nearly killed her before I could even meet her. “I’m coming for you, Prince, and I’ve dreamt of the pain I’m going to cause you. So get out of his body and back to wherever the fuck you are and come meet me in the sky. I’m not a scared woman you can beat and overpower. Neither is she anymore.” I smirk at him. “Story Dehana is a dragon rider and all fucking mine. Come for us. See what fucking happens to you.”

He snarls like an animal, snapping his fanged teeth at me, but he doesn’t make a move closer. He has some brains then. “No.” The room stills. “I know every inch of Story, inside and out, and I know this is her best friend who she is attached to. He died for her...and she won’t see us coming. I’m going to go and find Story in this body. She’s going to run up to me, happy to see her best friend, and then I’m going to sink my teeth into her neck and kill her.” I clench my fists. “I’ll bring her back as my bride, and she will be my queen forever. I knew when I met her, she had to be mine. I had this overwhelming desire to make her mine. My father called it an obsession, and he understood it. He said there was a name for it—mates.”

Fuck...no. I didn't know that vampyres could have mates, but it makes sense they might be able to. I didn't know it was even possible, but the way he's speaking about her, the obsession, the need. Story doesn't just have two mates, she has three. One from each of the dynasties, except for the one she comes from herself. He might be a vampyre, but he is a Dawn Dynasty royal through and through because of who his father is.

He'll never stop until he has Story to himself, and I'll never stop until he is dead.

Because she is mine, and there is nothing I wouldn't do for her. Because I love her with every inch of who I am, and I know she won't forgive me for this. I can't let him leave. Kyrell asked me to do the unthinkable if he was ever a threat to Story because he loves her, too. I don't want to do it. Killing people is easy for me. It's never been an issue, but doing this...crossing this line? We might never get back from this. I wish I fucking didn't have to do it, but I don't see another option. He is fast, and even if I manage to get him back into the dungeons, the prince will use him to get to Story over and over.

Kyrell is her biggest threat because she loves him.

He runs, but I catch him with my magic, my silver shadows snapping out of the wall and clamping down on his legs and arms. My stomach turns to lead, and I cut off the part of me that feels, the part that is alive around my mate, as I betray her in the worst possible way. It's for her own good.

I have to do this.

The fucker manages to break free of my shadows and run. I chase after him. Kyrell is weak because he's barely been drinking the blood we've been giving him. That means he's slow. It doesn't take me long to track him in the forest, in a clearing of damp leaves and rocks, hunched over and breathless.

I walk up to him, and I don't hesitate. I pour moonlight into his body, ripping him slowly apart with moon fire. He gasps, a silent scream in his mouth. His eyes completely change as he falls back onto the ground, and I crouch down, placing my hand on his shoulder. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry it ended like this for you."

My moonlight is ripping him apart, tearing his soul from his body. Pure fire burning up his veins. I can't save him, but I wouldn't even if I could. He thinks of Story in his last moments, just like I would. He loves her like a brother, but me? I love her enough to do this terrible thing. "This proves to me you're not selfish. You love her more than you want to keep her to yourself because, after this, she will hate you. Tell her the truth and that this is what I wanted. Maybe you are exactly what she needed to find, and you might get a chance. Thank you, King Ziven." The idea of Story hating me again fills me with dread. Kyrell grabs my hand. "Tell her the truth about her mother. Tell her the truth about everything. No more lies."

The moon fire creeps up his neck, and then his eyes glow with it. Burning silver flames. His hand drops from mine, and his entire body disintegrates into nothing but ash in my hand. I feel as dead as Kyrell as I look up and see Story standing there, shaking in the breeze, her soft red hair flowing around her, tears streaming down her face. Her pain is a stab to my chest. I did this.

Betrayal and hate is written across her face as clear as moonlight. "Did you just kill my best friend?"

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:21 am

I write these final pages on my deathbed.

This is a book for my children and for their children and so on...

I know what it's like to be betrayed. I know what it's like to have someone that you care about stand there and hurt you. I know what it's like to pretend you aren't shattering inside because letting them see it is a sign of weakness. But this... I can't hide how I feel. It screams out of me, along with pained words to confirm what I just saw. Nothing compares to the betrayal I feel as I see my best friend die in Ziven's arms. Until he is nothing but black moon dust, floating around the Moon king himself. The man I gave every inch of my heart to, who I love. Who I would have died for without another thought. He took Kyrell from me.

