



A Story of Mates and Temptation (The Lost Fae Riders #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When trapped between the sun and the moon by fate, can I ever be free?

I used to thinking surviving was all I could do to thrive, but when Emyr captures me, I learn my life could get much worse. The mansion is gone, burnt into nothing, and the dragon riding fae are scattered across Pennitan. Our army, our one chance to win, is lost with them.

Maeve is injured,

Ziven is missing,

Hettie is with King Daegan...Now my only hope is the books, and the deities locked away within them.

The vampyres have ruled for too long and the fae will not be slaves forever. I am Story Dehana, a lessborn fae, a blood slave, a dragon rider and finally a descendant of the lost Twilight Dynasty.

I will go down in dragon fire.

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The deities are three. The sun, the moon and the twilight between.

There's a taste in my mouth I can't quite get rid of. It's bitter, disgusting, and no matter how much I roll my tongue around, it stays. Vampyre. It reminds me of Emyr, of what it was like for him to kiss me when I was dying inside and mentally wishing I was anywhere else. It reminds me of all the years I felt dead and cold—alone. I open my eyes, the lids dry and crusted, and my hand immediately goes to my throat, remembering the dagger—Ziven's dagger—that I slid straight into it. Death isn't warm; in fact, it's humid and strange here. I feel silk sheets around my body, and a tight fabric wrapped around me.

Am I a vampyre now?

It's the only way I could have survived and still be alive. I can hear my heart beating in my chest, or at least, I think I can. Maybe I've lost my mind. I was stupid to think I could kill myself in front of Emyr, the vampyre prince obsessed with me, and he wouldn't try to save me. He wanted me to be a vampyre, after all. He wanted me, and nothing was going to stop him. I made the right choice not to fight him in the forest, knowing it would have cost Hettie her life. That sweet girl was worth whatever is coming for me now. The deities have decided not to be kind to me and let me die, but at least I'm not a vampyre. I don't think.

I lift my hand into the light, seeing my skin is pink and not drained of colour at all. There's no paleness to it—nothing more than usual. I don't feel hungry, beyond the usual hunger for food, and if I were a vampyre, surely, I would want blood and death? I saw what it did to Kyrell and how it made him insane for blood, how it was all he would think about.

Kyrell is gone. The fact he isn't here anymore doesn't seem real; it seems foreign and lost, and I'm not sure how to ever process that he has left this world for good. He was in pain; I knew that, but I hoped I'd be able to find a way to heal him with the books or just some way. He was my best friend, my person in this world I could trust to make me smile when everything was failing. I don't think I'll ever be able to not see Ziven ending his life in front of me.

My hand lifts to my teeth. No sharp canines. Nothing different at all.

"I'm not a vampyre." My voice is broken and cracked, like I screamed for too long. It's happened enough times I recognise the sound, but this time, it's from the scar on my neck, the line I can feel has healed, but it will leave a permanent mark of how I tried to end my life before he could get me again.

"Much to my disgust, it's not something to be delighted about, Story Dehana." I turn my head to the side and see Emyr sitting at the edge of the bed on my left. The bitter monster prince I escaped is casually resting at the end of the bed, dressed in a dark, blood-red shirt and black trousers. His crown, a red jewelled spiked crown, is sitting in his pale silver hair. His eyes aren't on me, and I'm thankful I don't have to look at the light blue irises of my nightmares.

Instead of on Emyr, or the doom I feel spreading around my chest at the sight of him, I focus elsewhere. The room isn't somewhere I've been before and that's not good. I don't have a chance to escape somewhere new. The silk sheets are unfamiliar, red, like the short, tight nightdress I'm wearing. The castle walls are yellow brick, glimmering like stars in the bright light shining in from outside. It's bright out there, and it hurts to look for more than a second.

I can smell my blood in the air, thick and heavy, and little else over it except for the stink of the Silkvir. The rotting smell hangs on Emyr. There's a big balcony door overlooking what I assume is sand outside. A gentle, warm breeze blows in through

the willowy curtains. When Emyr looks at me, my heart pounds in pure fear, and the smile on his face tells me he is happy about that reaction. He likes it when I'm scared out of my mind. For a moment, I feel like the same blood slave who was trapped under him for years. Those endless years of misery and not a moment of hope. "It's all going to be fine, my Story. My father's on his way to meet you, and we'll figure out what went wrong in your moment of madness. I forgive you for trying to leave this world after all of the misery of being trapped in that mansion."

"Do you think it was madness?" I ask with a laugh on the tip of my tongue. I don't see him as this terrifying vampyre anymore. I see him for exactly what he is—nothing. I'm not scared of him anymore. My heart slows as I realise that the past is not now and I'm not some weak, untrained girl anymore. I was taught to fight. I won a dragon. He can't make me weak again. "I wanted to die and get away from you. It wasn't madness."

He's on me in a flash, his body pressing into mine, and he is strong. Too strong for me to fight him off, but I scream and fight, anyway. Disgust rolls through me as his hand wraps around my throat and his lips slam down on me as I struggle underneath him, trying to get away, but he kisses me deeper, pushing his tongue into my mouth. I want to be sick.

All I can taste is him—and that bitter, horrible taste. They are the same thing and I hate it. I hate every moment of it.

"As much as I want you," he growls, pushing himself against my thigh, "when we are married, I will have all of you. I want my wife." He tightens his grip on my throat. "I know you don't love me like I love you, but you're so young, Story. In time, you will find loving me is the best way for us. I love you."

"You don't know what the word means!" I spit out the words between heated breaths. "I don't fear you, and I will not bend to you anymore. I will spend every day of my

life here fighting you, endlessly, until you see that I will never love you. Never. The Story you broke and tried to destroy is gone. Good fucking riddance. Who I am now, she is exceptional, and I fought for her.”

His eyes flash with anger and rage, but I don’t stop. “The Story who you beat, raped and destroyed ever since you met her is gone,” I continue, staring up at him. “I’m a dragon rider now. I am fae. I will never be a vampyre, and you’ll never own me. You can do what you want with my body. You’ve already done it before, and it changed nothing. I forgot about you the second I met my mate and was with him. He taught me what love is and what sex is really like. You are nothing. I will never love you. I will never want you. You are nothing to me.”

His hand strikes me hard across the face, and his other hand tightens on my neck. I know I’m playing with fire, but I’ve lost so much now, I can’t find it in myself to care. I’ve snapped. My neck jerks with the force of the hit, but I just laugh as my cheek stings and I struggle to breathe. “Being a fucking bitch is going to do nothing but piss me off, Story!” He grabs me out of the bed and throws me against the wall by my hair, yanking out strands of it as I scream. Pain radiates down my shoulder as I hit the stone, and I feel a rib snap. He climbs off the bed, stomping toward me.

“That it?”

“I only enjoy breaking you,” he snarls like an animal, his voice low and dangerous. “You know I enjoy that. Stop fucking laughing at me!”

I glare at him and grin. “Do it. I don’t care.”

He shakes his head. “I should have kept that little girl to tame you, but don’t worry, when I find her with the rest of them, I’ll make sure she is here to make you behave. Your soft heart is stronger than your new resolve to die.” My laugh stops. “Whoever decided to fuck you, whoever you smell like—well, I’ll tell you this—he is dead. I

will find him and end him in front of you. Only I get to have you, Story. Only me.”

“You’ll never break me again and you’ll never own me.” Even I don’t believe it now. Not when he knows I have a weakness—Hettie. I sent her running into the forest, but for all I know, he could find her anyway. Some random fae might have taken her in, a helpless child, but if Emyr puts out word that he is looking for a child with her description and reward, they will give her up.

His eyes narrow. “I’m going to fuck that spirit right out of you,” he spits. “I’ll teach you exactly how and why you belong to me.”

A voice interrupts. “Son.”

My eyes widen as the king enters the room, and immediately the room feels wrong. I remember him—remember him killing my friend like it’s happening right in front of me all over again and I can’t stop it. Like it’s real and cold, and he is just stopping Kyrell from being free. I remember him ripping his heart out of his chest in the most brutal way, the spray of his blood, the joy in his dead eyes at the sight of death.

Nothing’s really changed about the immortal king, with a crown nestled on his head. Except now he has creatures flying in the sky, and he found the mansion with the dragon-riding fae. I hope he doesn’t have the books. Catherine and Avaluna might have successfully gotten away with them in the madness of the attack. We lost so much, but we had to keep the books safe. I just read the last page, the one where it told me the books were actually deities and alive, bound to the pages. I read how to free them too. I’m not sure freeing the deities would be good for the world, not when they have likely gone insane from being bound to the books for so long.

“It’s been very long since I saw the prince—now king—of the Moon Dynasty. I smell him on you.” The king pauses and cocks his head to the side. Ziven. “I enjoyed ripping his dragon apart and watching him fall from the sky. I doubt he survived the

fall and the death of his dragon.” No. No. No. His dragon is dead? Ziven...no, he is alive. I can feel our connection in my chest, still alive and burning, like the first moment I met Ziven. I can feel him out there because he is my destined mate, and he is not dead. I’d know. But Brythan? His dragon... Deities above.

At least I know he won’t risk coming after me and being killed by them. He wouldn’t be able to get me without a dragon, and Maeve was hurt. She won’t be coming either. I want them safe. It’s best this way. Hopefully, he doesn’t come after me. I want him safe—even after everything he did. Even after killing my best friend. I love him. I want to see him again someday. I need him.

“He must have manipulated her somehow. She loves me—” Emyr is cut off by the king’s laugh.

“You can’t break a dog with beatings and expect it to love you when a kinder owner offers a hand.” The king turns his eyes on me, and I feel the coldness, right down to my bones.

“I’m not a dog,” I snap.

“I’m so sorry, father. She’s running her mouth, and it is unlike her.” Emyr steps closer to me. “Her time in the mansion has corrupted her mind against me.”

The king moves like a ghost towards me. His presence is too much because it feels wrong. Empty. He walks straight over to where I’m crouched on the floor by the stone wall that I was thrown into. “I won’t hurt you.”

“How many fae have you looked in the eyes and said that to and still hurt them?” I sarcastically question.

He doesn’t even pause to answer. “Hundreds. Thousands, maybe. I don’t know or

care.”

I rise to my feet on my own, my hands shaking under the full weight of his stare.

“You look like her,” he murmurs, his gaze searching my face. My eyes. My hair. He seems to spend a long time looking at me and seeing the past. I know who he means, the princess who he married and then destroyed with hate. He never loved her and he chose to be a vampyre and burn the world down instead. “But you’re more beautiful. Different. That same determination in your eyes is there across your souls. It’s no wonder my son became so invested in you. If I’d seen you, I’d have been invested too.”

He moves a step closer and I press myself against the wall to escape any way I can. “I’m sure you’ve heard all the horrible things about me from my last blood slave. Avaluna.” He looks at my hair and picks up a lock, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger. I swear there is longing in his voice when he says her name. I know she is free and she won’t be coming back to him. Calix will never let him close. “I know she was corrupted into leaving my side, but I had plans for her. She was not like the others.”

“She never spoke about you,” I say coldly, knowing it will hurt him more than anything else I could say.

His eyes flicker, but he doesn’t rise to the bait. He drops my hair though, and I’m glad for it.

“She’s mine,” he says simply, before sitting at the edge of the bed and gazing out the window. “I will have her again.”

My heart races as I press myself against the cold stone wall, trying to steady my breathing.

“The world is changing,” he says, almost to himself. “My Silkvir are spread across the lands where the mansion once stood and here in the East where the Sun kings once ruled. The lands of the Moon are going to be no more, but their city is nothing but dust now. The fae who escaped are running, hiding from my creatures. It’s futile for them to escape and hide. I plan to level the entire land with fire and start anew. Build a brilliant city for my son and heir...and for you to rule beside him, Story Dehana. With you at my son’s side, as princess of the vampyres, the hope inspired by your name will die and the fae will stop looking to you for a hero to save them.” He pauses. “And once I have Avaluna back, she will be my new queen. Two of your kind ruling with us, as it should be.”

I force my voice to remain steady, though anger burns as hot as a dragon within my chest. “And where exactly do the kings of the fae—the real kings—fit into that vision? Do you honestly think King Daegan and King Ziven will bow to you? The dragons too? The fae are done with being slaves, and rebellions will always happen. We are done being your food, your slaves.”

His head tilts slightly, amused by my defiance. “And you speak for all of them, do you? I’m sure not every fae is so enamoured with your opinion. Freedom? They were freed from one type of ruler and given another. Buried kings used them as slaves, too. No, they haven’t truly been free before.”

I bite back the response rising in my throat, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of my anger. He wants me to react.

His expression changes like smoke in the wind. “I’m surprised you haven’t asked why you didn’t turn, Story?”

My blood is so cold I’m not fully convinced I’m not turning into a vampyre at this very moment. “Why didn’t I?”

“You died,” Emyr demands, his gaze flicking to me. “I felt it. You died in my arms, with vampyre blood already in your system from me, and it should have worked.” He grabs the bed base. “I brought you back here, expecting you to turn within hours. But you didn’t. Instead, you healed. Every wound on your body—every mark, even the one on your neck where you tried to kill yourself to escape me—closed as if they were never there. Still fae and perfectly fine, despite death.”

I say nothing, but his words send a chill through me that I can’t shake off.

“She’s a Twilight heir, and it would never have worked on her,” the king murmurs with a certainty I don’t like. Twilight heir? What exactly does that mean?

The king’s eyes narrow on me. “The red hair. The eyes of green like a fire that burned in the city, right outside the royal households. There were twelve noble families with the purest of blood when the world fell to its knees for me. She is a descendant of a noble household. Twilight blood is rare. Most of the Twilight Dynasty has been diluted. You’re one of them.”

He rises, his steps measured as he heads to the balcony. Sweat sticks to my skin from the heat. “The vampyre blood we give to turn others only works on those without the blood of deities. The Twilight Dynasty carries the blood of those gods, and it is what made them different. You don’t need to be a vampyre to achieve immortality when it is in your blood already. You can live as long as you wish. But the perfection of your bloodline had its flaws,” he continues with a cruel smile, his eyes dropping to my stomach. The cycles, the infertility. I read about it for the princess and now for me. I never got to ask Avaluna if she suffered like I do. “This one is broken, isn’t she? Like my wife was, and there was never a cure. If you’re looking for heirs, Emyr, you may need to search elsewhere.”

“I’ll make heirs for us to raise as our children. No one will know,” Emyr replies coldly, his eyes locked on mine. “This one is still mine. She always will be.”

The king nods, satisfied. “Very well. The wedding will be tomorrow. Let her have this one last day where she believes she’s free. Perhaps I should have offered your mother that courtesy. She might not have betrayed me if I had.”

Emyr doesn’t flinch at the jab, his face impassive.

“Her funeral is today,” the king continues. “Tomorrow, a wedding. A symbol of progress after winning the war.” He looks to the sky. “Before my own wedding to Avaluna, of course.”

Their words blur together in my mind as panic rises like a drum. Beat. Beat. Beat. The realisation hits me like a crashing wave along a cliff side—Emyr is going to force me to marry him tomorrow. I have no plan, no escape from this place, and I’ll end being his bride. I don’t want that and I’d rather die, but it seems like I can’t even have that option.

I can’t feel Maeve.

I know she’s alive—I can feel it somewhere deep within me—but I can’t reach her, and without my dragon, I can’t fight my way out of this. I’m trapped.

My back slides down the wall as they leave, their words fading, and I can barely hear them. Only when I hear Ziven’s name do I snap out of it. “That king, Ziven, and the other one are still missing. Along with too many dragons and fae. After the wedding, I want to return to hunt them down.”

“We will find them, but I do not feel they are a threat anymore.” The king is confident and my stomach drops like a rock. “Where else could they go? We will find what is left of them and destroy them. We won’t be stopped.”

“No one can stop us and I am glad of it,” Emyr echoes his father, looking back at me.

I want to be sick again. I'm a prize to him. I always have been, and now he has me back exactly where he wants me. Kyrell won't be there to pick the pieces up this time.

He's won. It almost feels like it was all for nothing. I can't get out of here and I still don't even know where I am. I feel the trickle of hot blood sliding down my forehead, and I wipe it away, staring at my blood marking my hand as it shakes. I want to be strong and pretend I'm not scared, but I am. I'm tired and scared. A sob echoes out of my throat as I wrap my arms around my knees and rest my head against them. I pray to the deities, even when I know they can't hear me because they are trapped within pages of a magic book.

I pray to them anyway. Not for me.

For Ziven.

My life is over, but his—he has to be okay. Because I love him, and if anything can survive this world, it has to be him. Even if I might not.

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Chapter Two

King Ziven

Page Two. My family wish for a rebellion in the name of the gods, but I only see my small baby in my arms. A rebellion would undoubtedly cost her...or free her.

“Wake up.” I look up to see Ruelle leaning over me, her hands glowing in the brightness of magic as she continues to heal me. For a delusional moment, I don’t see Ruelle but Story. Her long red hair flowing around her slender shoulders, the glare of her bright green eyes as she argued with me and ended up in my arms, my lips on hers. Branding her as mine. Protecting her as mine, too. The limited time we had together and how it went too quickly—and ended with her hating me. Killing Kyrell was a mercy. A promise I made...but it cost me too much. It cost my Storm, and I fucked up royally. In every way that mattered.

Recently, I let myself think of a future with her. A house I’d build for her, with a massive library for her to collect books from all over the world as we travelled and I showed her everything she never got to see. I want to see her happy, well-travelled and living a life she deserved. I wanted to be by her side for all of it, riding our dragons together...but that future is as shattered as this world.

“I nearly thought you died on me, and I’d be forever known as the shit healer who couldn’t save the legendary Moon king.” She hits my arm, she sobs slightly. Ruelle is the role model I never once deserved. “You scared me, you silly boy.” She’s breathless with every word. “You can talk, Ziven. I’ve been alone with your half-dead body for long enough.”

“Ruelle...thank you,” I groan, noting the fact my body feels bruised and battered, but I’m not dead. As long as I’m breathing, I’m finding Story. I’m helping her. I ease myself up against a rock, glancing around the cave. The dragon’s eyes watch us from the shadows. Her dragon isn’t far, and I doubt her dragon is the only one here watching. My dragon. Brythan. I close my eyes for a moment, praying to the deities to care for him and let us see each other again in the afterlife. His last words will haunt me to the day I die.

“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.”

I focus on the present because my past is full of death, and if I linger there too long, I won’t find a way out. Ruelle is covered in ash from her head to toes, and her clothes are burnt in many places, but I can’t see if she is hurt. “Are you injured?”

“No.” She shifts back against the wall. “Just tired. You were gravely injured after your dragon fell from the skies.” She grunts, and I know the stubborn woman is lying about being hurt. Age has only made Ruelle more stubborn. “You passed out with your dragon not long after the fall. You were lucky I was close. A blessing from the deities in the sky, and I’m glad I was there to stop those disgusting creatures from finding you.” She swallows hard. “They haven’t found this place. It seems to be protected from them, but the mansion...” She shakes her head and picks up her walking stick, dragging it to her lap. “They burnt it down. It’s still burning even now.”

It’s gone. It was a trap for me and my people, but it was a home, too. A safe place for thousands. “Our people?”

She can only shrug her shoulders.

“Story. I can sense her out there.” I pause, struggling to find words. “I need to get?—”

Ruelle interrupts me, something she rarely does. “But I saw him, that vampyre—taking her. Through the eyes of my dragon, I saw it in the sky. He has her.”

Cold fury flickers through my chest...and fear. He will hurt her, he has done in the past, and long ago I made a promise to her that I’d protect her. I love every inch of that woman, and I can’t let that vampyre touch a hair on her head. “I have to go.”

“And where do you think you’re going without a dragon, boy?” Ruelle’s voice is sharp as I stand. “I didn’t raise you to be a stupid king who risks everything.”