I scream in pain, rushing over to the ash pile, and sink down in front of it, touching the pile for a second. This is all I have left of my best friend. My brother. He's gone. I look up, tears streaming down my face, and each tear is filled with bitter hate. Ziven reaches for me, and I nearly fall back to get away from him. "NO!" He stops, lowering his hand. "Why him? You knew what he meant to me and how much I owe him. I owed him a life! A long, full life, and you just killed him. How could you?"

My voice is broken, and I can't stop crying. I sob in front of him as his own eyes fill with tears. "I did not want to kill him. The prince possessed him and was coming after you. Kyrell and I made a deal that if he was ever a threat to you, I'd end his life. I did what he asked."

"How. Could. You!" I scream at him, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Story, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but I know he wanted this. The vampyre existence without a heart was torture for him. He was in pain all of the time, but he hid it from you. He couldn’t even feed to keep himself alive.” I can’t even listen to the lies. He has to be lying. Yes, Kyrell wasn’t happy, but was he starving? Was he in pain? “This is what he asked for, but I am so sorry.”

“Ziven, you never thought to tell me any of this?” I demand, my heart shattering. “You never thought to give me the choice or give me a chance to say goodbye?”

He crosses his arms. “The whole time he came back as a vampyre was your chance to say goodbye, and we both know you did. Hate me if it makes you feel better, but I told you I’d do anything to keep you safe. I don’t regret anything I do to make sure you’re alive and free.”

“Fuck you!” I snap, breathless. I can’t breathe. Kyrell’s last words echo to me. “What did he say about my mother? I heard that.”

He grits his teeth. “I made him swear not to tell you.”

If my heart wasn’t broken already, he makes sure to stomp on it. I can’t even barely believe it as he starts telling me a truth I should have guessed. “The vampyre prince has your mother. He turned to Kyrell to send him to come and find you. To tell you that he has your mother and that he’ll turn her into a vampyre too if you don’t come back to him.”

“No.” I whisper the word. My mother is with Emyr? No. No. No. I scream at him, again and again until I can’t feel anything but rage. “How could you not tell me? I would have gone to find her!”

He waves his hands out. “That’s exactly why. You would have taken the bait and ended up back in the prince’s hands, where I couldn’t get to you. Fuck no. Kyrell did

everything to make sure that you had a chance to escape, and even he agreed that telling you meant all of it was for nothing. You'd never be free again. Everything would be lost, because you'd go after your mother. But would she want that?" He stares right at me. "Would the mother you told me about want you to become a blood slave to the prince again for her?"

No.

She wouldn't, but it doesn't matter. I laugh, but it's hollow. "You don't get to make that decision for me, Ziven. That's the point. You didn't trust me to make the choice. You made the decision for me and lied." The ground shakes. "I came back to find you, to make sure that you got out of that mansion. To make sure that you were okay, because I felt like something was wrong. I came for you." I scream at him. "I came for the man I loved when I found him killing my best friend and betraying me." The rage I feel. I can't explain it, the pure feminine rage that screams down my throat. "Stay away from me."

"Never," he snarls.

Coldness spreads across my body. "Then you're as bad as Emyr."

I know I took it too far from the moment I say it, and Ziven flinches in pain. Shock. I want to take it back, but a sound makes me clamp my hands over my ears. Ziven glares up at the skies as Maeve's warning shouts in my head, "They are here. Get to me!"

A yellow dragon darts across the sky, blood pouring off its side, and right behind him is a Silkvir. Horror vibrates through me as I see the beasts Luna warned us about. Their bones rattle as they fly, and they make an awful noise that makes me want to clamp down on my ears forever. They glow an eerie blue, and sickness threatens to rise up my throat as I watch the Silkvir slam into the dragon and rip it apart in a blast

of red and blue fire that spreads across the sky.

Ziven grabs my waist, turning me and kissing me before I push him away. “I will always love you, Story Dehana.” He pushes me away to run into the forest, back towards the mansion and to where the Silkvir must be. Maeve snarl echoes in my mind. “To the skies, rider.”

I wipe my wet cheeks as I turn and rush towards Maeve, who isn’t too far away. I can’t grieve for Kyrell or even think about Ziven right now. I have to get Hettie away and make sure the fae flooding to this side of the forest have a chance to escape the vampyres. They are like me and they deserve a chance of freedom. Catherine and her dragon take off as I come out of the forest into the clearing, and I throw myself onto Maeve. She stands as I climb, and I’m glad I don’t slip just this once. The minute I’ve settled in, I wrap my arms tight around Hettie, who is shaking. “Just stay down, okay?”