“You raised me to protect my people. To protect Hettie.” My eyes snap to Ruelle. “Tell me Hettie’s still alive,” I ask. When she nods, I narrow my eyes, refocusing. “Story. Story is my mate, my entire reason for living, and I won’t let her die with that sick fucking vampyre.”

“Story...” Ruelle’s face softens. “If anyone can escape and survive, it will be her. If she were here now, would she want you to risk your life and likely die in an attempt to save her without a dragon...or do something to protect your surviving people, the fae who are holding on by nothing but faith.”

“She did everything to escape him. He can’t have her back. He’ll kill her. He’ll hurt her.” My voice drops to a whisper as I feel sick at the thought. “He’ll do worse than killing her.”

“Ziven.” She grabs my arm. “I know that. But you need a new dragon.” She pulls a necklace from around her neck and holds it out to me, a vial of ash hanging in the air between us. “While I was waiting for you to wake up, between my healing... It’s

been over—what—two days now. No, that’s not right.” She hesitates as she counts. “It’s been over a week since the attack.”

“A week?” My stomach drops. “A fucking week. A week he’s had his hands on her. A week where he could be hurting her. Again. A fucking week.”

I collapse to my knees, running my hands over my face. “I failed her. I failed everyone.” My voice cracks. “I can feel her in my heart, in my fucking soul, and I would walk to the ends of the earth for her. If that is my last moments, then so be it.” I don’t look at Ruelle anymore.

She steps closer, tired and weary, and places the necklace around my neck. “The ashes of your dragon, here, next to your heart. You’ll do something extraordinary and I’ll guide you, Ziven. Like I always have done. Come with me.” I follow her through the caves until we get to a place that has always made my blood feel cold. Right in the centre of a domed cave is a pit, dug into the ground with a red ring drawn around the edges. Brythan isn’t warning me not to go near it this time. My mother’s warnings of this place echo in my mind. The home of the legendary shadow dragons, who have never been ridden by anyone and aren’t alive. They are beings of shadow and nothing else.

Ruelle stops when we are standing by the edge. “When you were born, I had a vision of you here, and I told you to jump. I didn’t know if it was real, and then one day, I was speaking with your mother. She knew you would have a mate in the Twilight Dynasty, and only mates of the Twilight Dynasty would stand a chance in there. Even I believe the deities are leading us, trying to help us find a way, and they want you to go here. Visions are gifts to us, and magic...it is exceptional, but we know it comes at a price.” She touches my arm, her touch cold even through my burnt leather shirt. “I made sure you trained, you fought and learnt to be wise. I knew this day was coming for me, and it has been...it has been such a privilege to be your family, Ziven.”

A roar echoes from the depths, and my eyes tug to the pit. I can't look away. It's calling to me. "You need to jump in here," she coaxes. "This is how you save them all. This is how you save your mate and make her your queen."

"I will die in there." I can't explain how I know, but a deep feeling tells me as much.

She smiles faintly at me. "Yes, but this isn't about dying...it is about so much more. We need to believe in magic and fate and destiny. Our deities must be freed. We need a king—not of the Moon Dynasty, or the Sun Dynasty, or the fae, or the Twilight Dynasty, or any of the old names. No, we need a King of the Dragons. There's never been one."

The king of the dragons is a myth, an old fairy tale my father once told me about. He explained how there was once a god, so powerful because the dragons made him that way, and he saved our world so the fae could live in peace. It's not real.

"Every title is made up by someone. Make yours a myth, Ziven. You want your mate alive? Your niece? Your people? All of them need a king of legends, because otherwise, the vampyre king will rule. You need to be stronger than anyone who's come before you. You need to be stronger than the dragons." A halo of red glows around her for a moment, but I blink and it's gone.

"My dragon's dead," I whisper.

"Your first dragon, yes," she softly whispers. "And I'm sorry, Brythan was an amazing dragon, but he knew his time had come. You will fly together again one day." She looks me in the eye and cups my face. "I look forward to seeing what you become, and I am always with you."

She disappears as quick as a gust of wind, leaving me alone in the cave. My heart pounds as I stare at the space where she was, and I look in the distance, seeing a body

lying at the foot of a dragon. Ruelle's dragon. "No!" I don't know how it was possible she was here, but it was a gift. She wanted to save me and say goodbye, to lead me here. I look up at the top of the cave, imagining the stars. Goodbye, Ruelle. I wrap my hand around the necklace and think of Story—her long red hair, her beautiful curvy body, and her smile that makes me feel alive. I remember how she transformed from a woman who turned up at the mansion, broken—literally broken down to her soul and covered in enough scars to show her battles.

I thought no one could come back from that.

I wanted her to. Desperately. I thought I could push and push and push until she came back from the brink. Fuck, she did, and I fell in love with her. She came back fiery and brilliant. Extraordinary.

If I want to be hers forever, and her mine, then it's time to do something extraordinary, too. I need to be more.

Without another thought, I dive straight into the pit, doing something my ancestors warned every single rider never to do.

As I fall into the darkness, I hear the blast of wings in the air. "You're going to die down here, King Ziven."

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Chapter Three

Catherine

Page Three. I love my wife, even if powerborn and lessborn cannot be forever. Our child is our only forever.

I stare at the box right in front of me, wondering what the hell happened as I wake up in a haze. It's the first thing I see when I sit up, rubbing my head and feeling a lump there, along with several cuts. My body is sore everywhere, but I struggle to remember what happened until it hits my mind like a brick. I was flying away from the mansion with the book that was locked in the box, which Story gave to me to protect, when three of those creatures got to us. My dragon took one of them with fire and the other with his claws. The third one managed to bite his leg, and we went down with it. I remember screaming, falling, and then just nothing. My dragon's grumble makes me aware of the warmth at my back—my dragon. I look at him, seeing his leg has a bandage, a worn black fabric with holes in it, wrapped tight around the bite. "I am well. I will fly tomorrow."

My shoulders drop as Ululia's voice echoes in my mind. He is okay. But still, how? Someone had to have helped us, and where are we? It's cold, but I am covered in old blankets, which is keeping off the chill, along with the warmth from my dragon. As I look around, I realise we're in some kind of broken house in the forest still... The forest trees have grown up through it, creating a makeshift roof of branches and leaves. Light flickers through in streams, making it strangely bright in here. Glancing around, I ask my dragon out loud. "Did you get us in here?"

“No,” comes a different male voice. “I suggested this place. After I watched you and your injured dragon fall from the sky, I caught you,” he continues. “Your dragon followed me in.”

I back up a few steps as the vampyre I saved from the creek walks into the room. The gold sword I pulled out of his stomach is clipped to his back in a holder, and he is very awake. I was right about him being tall. He is towering at over six feet, and he looks even more muscular now he is moving. His arms flex with the movement as he crosses them and meets my eyes. He’s still wearing the same black clothes, torn still on his stomach, and I can see ripples of muscular still pale skin underneath that makes my heart race. His silver locks are curly, bouncing slightly as he moves. His pure red eyes settle on me, and there’s a coldness in his gaze that seems to echo around the room. When he smirks slightly, a flash of his fangs makes me almost jump.

“Before you scream and run away, those flying creatures out there are close and listening always. They are searching the forest every night, but even in the daylight, they are listening,” he warns, and he isn’t smirking now. “At night, they roam with vampyre riders, and you must be silent. The sun will set within the hour.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, vampyre,” I snarl, but I keep my voice quieter than I want. I want to scream and run away. “They are your people riding those things!”

“My people, but not my friends. I’m not on their side, and I do not bow to the king of the vampyres unless forced.” He offers a truth. I don’t know what to make of it. Of him. “I suggest, since it’s nearly night now, that we keep our voices down, stay for the night, and travel in the morning. Your dragon will be able to move by then, I believe.”

She growls low at him. “Not if she doesn’t burn you to flames first, vampyre.”

“Don’t you want to know my name?” He quirks an eyebrow. “Fae, I’m inquiring about yours, and I’ve been thinking of what it could be while you’ve been resting and recovering in my protection.” He draws out the word protection . “I’m sure you told me it but I was struggling to not die.”

“We’ve saved each other. We’re even now.” I cross my arms, mirroring his stance. “I don’t owe you anything.”

He smirks again. It makes his cheekbones look even more chiselled and his entire face just so much prettier. “I’m not used to anyone telling me what to do.”

“You forget which one of us has a dragon?” I push the blankets up and stand, never taking my eyes off him. I touch my thigh, finding my dagger from Story still there. He didn’t take my weapons off me, and that on its own is really confusing.

“True,” he muses. “But I helped your dragon and saved your life. I monitored his wound until it healed, hunted for fabric and blankets, and looked after his rider—you. You had a severe hit to the head and burns on your legs. Also, you brought that cursed box with you. It feels extremely wrong to even be near it.”

I glance at it and shiver. Cursed is one word for it. Even bound with the box, I can feel the book inside, humming and vibrating in the air. I know to touch it would be to sink into madness. “Don’t touch it.”

“I might be pretty, but I’m not dumb. I gather that it is very powerful and likely evil from what I sense.” He pauses. “I’m going to be honest with you about who I am, and maybe then you can tell me something about yourself, too. We might as well have it all out now. Maybe when you know everything, you might trust me.”

“Doubt I’ll ever trust a vampyre.” I shrug a shoulder. “Our races are enemies.”

“I thought I’d say the same about a fae—until one saved my life. Not you. Sorry, you’re the second. No, when I was eight years old, another fae saved me, and it set up my path in life that led me here.” He takes a step forward, his expression unreadable. I get the feeling he doesn’t want to say the next words that leave his mouth. “My name is Prince Nikoloz, son of the king of the vampyres. I’m the fourth son, not the heir, and really, I’m mostly forgotten. It’s a gift to be fourth.”

I take a step backwards and fear locks my body up. I have the book and I’m with a prince of the vampyres. I saved a fucking vampyre prince’s life, and I really shouldn’t have done that. Even now, even knowing who he is, would I make the same choice? All things considered, even in my state of fear and panic, I know he can’t be all evil if he looked after me and didn’t immediately hand me over to his father. “Give me a chance. One conversation and if you want me to leave, I will.”

We stare at each other in silence. For so long I end up focusing on my dragon’s calm breathing. If he is calm, then I can be also. “One conversation, in thanks of saving me.”

“Thought we were even?” He winks and I flush. He walks over to what is left of a stone wall, which likely marked the rooms before, and sits on it. “My father is cruel—he always was. My oldest brother is exactly like him. My mother was not, but she could be cruel to your kind when there wasn’t a choice. My father never gave her a choice. Kindness was a sign to him that she wasn’t the monster he trained her to be. So she became a monster to protect her children. She was indifferent to me most of the time, especially when eyes were watching, but in quiet moments, she was different. She told me that there is a better world to be made—a way forward—and that she would die making sure some of her children live to see it.”

“Did she?” I ask.

“I can hear your heart racing.” He deflects answering my question and, at the same

time, makes me scared. I spot the look in his eyes, a predator hunting prey. “Don’t worry. I found deer in the forest and I’m well fed. I have no interest in biting you. I don’t feed off you fae unless I absolutely have to. I have no interest in it, in causing pain. Not all of us are brought up that way. I know that’s hard for you to believe, but it is true. We don’t all want pain and misery and suffering.”

“Really?” I mutter dryly. “Your brother—I know of your brother. I know what he did to Story Dehana. She may not have told me explicitly, but I know. My best friend was his blood slave.”

“Story Dehana.” His lips twitch. “Even though I’ve only heard the rumours—everyone’s heard the rumours—about her and the absolute fixation my brother seemed to have. Honestly, he was never told no or not loved by anyone in his path. I admire the lessborn fae who ran away and drove him insane.” He rolls his shoulders back. “Now I’m going to tell you a story, and I’ve never told it to anyone else. Let’s share this between us as a mark of trust. The vampyres are currently ruling. The fae are on the run, even the ones with dragons, and my father is winning. I could easily take you back to my father now. I’d get some reward, no doubt, for that box or whatever you are hiding in it. But even then, you just told me your best friend is Story. You’re a beautifully useful bargaining chip for my brother. If anything, I could get everything I ever asked for by taking you to his door.”

My dragon growls low in warning. He hasn’t burned this vampyre to a crisp. If he trusts him here with me, then I should trust his instincts. “Why haven’t you?”

“I’d rather fucking die than see my brother or father lay a finger on you. I’m possessive with little in my life, but the moment I saw you, I decided you’re mine.” Heat flushes through my body. Mine? We barely know each other, and our races are enemies. “That’s me being honest. So, starting over again for us is going to mean starting from the beginning. I need you to understand that I’m not all good. I’ve killed, I’ve made mistakes, and I tried for a few years to be the monster my father

wanted me to be.”

He takes a deep breath, his eyes locked on mine. “A fae saved me when I was eight years old. My father had lost his temper with me because he demanded I kill a bunch of powerborn fae mothers for hiding their children from him. I said no. He left me nearly dead, wounds all over my body—bled me out because I wouldn’t kill like he wanted me to. He said I was a disappointment, and Emyr did it without even blinking. I don’t believe in killing, nor am I interested in it unless it’s protecting myself. There was a female fae servant who found me in a room of bodies, nearly dying. She cut her wrist and let me feed from her, knowing I would not be able to stop until she was dead. I was too weak to fight my natural instinct to survive. She was older, maybe in her fifties or sixties. She had so much grey hair. I don’t remember much else about her, but she died to keep me alive. And it struck me—why would she do that? I became obsessed with knowing why.”

He looks up at the light, a beam that is shining right down on his own arm. His own wrist. “I found her family. They didn’t have an answer. Found her lover. He didn’t know either. I asked everybody, endlessly asked, and never stopped. Until one fae sat down with me in a small drinking bar in the city and told me that she was part of the rebellion. She was in the castle because she was looking for hope in the royal family. It struck me that she wanted me alive because she knew I was different, and I vowed to be from that moment on. Different from my family.” He smiles at me. “Call me Niko. What’s your name?”

“Catherine,” I give him. “And this is my dragon.”

“Catherine.” He repeats my name twice. “I always loved cats. How strange.” He rises to his feet. “There’s a bond between us. Something has called out to me in these forests for years. I think it was something that was drawing me to you, but I could never quite find you.” He pauses, testing my name again. “Catherine.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you, but even knowing?—”

“In that box is one of the magical books my father’s looking for. He’s obsessed with them. I don’t need you to open it to know.” He comes closer, close enough I can smell him. Peppermint lingers around him, mixed with something else. He smells nice, and strangely, not like blood. I don’t know why I imagined he would smell like metal. “I need your trust because I need your dragon’s help. I am telling you to trust me because I know you have that book and you are a priceless prize on your own. I will not take you to my father.”

“What could you need my dragon for, then?” I question.

“I am the leader of the rebellion, and I have a hundred lessborn fae children, all under the age of ten, waiting in the next room to be taken somewhere safe. Their parents got them out of the breeding camp near here and gave them to me to keep safe.” My eyes widen and he points to the door. “I’ve made a box for your dragon to carry, and they can sit inside it. It will be cold, but it’s their best chance for survival.”

I’m still shocked, silent.

“Vampyres found out what I was doing, and they followed me and the children into the forest before the barrier came up. I got them away, fought, but one of them took my sword and slammed it into my stomach before sending me down into the river. I made sure to drag him with me, and I killed him before I passed out. But the deities above—the only true power left—did not want me or the children to die. I believe she saved me by leading me to you...or you to me. The oldest children know how to hunt and gather berries to eat. But they are hungry and sick, and the babies are running out of milk now. We have to leave tomorrow, and if your dragon doesn’t help, Catherine, they will be killed out there. I will die protecting them, too.” He is so close to me now. “I believe that we’re being led together for a reason, and I’m going to protect you, too.”

I walk away from him and to the door he pointed at. I pull it open, just a little, and my eyes widen at all the children. I've never seen so many children before in one place. For years in the mansion, there were no children, and then there was just Hettie, and she was kept hidden by the Moon Dynasty for good reason. There is a fire lit in a hole in the ground, and they all have blankets. Most are sleeping and a few babies are crying softly. The thick walls must keep the sound in. "Ululia, what do you think?" I murmur to him in my mind.

He answers immediately. "The children will slow down our flight, but there is a pull to the far north, away from the king of the vampyres. I know a way to our people, and we must fly high." She huffs smoke out of her mouth. "Your entwined mate will ride on my back this once."

Mate? MATE!? The single word nearly makes me fall to my knees. "But he's a vampyre."

"Fae are clueless." My heart pauses as I look over at him.

"What did he tell you?" he softly asks. "You look pale."

"Nothing," I reply far too quickly. "I need you to make a vow that you will never harm me, or bite me, or any fae."

"I vow it." He places his hand over his heart. "There's a whole rebellion in nearly every vampyre city, who do not want fae as slaves anymore. They care for them. They are protecting them. They're friends with them. Family. They have children with them. There are many who want a cure to vampyrism, perhaps to turn us back into fae, what we were before. Maybe it's possible. But all I know is that I need to see your rulers, and maybe we can make a plan together for a better future. Those children's parents died to get them out, and I took a sword for them too. We can't let them die." He rubs his face. "And for the record, you shocked me too, Catherine."

“If you betray me, I’ll kill you myself,” I mutter.

His smile is seductive—the smile of a vampyre used to getting his way. A spoiled prince, I’d imagine.

But still, his story rings true. I don’t think he’s lying to me. “I’d enjoy letting you, Catherine. My life is yours.”

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Chapter Four

Page Four. The rebellion began today in the blood of more dead. I have to write this down so she can read this one day and understand...

I 'm squeezed into a wedding dress that is fit for a queen—a wedding dress that is pure red like the blood slave I once was. In many ways, I'm now just a blood slave with a title. With a crown stuck onto the top of my head and a lifetime of misery ahead of me. I never wanted this and not even death could save me from it. It's layers upon layers of ridiculous, expensive fabric, so heavy it's hard to walk or even stand as they pull the corset tight around my chest, and the skirts continue to weigh me down. My arms and shoulders are bare, and a heavy red jewel rests around my neck—a gift from the king, as the fae servants tell me. Diamonds are nestled into the chain, and they feel like a symbol of what I am going to become. An expensive chained pet for the prince. Even with a title of princess, I'll have no power. No say in anything I do.

I glance at them in their plain brown clothing as they rush around me, and I see myself in their eyes. They are just as angry, scared, and tired of this endless fight as I am. I fought every day of my life since I was a kid, since I was born in the breeding districts and saw things I wished I hadn't. I want to fight them, to scream, but it's not their fault. The king will likely kill these fae—or have them killed—if they don't manage to get me ready in time. None of this is their fault, and I don't want more blood on my hands.

I didn't sleep last night. Instead, I pointlessly tried to find a way out of this room. I tried every door, even the balcony that looks over nothing but endless deserts of

orange sand. The castle is the same colour as the sand, tall and willowy, with sun symbols etched into every stone. I don't need to ask anyone to know this was Daegan's royal family home. It means I'm in the south, from the little studies I did on maps of the world, but the south is a vast expanse of land, and there is a massive sea between the Moon Dynasty lands and here. I've never seen sand like this, how there is so much of it, and the air is sticky with heat, making me sweat near constantly. It's so warm, like sitting by a fire, but all of the time.

The balcony wasn't a way to escape, as I learnt last night, because it's guarded by four vampyres at all times. Every time I tried to run and leap over the stone railing, they caught me and threw me back inside. The other doors leading out of this room were locked except for the one to the bathroom.

There are no sharp objects anywhere—nothing I could use to hurt myself—because Emyr is now aware I'd rather die than be his.

Before they place the last layer of the gown over the ruffles on the bottom, I find my voice. "I need to use the bathroom first." I'm not lying, I actually do, but I also need every second I can get before facing this fate. This can't be real.