“Did you find my uncle?”

Pain slams into my chest from the sheer thought of him. Yes, and he was killing my best friend. Yes, and I don’t know how I can still love him. “Yes, and he’s fine.”

Maeve needs no instruction to take herself straight up into the skies, knocking over trees with her giant wings. The higher and higher she gets, the more the horror unfolds, and I hope Hettie has her eyes closed. The sky looks like a thousand bugs flying around all at once, slamming and ripping into each other in blasts of red and blue fire. But it’s dragons and Silkvir. They’re tearing into each other in the clouds, and rain pours down on me as I watch, my mouth parting. I’m so busy looking at the war, seeing my first glimpse of this beast that the vampyres ride, that I ignore the feeling someone is watching me. I turn around too late and see one of them flying right towards us.

With a vampyre rider I know very well. Prince Emyr. Even with the miles between us, fear slams into me as our eyes meet. I was wrong. Ziven isn't anything like Emyr, and now that I'm faced with Emyr, I know deep down that I have to get away. The Silkvir he rides is gigantic and bigger than Maeve, with huge wings of spikes and a rotting body of bones. It roars, snapping its teeth as Maeve turns to face him. She opens her mouth, pure red fire plummeting out of her and shooting across the sky like a star. Hettie screams as I push her down, covering her body, and the heat of the fire washes over me, making me feel like I'm burning.

The Silkvir flies right through the fire like it's not there and slams straight into Maeve.

I scream at the same time she cries out. They both spin round in the sky as the wind moves so fast past us, and I scream, holding onto Hettie and Maeve's scales. One spin, and I'm thrown right off her back with Hettie in my arms. The treeline comes up too fast, too quick, and all I can do is turn my body to hit it first and try to save Hettie.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:21 am

If you have read this far, all the way to the end, know you are from the Twilight Dynasty and a royal of the oldest blood. Your red and black hair is a promise from the only deity left free in the sky...

The Silkvir are brutal, disgusting creatures, and they swarm my dragon the moment we take off. I don't know how the king made these things, but they are nothing compared to the beauty of a dragon. They are made of mostly bones and rotting flesh, and they stink too. I almost gag on the smell as one of their bodies slams into Brythan's wing and leaves a line of blood that is as black as the night sky. The Silkvir don't fly in groups or formations, they just attack like wild, desperate animals. It might give us the upper hand if we can take them out one by one instead of a controlled group.

There are so fucking many of them. I can't see through them to see where Maeve is with Story and Hettie. I fucked up and Story hates me. I did the right thing, but I should have told Story. I shouldn't have let my fear of losing her cloud my judgment. Because the way she looked at me...fuck, I was crushed.

Brythan snaps his teeth around the bony neck of a Silkvir, the vampyre rider falling off the saddle on its back and into the forest. For every one my dragon tears into, five more appear. I sent my riders to protect the fae escaping, and I don't regret my choice now as I watch the chaos at the front lines of the war. The barrier is gone completely, and the beasts have just torn through it.

My dragon is fast enough to get out of the crowds of Silkvir and into the sky, gliding into a clearing. My eyes are drawn to a row of Sun dragons fighting the Silkvir at the front line, and Daegan's dragon is easy to spot in the middle. Ten Silkvir dive on us

from above, and I'm fucking done. I pull moonlight from the ground, from the sky, and send them into the Silkvir's disgusting bodies of rot, tearing them apart. Their bones fall and shatter in the sky, and their vampyre riders scream as they fall or burn. Breathless, I nearly fall forward on my dragon.

Story. I need to find her and make sure she is safe. As long as she gets away, nothing else matters to me. We search the skies from above, but I can't see her. Maeve is big enough that even with the hundreds of dragons flying around, I should see her. Where the hell are they?

I check the forest, looking round the forest floor by the entrance to the dragons' home, but it's empty. I see Catherine's dragon being chased by dozens of Silkvir, and she dives to the sea to escape them. Maeve isn't there. A shiver goes down my neck, and I look around.

An old enemy flies on his Silkvir towards me. A face I haven't seen in hundreds of years, and time hasn't been good to this ugly fucker. The Dawn king used to be a young king with the world at his fingertips, but he chose to change himself into this vampyre for more power and time. It is going to cost him everything. I'm not locked in that mansion anymore.

His Silkvir is much bigger than my dragon. The king's Silkvir is as big as a fucking mansion, and it flies as fast as a shooting star. Brythan doesn't blink and charges to meet this new enemy head-on, fire breathing out of his mouth. The king's Silkvir moves fast, diving to the side and its claws sinking into Brythan. The sickening crunch of bone and cutting skin will stay with me as time freezes for me. I see the death hit, the way the Silkvir claws are so deep, and he flings Brythan away into the skies. Time speeds up as fast as the wind around me as I shout, clenching my legs and holding onto Brythan with everything I have.

We both smack straight into the forest, with Brythan on his stomach, knocking over a

line of trees until enough of them stop our descent. My ears ring as dust, dirt and leaves blow around me like a storm, and I slide from his back.

When everything settles, I get a good look at my dragon. The dragon I've been bound to for hundreds of years, who knows me better than anyone, is dying. "No!" I half scream, half shout. The maddening scream that echoes out of me reminds me of the same feeling I had when I held my sister as she died. I can't lose him too. I fall to my knees with a thump. There's a massive gaping hole in his chest, blood pouring out into the dirt. I can actually see his heart beating in his chest.

He turns his head on his side with a cry that breaks me. I crawl the final distance to him and rest my head on his nose. "This is my fault. Fuck, this is all my fault."

There is no way known to save a dragon, and no amount of magic will help. Moonlight wraps around me in my anger, in my hate for the vampyres and the vampyre king. He fucking did this. I run my hand up to under his eye. I feel the goodbye in his words echoed in my mind, "It's over for me. I was only ever meant to be your first dragon."

"My only dragon!" I echo back. "You can survive this, Brythan."

"I will not, King Ziven, but you will. I chose you because you are strong. You are strong and you are good. I chose you because you will make any decision to save your people. The next dragon that chooses you will see that in time. You are the last king of the Moon Dynasty, and it has been my honour to serve."

Embers dance out of his mouth as he takes his last breath, and I scream, my forehead pressing into his nose. I scream and scream for the deities to hear me, but they don't. They won't bring my dragon back. My heart shatters as I stop and lean away from his body. My dragon's dead. The hollow pain I feel in my chest takes over.

A roar, a dragon's roar, makes me look into the sky. It's not Maeve. "Story." The king will be after her next, and Maeve...she might be taken down like Brythan. Story isn't safe. With one more look at my dragon, I make myself stand. "May the deities ride you now, my old friend. I will fly with you once again."

I remember my father saying those words to his dragon before he died, and I never once imagined myself saying them. Or how it would feel. My chest feels like it has a hole in it where our bond should be, and it's just gone. It kills me to walk away from him, but he's only a body now. His soul, the one that I spoke to, that is gone. I barrel through the forest, straight towards the feeling of where Story is. I have to warn her, even if she hates me. I can't save my dragon, but I can save my mate.

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And he is waiting. He planned this all, and one day the dragons will come back to the world of Pennitan.

Two powerful descendants of Twilight will hold the books.

The books are the other deities, Sun and Moon, trapped within the pages...

This is how you free them...

There's blood in my mouth, and I cough it out, my lungs and ribs screaming in pain with the movement. The unimaginable pain shooting straight up my bones in my leg is the worst and makes my eyes pop open, even as everything spins. Thick drops of blood slide down my eyebrow, and I brush it away with the back of my hand. Everything hurts too much, and I can't remember for a second what happened. I was flying with Maeve...and Hettie.

We crashed because of Emyr and his Silkvir. Hettie. I hear a slight cry, and I sit up, my body shaking as the world comes into view. I almost wish it didn't. Maeve is crashed on the forest floor with trees sticking through her beautiful red wings, blood pouring out of them, and she isn't awake. Deities, please save my dragon. Hettie...is being held up by Emyr. He's got his hand wrapped around Hettie's neck, holding her up in front of me in the air as she cries and wiggles to get free. Pure fear spills through my body and washes the pain away. I'm not scared for me. What is left of me at this point? Something feels very wrong in my body, and I bet I have internal injuries from the landing. Hettie, thank the deities, doesn't look too bad. A few cuts and scratches, but that's it.

I don't care what this monster does to me anymore, but if it's the last thing I do, I'll save her. For Ziven. For that innocent, sweet little girl to have a future. I clamp my teeth down as I stare up at my personal monster, who has me again. "Let her the fuck go, Emyr."

He blinks at me, and I realise I haven't shouted at him before. I've always been too scared, but I'm not anymore. I've changed and grown stronger. I'm too strong for him to break, no matter what he does to me. "No. Aren't you happy to see me?"