"Of course, Princess," one of the fae women answers. I flinch at the title. I'm not married yet, and that title being used on me feels like tempting fate. Tempting destiny itself. They take off several bits of the skirt, leaving me in the corset and a thinner part of the skirt I can easily carry myself. I feel the weight of too many eyes on me, my skin crawling with a heavy feeling as I make my way to the other side of the room. I know they've seen the bite marks all over me, and I know they likely have them too. Until I went into the mansion, I didn't know there was an adult fae left in this world that hadn't been bitten by a vampyre. I touch my stomach, a memory of Ziven kissing every single one of the bites, and I keep him in my mind for strength as tears fall down my cheeks.

Quickly, I rush to the bathroom, my heart racing, and close the door behind me. I look at myself in the mirror on the opposite wall and immediately wish I hadn't. My red hair has been curled into locks that tumble over my shoulders. The top part is pinned back in four braids, twisted around each other like chains and clipped with a red jewel. Even my face is painted—I have makeup on to make my lashes bigger, my cheeks blushed and lips painted bright red.

I look ridiculous, and I hate it. Sickness rises in my throat, and I push the feeling down. I can't be sick. I've barely eaten anything in days now. I feel a light cramp in my stomach and go to the toilet, putting my head in my hands as I weep until the makeup coats my fingertips. Eventually, when I know my time is running out to hide in here and cry, I sit up. When I glance down, I'm surprised to see my monthlies have come. There's no pain, no anything—just a light cramp.

What in the deities above? A part of me is thankful I'm not in extreme pain, but another part wishes the pain was here. At least the pain could knock me out for a single blissful day of peace from this nightmare. Feeling confused, I open the cupboards but find nothing to help and groan. I have to ask one of the fae servants to fetch something, and they wince when they see the state of my face and all the makeup I've cried away. They return quickly with cotton pads, easy enough to attach to my underwear, before helping me back into the gown and fixing my face.

Even if it is beautifully made, the dress is the colour of blood, and I hate it. The corset down the middle looks like vampyre teeth, forming a line all the way up and around my breasts. It's almost like a cage locking me in. I close my eyes as they finish lacing it and reach for the depths of my mind, for the two single souls in the world that belong to me. Ziven and Maeve, my dragon. My mate.

I reach for Ziven first, and even through the bond that I wish...I wish we'd made permanent, he is there. Echoing to me. I could follow this feeling right to him if I could leave. I love him, and being back here, back caged with Emyr in this horrid life,

has made me realise how foolish I was. I had everything, and now I'm back to a life that Kyrell died to save me from. I can hear Maeve almost echoing in my mind, but she's so distant, so many miles apart from me, and I know deep down she must be hurt or she would have flown to me by now. I hope she isn't, and I'm desperate to get to her, to see her for myself. I can feel them both—but it's like trying to catch embers of a fire within my soul, but the second I'm close, the feeling just fades into ash in my fingers.

I don't even notice the fae servants leaving the room until I open my eyes and see Emyr standing in front of me, and my blood runs cold. "You look stunning," he purrs, dipping his eyes down my body and back up. I want to cut those eyes out. I'm done. I don't know what happens as my anger rises like a storm, don't know where it comes from, but I throw myself at him and punch him in the face. The satisfaction of a crunch powers me into a second punch, and then I let myself lose on him. Hitting, kicking, fighting in the way I've been trained, and he fights me back. I block most of his attacks, even when he is stronger than me. I feel like there is power in my veins, power pushing me forward.

"Stop it! Fucking stop it—you'll rip the dress!" He grabs hold of me and punches me back, straight into my stomach, and I miss the block. Pain radiates through me, and I scream, falling to my knees. He grabs my face roughly, his nails digging into my hair. His red shirt is ripped, his lip has a cut in it that is already healing, and blood is trickling from his nose. "You won't fucking ever do that again!" he hisses into my face, but I'm reeling from the pain in my stomach. "You will be my wife—a queen that people will look up to and see the reason why fae do not win. They will look at you, not as a symbol of rebellion and hope, but as a broken-down blood slave who is proof that escaping and fighting us is pointless. You do that again, and I swear, I will bring in all the fae that just looked after you and behead them one by one. Then I will murder them, one after the other, until that defiance is gone in you. Then I'll find random fae and keep killing them in your name until you behave. Do you understand?"

“You think death scares me?” I spit at him. “They’re already dead. We all are, or might as well be, while your father rules. While vampyres like you are in charge. You don’t scare me anymore, and death will not break me.”

“I should scare you,” he says, his voice cold and dangerous. “I think you’ve forgotten what it’s like to be mine. After this wedding, you will know.”

“No!” I shout, pulling away from him as he reaches for me. He lets me go. I rush to the balcony, but I don’t get far before he grabs my wrist and starts dragging me toward the doors. I fight him every step of the way.

“Enough!” he snarls, pulling me to his chest, and I slap him. Fury burns in his eyes and he screams into my face this time. “Fucking stop it!”

“NO!” I scream back at him, just as the wall collapses around us. Stone and bricks, dust and fire crash down in a thunderous roar, and a dragon’s roar shakes the air. A familiar roar. I scream in pain as several bricks smack into my body, and I fall through the building along with the wall. Dragon claws wrap around me midair, flames cascading everywhere around me like a tornado of fire. Emyr reaches for me, missing the fire by an inch, and his nails tear down my wrist, dragging through my skin and cutting it open, but he doesn’t get me.

I grip the golden scales of the dragon claw as it rises in the air, and its roar blocks out anything Emyr screams at me. I smile, holding on tight, feeling blood pouring down my wrists. I look up, stunned, as we ascend high into the sky until the clouds begin to smother us, and suddenly, there is nothing but cold air, the high sun in the sky, and Daegan’s dragon, complete with its rider, carrying me away into the sky.

“Twist, Odemis—I’ll catch her!” he commands his dragon, and I brace myself for it.

Odemis obeys, tightening his claw as he carries me, and then he dives before he

throws me into the air. I scream, only for a moment, before I land on the dragon's back, Daegan's arms tightly wrapping around me, caging me to him. "Now fly fast. We need to reach our home before the sun sets."

"Why would you do that? You came for me," I shout over the wind, my voice trembling. Daegan swears under his breath, ripping some of my skirts and taking my wrist into his hands.

"You're bleeding all over me." He begins to wrap my wrist tight, stopping the bleeding. "Now, are you hurt anywhere else? We can't stop, but I will try my best to make sure you're comfortable."

"Didn't know you cared enough about me to bother with my comfort or being a hero. Answer what I asked. How did you find me, and why?" I demand. The wind blows his white curls around on his head as he faces me.

"Our souls are bound together as entwined mates," he explains, his grip tight on me. I've only ever ridden with Ziven, and it feels all kinds of wrong flying with Daegan. I'm surprised Odemis let me ride on her at all. "Of course I'd be able to find you. You may hate me forever, but not all of it was a lie for me. I do care. I just...I don't love you, Story. I don't have to love you to care about you because we are linked. We always will be. I couldn't let him have you back, knowing that he'd hurt you. You came too far to be that broken again, and secretly, I hoped this might make you forgive me a little."

"You tried to kill me!" I slam my hands against his chest.

"I was going mad because of the fucking book," his voice breaks. "It was driving me insane—it felt like it was drilling into my soul. But when you were taken, the book knew. It knew their only chance of being freed from those pages was gone, too." He has to shout for me to hear him over the howling wind, from how fast Odemis is

flying. Daegan commanded him to go home, but where is home exactly? I don't have any choice but to trust him at the moment.

“The book, the corruption of my soul, it snapped. It let me go. It just stopped speaking to me, and I presume it was because it didn't want you dead. It knew that if you were, it might be another thousand years—or longer—before there was ever a chance it could be freed. Maybe it would never happen. It gave me my mind back, piece by piece, until I realised what I'd done—to my people, to you, to everyone.”

Guilt is written starkly across every inch of his face. “I couldn't win against my mind, but maybe I was somehow. The first thing I did was get my people to safety. I've been preparing for months...but I don't remember doing it.” He shakes his head. “I'm not sure how—it's all a bit broken in my mind. But there's a secret place, deep within the Moon Dynasty lands. It's underground.”

“What are you talking about?” I grip his arm tighter when he dives and pain radiates up my stomach. I can taste my blood in my mouth, and I think when Emyr punched me, he hurt me badly. I need a healer, and there is zero chance of getting one anytime soon.

“Home. It's connected to the dragons' tunnels, but it's much further north. I was taught about it from my father, like all princes of the sun are. The Sun and Moon kings, they knew the end of our kind was coming and we would face a great enemy, and they held a secret meeting to make a plan between them all.” He sadly smiles. “But that didn't work. The Twilight and the Dawn Dynasty didn't agree to anything, didn't want anything to do with a fail-safe plan of sorts. The Sun and Moon kings decided to do it without them then, and they formed an alliance, creating a secret place where their people could go when it all failed. They used their lives to cast powerful magic on the lands. It's not a big place, but it is safe. It's similar to what the princess did to make the mansion with the books, but it's different and older. I believe it is where she got the idea from in the first place.”

I open and shut my mouth a few times. I don't even know if I can believe a word that comes out of his mouth. He seduced me, only to try to kill me. "So you're really not under the magic of the book anymore?"

"I don't think I'll ever be truly free, but yes in a way," he says, skirting around a real answer. "One book is in the hideout. You had the other. Story, where is it?"

I'm still catching my breath, still processing that he got me out of there—away from Emyr—and there is a secret place where some of the fae are safe. "It's with someone I trust. I know if anyone can get it to me, or to Avaluna, it will be her. I need both the books and Avaluna. I might be able to stop the vampyre king." I don't mention that I'm betting on the deities trapped in the books to have some mercy on us fae and help us stop the king if I free them like they want.

"We have a long flight ahead of us." He looks away from me. "You can rest if you want."

I can't, not with how much pain I'm in. "Are these your old lands? The Sun Dynasty?"

He doesn't look at me still, but he tenses. "Yes, though they're barely recognizable now. They were once great, and now they are mostly buried in sand. Dead. I imagined seeing the world for so long, and it's worse than any nightmare I had."

"Ziven felt the same." I gulp. "Where is he?"

"I'm not sure," Daegan admits, his voice soft. "I'm sorry, but there were reports his dragon was gravely injured, and they both fell from the skies?—"

"But he's alive."

He looks right at me.

“The same way you knew I was alive is the same way I know he is. But stronger. He is out there.”

“That’s good. Most of his people are in the hideout,” he adds. “We got as many as we could to the city, including the refugees.”

I look at him, a mix of anger and confusion still swirling in my chest. “You tried to kill me before, but you saved me now. You got them to safety, and I don’t know how to feel about that.”

“I destroyed a significant part of my castle for you.” He grins, almost teasing. Then his tone turns sincere. “I want to be your friend, Story. I want us to start over. It’s important that any world we fight for from here is one we can live in without the past clouding us. I want a fresh start with my people. That’s it.”

“I am grateful that you saved me from Emyr, so I will think about it,” I offer, because it is all I have right now. I’m too worried about Ziven and Hettie. About Catherine and Avaluna and Calix. These people have become my family.

“You’re the love of his life.” Daegan’s voice is filled with conviction, and it is almost like he can read my thoughts. “And I was once his best friend. We fucked up everything between each other time after time, but I never saw him love anyone before. Not like you. You are his sole reason for existing, and he is so fucking stubborn...there isn’t a chance he isn’t fighting to get to you now. With or without a dragon.” I hope he is right, but it feels wrong to talk to Daegan about Ziven, so I don’t reply. “I found Hettie with a fae couple who found her alone in the forest. She was smart enough to call herself the sun princess heir, and they brought her to Etena. I have kept her safe and have every intention of continuing to do so. She’s my heir, after all—my niece.”

“I think if you don’t want Ziven or me to kill you, then you should keep away from her. She isn’t your anything, Daegan,” I snap. “You hurt her to use her as a distraction to kill me.”

He tightens his grip on me, and when he meets my eyes, his are full of unshed tears. His expression breaks something inside me. “I don’t remember doing any of it. It was the book, the magic pushing me and shadowing everything. It made it feel like all I needed was to kill you and escape the castle, but I know it was aware of what would happen. That you’d unlock the mansion and give the book a chance to find the other. I’m sorry and I will be forever.” I want to believe him, but I need to see proof of this hideout, see Hettie, and make sure she is okay. I begin shivering after half an hour of the flight, so bad that he pulls his yellow cloak, covered in sun symbols, and wraps it around me.

“We make a better future.” His voice is nothing but a soft prayer to the world. “That’s how we make amends for the past. What else can we do to move forward? Maybe it doesn’t matter because I can’t win this war, Story. Even our dragons are outnumbered. Between them and the vampyres...we’ve lost so much. Too much.” I don’t know how to respond. The wind whips around us as we soar through the sky. I close my eyes just as I feel it.

I feel the part of me that is missing, the part of me that I search for every time I close my eyes. My connection to Ziven...it’s just gone.

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Chapter Five

King Ziven

Page Five. When I die, will she remember me?

It feels like I'm falling forever, like the darkness and shadows never stop chasing me. It's been like this since I was a child, living in a world where the darkness became my power and I let it take me whole. I let myself pit into the darkest places of my mind when I lost my family, most of my people, and then, even when nothing was left, I still never gave up. I don't know what waits for me down here, in this pit, in this place even my ancestors claimed no one should ever head into, but if there is a chance I can save Story, if there is a way to make this world better so she can live safely within it, then I will face it. No darkness can touch me when she is there, shining in my mind like fire.

I hear them moving around me, feel them flying in the air, sense them endlessly flying everywhere and nowhere all at the same time. It smells like fire, like dampness and flames mixed together, the further I fall until I wonder if I'll touch the very centre of the world. Can I ever come back from that? Will I ever find my way back to Storm? The dragon's roar sounds like a dare, like a threat whispered on the wind that I will not find my way back to her. I feel when they start slamming into me, catching me with their sharp talons.

Something suddenly changes, and I shout for the deities to stop this. The dragons claw into me, like they are searching my blood for my soul. They start dragging their claws down my arms, down my stomach, down my legs, until they're ripping my

skin. I scream in pain as they tear at me, their torment relentless and as endless as time. There's nothing I can do but let them continue to test me over and over again as I fall through their darkness, through their shadows, through time itself—or so it feels.

This place doesn't feel right. Through all the pain and torment, it feels wrong, out of balance. I suspect they want me to die. What they don't know is that I'm the most stubborn bastard who's ever decided to jump into this pit and face whatever dwells down here. They don't know about the redheaded woman who needs me to come back.

It feels like hours, days, or months—who knows how long before it stops? Before I'm falling slower and slower. I slam straight into black dust that feels almost like sand under my fingertips. My body aches, covered in millions of scratches all over my arms, my face, everywhere. I lift my head, seeing swirling grey shadows instead of clouds circling around me, encircling me. Slowly, the shadows begin to take form and shape: two wings, massive enough to make a complete circle around the vast gap in which I now stand. The body and claws of this incredible dragon eventually come into view, along with scales like ice and shadow magic dripping off it into the earth below.

Its claws are enormous, larger than anything I've ever seen, and it's stunning. Its long, arched neck is covered in grey spikes that resemble diamonds, reflecting the faint light of the shadows around it. But this dragon is solid, unlike anything I've seen before. I'd say it's even bigger than Story's dragon, Maeve—and that's saying something because she is the biggest dragon alive. Not anymore.

When it looks at me, its eyes are swirling pits of grey, almost like smoke, and shadows are dancing inside them to an unheard song. Yet they glint like silver as they watch me.

“How dare you!” it roars into my mind. Its voice is old, ancient, different. It takes me a second to adjust, as though I need to form the words in my mind to fully understand them. “How dare you come here with your blood, with who you are, and step on the graves of my kin.” I look down at the black dust, and within it, I see ash and bone. “You are not welcome, and there’s nothing but death down here for you, King of the Moon Dynasty. Have you not had enough of it?”

“I’ve come because our world is drowning.” I make sure to shout. To make sure this creature hears me. “It’s drowning in the blood of the vampyres, from the king who rules it, and they will not be stopped.” It watches me, this male dragon. “And if they rule, nobody wins. Dragons will go extinct. There’ll be nothing left of them...eventually, including you. There’ll be nothing left of the fae, too. Is that what you want? To hide down here like cowards as the world begs on its knees for help?”

It roars at me, grey fire spiralling in a circle, but I know it could have killed me if it wanted to. It’s testing me. I lift my head and make sure I’m looking straight into its eyes as it speaks into my mind again. Calling it a “he” seems like a weak word for what this male dragon is. Too binding. “What is your name?” it asks.

I formally bow. “King Ziven of the Moon Dynasty. I’ve come here to be your rider.”

There’s no point dancing around the subject. I’ve always been blunt and straightforward—it’s usually how I get what I want. I know exactly what I want and need now. It’s being this dragon’s rider. This is the dragon I need. I’ll mourn Brythan to the day that I die, but this dragon, this is going to be my last dragon and the one I win the war with. It is no coincidence I was led here, time and time again. Even the day I kissed Story right outside this pit and knew, right down to my soul, there wasn’t a thing I wouldn’t do for her. So fuck whatever this dragon has planned for me.

The dragon’s laugh echoes around my mind, clawing through it like a physical force. “I have never had a rider, and I will never have a rider.”

“Never is a word you shouldn’t use lightly.” I smirk at it. “Especially when your rider has come down here to face you. When we ride together, I know we can fix it. Fix the vampyre threat and win the war.”

Heat escapes its nostrils like a sigh of contempt. “Do you know your history?” The heat turns to steam, blowing around my legs. “As you come here to ask for the king of all dragons to be yours, to ride me would mean taking that title. The power that comes with a bond like that—no being would survive it.”

“I would,” I firmly state. “My whole life, I’ve been pulled here, destined for this. My power is shadows and darkness, and I’ve never pushed myself to the limit of it before. I know, without a doubt, you’re my dragon.”

He huffs in doubt. “You do not know the history, then.”

“Inform me,” I demand, crossing my arms. “Tell me what you think will change anything.”

Its voice deepens, and I can feel the weight of its truth pressing down on me. “We were not of this world, not originally. We are from the sky, where the stars shine brightly in the darkness, and it is beautiful there. We never felt pain or any feeling at all. Once, we were nothing but waves of flames of all colours, streaking across the heavens. But we crashed here, pulled in, lured by great dark magic. That magic bound the flames into living creatures—it made the first dragons. We felt, we still feel now, and to feel is to know pain and loss. Those first dragons were bound by the magic to take riders, to be ridden endlessly, forever. We were family, and then...we were nothing but tools for the fae to win their wars. So much fire.” An image bursts into my head of cities burning, of forests destroyed and dragons going to war. An image I never wanted to see. “Some of us, however, were too strong. We refused riders, refused to be bound when all they did was make war and take lives with us. And so we became this—shadows of flame, echoing deep below the surface. Never allowed

to see the stars or the heavens we came from.”

Its teeth bare down as it stares down at me, and my heart pounds in my chest. “What is it you want? I cannot fix the past, dragon.”

“Nothing that you can give me,” it growls. “And my name is not dragon. It is Nianyan of the first. Riderless until my death.”

“You want freedom?” I challenge Nianyan. “Then make me your rider. Give me a trial, like the other dragons do. Let me prove myself, and when I win that trial, I will become your rider. If I lose, then you get to kill me without a fight.” I take a step forward. “When the war is over, you’re free to roam the world as you please. No more wars to be fought. I promise it. All dragons will be free. No more riders. We will be the last riders,” I declare firmly, my gaze locked on his. “What do you think?”

“NO!” Nianyan’s answer echoes through the air like a thunder clap. Like it’s more than just in my mind.

Shit. Nianyan might be more stubborn than me. “Why? Are you worried? Worried that fate has finally come down here to prove that you can’t lurk in the shadows as some lonely old dragon all on your own?”

“I am not alone.” The shadows shift, and I realise it’s true. The glowing eyes of thousands of shadow dragons appear, watching us from the darkness.