Is he fucking kidding me? "No. I hoped you were dead."

He looks shocked, and it only confirms to me that he is crazy. His features harden, and I instantly want to hide, run and cower like I always did when he was angry. But I'm not his victim anymore. I won't let him take me, and when I promised myself that, I meant it. "This place has you under some disbelief that running away would ever mean that you do not belong to me. You do."

I lift my head. "I belong to no one, especially not you. My body, my mind and my blood are mine. You are nothing to me." He tightens his hand on Hettie, who starts screaming, sobbing and thrashing in his arms. "Let her go!" I beg, holding my hands up. "Please, please."

"I'll let her go, but only if you come with me." He smirks. He won't be smiling soon. "You're going to be my bride. Mine forever." I don't know what his idea of forever means, but it turns my blood cold. It makes me terrified, absolutely fucking terrified. I look at Hettie's terrified face, and I see myself at her age. I see a young little girl that deserved nothing that she got. I can't let her die. My life for hers seems like an easy trade.

I nod to Emyr. "You can have me." What's left of me, I don't add.

He drops her straight onto the ground. Hettie runs to me, flinging her arms around my

neck, and I breathe in her scent one more time. I hold her one more time for strength and whisper in her ear, “Hettie, you need to run in the forest. Don’t stop until you find a fae, and then tell them who you are. Sun or Moon, you’re their princess. Do you understand?”

She shakes her head in my chest. “I’m not leaving you!” Her voice is cracked, her throat swollen and red.

I tilt her face up to look at mine. “I love you too. You need to run into the forest, and don’t look back. Catherine is out there. Please, just go.” I push her away from me, even if it’s the last thing I want to do. I want to hold her to me and never let go. Not when the sky is at war and there are monsters in that forest fighting. She is still better off than here. Emyr could change his mind at any moment, but he hates children.

She looks at me with tears falling down her cheeks and turns, running into the forest until I can’t see her anymore. Maeve. I look at her and wish she would wake up, help me somehow, but I know deep down, she can’t. She is seriously injured, just like I am, and she will heal. I will not.

I turn to face him. Him, the monster who tormented me for years. Him who abused me and hurt me. “Where’s my mother?”

He smiles widely as he takes a step closer. I take one away from him. “Oh, you heard that lie. I never had her. I knew she existed all along, but your mother’s pretty sneaky. I never did manage to find her, but it would have been fun if I did. I only told Kyrell that to make sure you’d come back, but it seems you’re more heartless than I thought. I do like this side to you, Story.”

I slip the dagger out of my thigh while the prince goes on and on. I only heard that he doesn’t have my mother. Ziven, forgive me for this. I wish I could tell you I’ll always love you, even when you fucked up. This black dagger was a gift from Ziven, but I don’t think he intended it for this. I’m not leaving with Emyr. “Did you know I hated

you?”

He takes a step forward, and his fangs slip out. “You won’t hate me anymore.”

I laugh in his face. I have nothing to lose anymore. My dragon is injured, Ziven is...I don’t know where, but he can’t save me from Emyr. I won’t be taken by him. My body is crumbling, and I know I’m going to die. No healer is going to be able to fix me. “Did you know that every moment you touched me, I felt disgust? Every moment that you were close to me, all I felt was hate. Not love, not acceptance. You will never find anybody who hates you as much as I do, Prince Emyr. I had freedom back there, I had love, I had everything that was real. I found out I actually like sex when it’s with someone I love, and I found out who I was born to be. You are nothing to me, and no matter what you do to my body, you will never leave a long-lasting mark on my heart like others did.”

“Story!” He snarls like an animal, his eyes glowing with anger that bleeds to surprise as I slam the dagger straight into my neck. I don’t want to die or kill myself, but if I am dying, it will be my choice. This is the last thing I can choose for my own life, and death is better than being his blood slave again. The pain is instant and I choke on my blood as I pull the dagger out and fall to my knees. Emyr picks me up, putting his hand over my neck as pure blood pours out on his fingers. I don’t want to die.

“And you won’t.” My head rolls back in his arms, and I watch the sky full of dragons and stars. He shoves something into my mouth, a vial of something bitter that sticks to my tongue. It tastes like bark and magic. I scream and thrash as my body suddenly burns. He doesn’t let me go. “Death can’t take you, my vampyre queen. You’re my immortal story.”

Keep Reading here with Book Three ? —