“Shadow dragons,” I murmur, understanding. A whole new race of dragons, hidden down here from everyone, and they are our key to winning the war. If I am to have any chance of breaking Story out of the castle and killing the prince, and king too, then I need an army. I need something more, and it is staring me right in the face. I know Emyr won’t kill Story right away, and I have to pray to the deities he doesn’t hurt her. He is dead either way. “But you are trapped, aren’t you? I don’t think you’re

here by choice. Was it a curse? Because you refused to take riders?” Nianyan’s eyes flash with anger, and he takes a step forward, the black dust rippling. I almost grin. “By my bloodline, perhaps? My family—especially the males—have always been tricky bastards when it comes to magic, and I don’t think you would have stayed down here for all these years. No, you can’t leave.” I watch him closely. “You were waiting for me.”

“Dead or alive, you set us free. The curse only said you had to bleed on our holy ground, and you have.” I look down at the blood dripping from the thousands of cuts on my body. Fuck. “I want to watch you die, but...the deity above is watching and wishes for something different. You will face one trial.”

Swirls of shadow magic wrap around me and settle on my hand as a new marking appears. Right in the centre of my palm, a dragon—looking just like the stubborn bastard that’s been staring me down—swirls across the skin, peering toward my fingertips. When I look up, I’m in the mansion again and daylight is streaming through the glass top. The stone dragon is still there in the centre, Story’s dragon, but I’m outside the library and it’s warm. It smells like smoke and cooked food. What the fuck is happening?

“Mazzis, you have to leave the library at some point! You’re going to grow old like a tree in there, with no love life or fun.”

My blood freezes at the sound of my sister’s voice. It’s been so long since I heard her speak, let alone with joy and happiness in every word. I turn around to see her standing there, her long dark hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, just as she always wore it when we were younger. Before life truly ate away at us. She’s grinning, her smile as massive as her presence.

They were always such good friends. Mazzis and her. It’s why I always liked him, because he asked for nothing of her friendship but her time, which she gave easily.

But I don't remember this. It never happened in the past, and I don't understand why I'm here now. Mazzis touches her shoulder. "The books are my fun in life, and if I am ever blessed with a love life, it is best to find me in the pages."

My sister rolls her eyes. "Oh, Mazzis, I miss you."

He frowns and looks over at me, bowing his head in greeting. I do the same. "Make sure she eats, Prince Ziven. She's always running about and never eating enough."

"I don't even know which one of you two is my big brother." She jokes, laughing low, before she comes closer to me.

I stare at her...for so long that Mazzis has left and it's nearly night. The mansion has gone quiet, fires are lit up for lights, and there is a silence that only the night brings. "You're dead."

Her face drops, all the light and a smile leaving with it. Her skin pales. Her hair is sharply cut short above her ears—just like it was after Hettie was born. Before she gave up on life and let it drown out her fire. "Yes. But the gods have given us a chance. We can leave now. Go and see my daughter together, brother." She offers me her hand.

"No." I step back, right up to the railing. "You're not real. This is a sick joke. It's not funny. Where am I?" I shake my head, trying to remember, but I can't. I can't recall why I was here or even where I am. I glance back at the dragon in the middle, trying to summon any memory, but nothing comes to mind. Not even a story. It's a statue...and it means something important, but I don't know what it is. In fact, who am I?

A warm hand touches my arm. What is my sister's name? I don't know anything except she is my sister. It's all fading. I can barely remember now. Her voice is soft,

like coaxing an injured dog out of a hedge. “Do you remember my baby, Hettie? We can go together and be with her. She was such a special child. She’s more special than anyone knows. Do you know why she was allowed to be born?”

I can’t think. Suddenly, I remember her. Her blonde hair, her cheeky smile and attitude. She might be my niece by blood, but in every way that counts, I’ve been her dad, not just her uncle. I’ve brought her up to be the heir I likely will never have. “I do.”

“Hettie, the beautiful little girl that I had, well, she was prophesied long ago to the dragons. They let her become real with magic because she’ll be the queen who unites all of this broken world. When two kings give up their crowns to one, she can be...everything. She is to be the heir of both the Sun and the Moon, of the Twilight and the lost Dawn Dynasty. She has the blood of the Dusk in her from a long-lost line. She will be the queen of the dragons, the fae, and the vampyres and set about generations of peace.” She touches my cheek this time. “Don’t you see, Ziv? We can go and watch her from the afterlife together. She doesn’t need us now.” She begins to lead me down the path. “No one does anymore.”

My shoes dig into the path, and I make her stop, pulling my hand from hers and wherever she was leading me. “Story Dehana cannot be forgotten by whatever dark magic you are using. I’d never forget her, and I will never willingly walk into death...not even for you, my beloved sister. You are gone, and she is not.”

Fury blankets over her face, and she throws herself at me, a dagger appearing out of thin air as she tries to slam it into my throat. I knock her hand away just as it scratches across my skin. “The fuck are you doing?” I push her back. “And for the record, I know this isn’t my sister. She wouldn’t have laid a finger on me.” I grab her arm. “Stop!”

She starts fighting me, and it’s impossible to fight her back, even when I know it’s

not her. She's just like my sister, and I love her. She's all I have left...right? I see shadows dancing around my face, pushing onto my skin and into my head. Everything begins to slip again until I can't picture the woman I love anymore as I hold my sister back, as she screams at me to die. Even her daughter's name flickers from my mind. Even when everything that comes to mind just slips away. Stories in my mind linger like they aren't important anymore. Things that aren't true, things that are. A woman in my arms, laughing sweetly.

I hold her tight to me, begging her to stop fighting me, stop trying to hurt me. Screaming it over and over in the mansion—a mansion which is nothing more than a room, a house, things that don't make any sense. Did I live here once? I don't know anymore. “Stop!” I shout at her, but it's too late. She slams into me, and I let go—only for a second—and she goes falling over the banister, and I don't hesitate. I fling myself over too and jump after her to try to save her even though she is dead already.

We both slam straight into a ledge, and I grunt from the impact, tasting blood in my mouth. My sister fades into nothing but shadows—grey shadows slipping from my hands—before spreading out into a dragon form. It cracks the sides of the mansion, and everything—brick and ash—falls, consumed by grey flames until I recognise Nianyan again.

I stand on a ledge, looking up at it. “That was cruel,” I snarl, all my memories rushing back. “She was my sister.”

“Even with your mind gone, your memories missing, you still jumped after her. Why?” He actually sounds confused and shocked. Fucking hell, my ancestors must have been power hungry assholes to make Nianyan believe we are all like that.

“Because she's family. Because I loved her. I'm true to my word...I will be your rider.” I stand tall. “And I will rule this world in peace.” It watches me for a long

time, and I watch it right back, knowing that nothing will stop me from being its rider. “I am stronger than any before me, and I want a better world. You’ve been inside my mind, and you know what I think. You know what I want.”

“I do not think you will survive this on good intentions alone. It is up to the deities now.” A cold breeze blows around me. “You were prophesied to come here a long time ago, King Ziven. Half the prophecies say you’ll die. Half of them do not. But either way, you will keep your deal with me.”

It slams into me with the full force of a dragon. I scream as I fall back, shadows ripping into my skin, grey flames bursting across my body.

He may be right because I don’t think I can survive this.

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Chapter Six

Page Six. I was born with the knowledge of my fathers and their fathers. We know the deities are coming back, and we must fight for this world...

The flight with Daegan feels much longer than eight hours—it feels like an eternity of icy wind and silence between us. I don't say a word to him for the rest of it, and I'm still stuck in disbelief that he has saved me. Being honest with myself, I thought of our bond. This thing that lingers between us in the form of making us entwined mates was a curse and nothing more. I thought of him as nothing more than a monster, and as far as forgiveness goes, I know deep down I won't be able to forgive him for what he did. But hate him? Hating Daegan at this moment leaves a funny feeling in my chest. It feels wrong.

We start climbing into snowy mountains right as the sun sets—or almost disappears. The light softly fades in brilliant shades of orange and red, as it dies down for the moon to have its chance to shine bright. We soar high, just before Daegan grips me tightly and Odemis dives. Wind whistles in my ears, and it doesn't stop as we sink down in the clouds, straight into the top of what looks like a sunken mountain peak. Darkness is sharp against my eyes as everything loses light, and all I can smell on the wind is damp earth, a world that hasn't been touched by fae or vampyre. Tunnels, and Odemis knows them well.

Daegan flies down the tunnels, both of us cloaked in pitch darkness that only reminds me of Ziven. I close my eyes, unable to open them against the force of the flight, and soon my ears pop, my skin bristles, and I pull the cloak tighter around me. The dive goes on—down, down—and all I can do is feel for Ziven. He still feels gone, like

he's not really here, like he's dying. I can't shake the horrible feeling in the pit of my chest, even as a familiar voice breaks through the darkness. A voice I am so relieved to hear. "You're back. You're coming to me. I am injured or I would have flown to you. My wing...I will fly, if in time. I'll see you soon. I'm well."

Maeve. My dragon. I knew she was alive, but now I can feel her in my heart and mind. She is here and alive. I know I'm crying, even as the wind blows the tears away. "No, you're not well, Maeve. I can feel you." I frown. "What happened?"

"My wing was torn in two places." She huffs as worry floods through me to her. Her concerns come back in full force for me. "And you? He had you. The one you fear." She pauses for a moment. "Worry not about me, Story Dehana. You are hurt and you must get to a healer," she commands like a mother hen.

"First thing I'm going to do, I promise," I vow to her. Daegan's dragon moves into a glide. We get our first look at the hideout.

"I do not like you riding on another dragon."

"Don't worry, Maeve. I only want to be your rider too," I whisper as I watch the hideout. It's a town—a town buried inside a mountain. Somehow, it's bright here, and I realise the cave walls are like mirrors, reflecting light from somewhere else. It almost looks like daylight constantly. If it is this bright even when the sun must have set by now, I wonder if it ever actually gets dark.

The town isn't big, maybe no more than a hundred houses, and all of them have seen better days. Rows and rows of houses are built with the same mirror-like rock, but some don't have roofs, and it looks like they have been abandoned. Is this all we have left to fight with? No wonder Daegan has half given up. Flames and smoke curl from some of the homes, and I straighten my shoulders. As long as we aren't all dead, we can fight. We have to fight them, because it can't be this easy for him to win. Outside

the city lie fields upon fields of watery beds with plants growing within them, and strange buildings on the outskirts almost seem like towers. “They don’t have much food, and their education...is lacking. But it is home for now. Maybe forever.”

I look at him, my eyes sharp. “Forever? While the rest of our people are slaves? One city might be gone, but the rest of the world?—”

“He has an army of flying creatures and vampyres!” Daegan snaps at me. His shoulders drop. “I’m sorry, but it is true. We would need a miracle to save us now! We will make it work for the people here, and that includes you. For the last fifty years, the leaders have been bringing the fae in, trying to save who they could without revealing the location and to build their own ranks after an illness killed a bunch of them. Some fae apparently just find themselves here when they run away, but it’s still not many. It’s complicated magic and the last head count before we arrived was nine hundred.” I glance down at the cavern under the ledge the town is nestled on, sensing Maeve further down. “Are you feeling Maeve down there? I wasn’t sure if she’d returned with the others. That’s where the dragons go. They get called up, and we can fly off on them, but a lot of them are ignoring their riders. Odemis didn’t, but something’s wrong with them.”

“Another problem to deal with,” I murmur, my stomach twisting, and I hold my hand against it.

He frowns at me, touching my hand. “Are you okay?”

I don’t get to say another word before I pass out.

When I wake up, a warm fire flickers beside me, and I’m nestled in under thick fur blankets. It’s different from being so cold when I woke up like in the past, and I flinch, feeling pain in my stomach. I reach down, touching a bandage wrapped tight around my ribs and a stitched scar right under it. “Hey there, Trouble.”

My eyes shoot to the male voice, seeing Calix sitting in a rotting wooden chair by my bed. His black hair is tied back, and his eyes tell me how worried and exhausted he is, even before he smiles and tries to hide it. Calix touches my arm, leaning over me.

“Don’t you dare attempt to get up. I’ve just watched them cut you open, fix your internal bleeding and broken ribs, and then put you back together again. Thank fuck you’re awake. I didn’t want to explain to Ziven—when he gets back, that is—that you died on my watch.” He groans when I try to sit up, and he physically pushes my shoulder down. “Seriously, the healers we have left are struggling to use magic down here, and she warned me not to let you get up. You need to rest.” He meets my eyes. “Please.”

I rest back and nod, feeling too weak to attempt it, even if Calix hadn’t just said please. My voice is groggy. “What happened?”

He blows out a breath, sitting back. “Well, I was looking up at Odemis and fucking Daegan holding you, smiling at you because he’d done it, but then I saw you were passed out. He said you pretended to be fine and then you weren’t. I almost threw the pretty Sun king off the cliff edge to be dragon food.” I smile weakly at Calix. I feel exhausted and drained, otherwise I might have laughed at that. “I’ll let Ziven have the honour when he is back.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him what I’m feeling about Ziven. I can’t even admit it to myself. He has to come back. Calix and I share an unbroken stare, where we both can’t admit anything out loud about how worried we are for Ziven.

“She’s awake!”

I hear Hettie’s little squeal before I see her in the door and it shuts behind her. She’s all dressed in green, with a yellow pin clipped to the side of her hair, but she is moving towards me so quickly I barely get to see anything other than her light hair as

she hugs my neck tight. I breathe her in, wanting to cry just from knowing she is okay.

“Careful,” Calix warns her, picking her up off me and moving her to the side to sit on the bed.

She wipes her tears and grins at me. “I was so worried when I sent you into that forest alone,” I tell her. “I prayed to the deities to keep you safe when I couldn’t. I failed and I’m sorry, but I won’t again. I promise to keep you safe, no matter what.”

“You were worried and you’re sorry?” Her words come bursting out. “What do you mean, you were worried? I just watched you go off with that vampyre prince to save me! I was worried! I was scared! You shouldn’t have done that, and you can’t say sorry for saving me!”

Her cheeks are so red as I take her hand. “Okay, but I don’t regret my choice. If anyone deserves to be free, it’s you. We are okay, and it’s all that matters.”

Calix softly watches me. “Our future queen always returns to us. So does the princess.” He grins. “I see that as a good sign our king will follow.” He bows his head. “It is an honour to serve your family and be your friend.”

“We are the lucky ones,” I whisper, crying again. I relax as Hettie tells me all about her new room, about the weird food and how the people here don’t know much about the outside world. “Uncle Daegan has been really nice to me. He told me the book made his mind go bad when he hurt me, and now he’s okay. Is that true?”

Calix touches her arm. “People lie, but for what it’s worth, your uncle did risk his life to save Story. I’m not sure it answers the unsaid question of whether we can trust him or not. At the moment, he has us surprised, as I didn’t expect a hero move from him.”

“Neither did I.”

Calix clears his throat. “He saved all of us and led our dragons here. Daegan brought in the fae and single-handedly fought off the Silkvir that tried to follow. Got them into the tunnels that led here, because he knew the way. He was on his feet for a good three days, never stopping, and then he flew to you.” He pulls out a note from his pocket. “Ziven gave me this in a hurry, and it’s apparently for you.”

I take it and see my name in Kyrell’s handwriting on the folded letter. I can’t explain it all to Calix, not what Ziven did, not to him. I nod, tucking the letter into my blanket like a treasured prize. If only his redemption were that easy. “What about Luna?”

I smile as she steps in through the wooden door, closing it softly behind her. “I’m okay. I flew with Cal. Glad to see you awake, friend.” She tucks her hair behind her ears. “I prayed every second that you were gone for your return once I heard from Hettie what happened.”

“He’s looking for you,” I warn her. “The king.”

Calix tenses, but Avaluna doesn’t seem bothered at all. “I know. I knew he would. It’s been so many years since anyone has betrayed him. He’s as delusional as his son.”

“It must run in the family,” I joke, and she smiles softly. “I won’t let him have you back. I won’t go either. We are no longer blood slaves, we are free fae.”

“Now and until our deaths.” She nods in agreement. She sighs, then adds, “We need to talk. At some point. About the books. Okay?”

I nod. I know I’m not strong enough to talk about the books right now. “Okay, but what I know won’t...well, it isn’t nice.” I catch the first flicker of concern in her

eyes, and I don't have it in me to reassure her. These books, this journey, all of it—it's led to this. They've been manipulating us from the start. "For now," I say softly, "I think I need to rest. I don't think I can even get out of this bed."

"Good." Calix is still as tense as before. "The healer said you shouldn't be getting out of bed for at least twenty-four hours. Hettie and I are going to buy you some food. Fair warning, the food's not great here, but it'll keep you alive. That's about all I can say for it." He looks at Avaluna and whispers something I can't hear.

Hettie wrinkles her nose at me, sticking a finger in her mouth and making a gagging noise. "The food is awful. No wonder they don't smile here. If I could find chocolate frosting, I bet I could make everyone happy."

Oh, the innocence of her mind. "Hettie," Calix scolds, but she grins. "I warned you not to insult their food. They are hosting us."

"What?" She blinks innocently at him. "I'm only repeating what you said." Calix groans.

I look at her, my chest tightening with gratitude. "I'm really, really glad to be back here with you all."

She grins even wider. I grab her hand and hold it tight for a moment.

"Do you need anything else?" Calix questions, stepping closer.

"Maybe another blanket?" I mutter. "It's cold here."

He nods, finding a blanket for me as Avaluna and Hettie talk at the door. "Thank you. What's with the green clothes?" I ask, noticing their outfits.

“No idea, but I think it’s a dye they found. They have seaweed-like food here. They use it for food and also weave it into clothing. It’s smart how they’ve managed to do that over the years, but...” He pauses, glancing at me. “It does smell bad in the farms. Hettie isn’t wrong about the quality of things here.”

I chuckle, and he winks. My smile drops. “How many of the Moon Dynasty do you have here?” Who survived? I don’t dare ask.

“A few. Fifteen, I think. We lost some. They could still be out there, but it’s unlikely.” He admits. “Or they might be with Ziven. Ruelle included.”

My heart freezes. “Let’s pray.”

Calix leads Hettie out, and Avaluna comes to sit on the edge of the bed, smiling at me. “Daegan seems...different. I wouldn’t believe in this rapid change if I hadn’t seen the way he fought to save us and then how he got you back.”

“What do you think about that?” I ask. She has experience with the books too.

She crosses her arms. “I should be asking you that.”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I trusted him once, and he literally shot a beam of light through me and nearly killed me. But he says he was being manipulated by the books. He saved Hettie, made sure she was safe. He came after me, knowing full well it could’ve ended badly. He must’ve been out there all night, waiting for the sunrise just to give me enough time to get back here. If anyone had found him, they could’ve killed him. So, knowing the risk he took, I’m inclined to believe this place is safe. At least for now.” I touch my ribs. “But trusting him? I honestly don’t think I ever can.”

“Do you know where Ziven is?”

I shake my head as her question makes me want to panic. I need to get out of this bed and find him. “No. But I have this.” I hold up a note. “Calix said Ziven gave it to him. It was from Kyrell.” My voice falters. “He killed him. Ziven...he killed him.”

“What?” Luna’s confused eyes meet mine. “Why would he do that? Ziven isn’t evil...”

“I think...the way it seemed, it was like Kyrell wanted a mercy killing. I think Ziven did it because he was asked. I don’t...” My voice shakes. “I don’t know what’s real or what’s not when it comes to that situation now. But he was my best friend, and he’s gone.”

She squeezes my hand. “I think he was always gone,” she says gently. “That life of his...You know his story. He was gone long before this death. I think it was probably a blessing for him. If I were like that, I’d want someone to kill me and to make it quick, too.”

I nod, though the weight in my chest remains.

“Get some rest,” Luna gently coaxes. “I’m sure they’ll be back with food and non-stop chatter soon enough. Sorry about the seaweed wrap you’re about to try to ingest.” She flashes me a faint smile. “I’m heading off to training. They do that a lot here. It’s actually really good and you must come when you’ve recovered.”

“I will,” I promise. “About Calix...are you and him?”

She blushes and shakes her head. “He has an entwined mate, so it doesn’t matter how I feel, right?” She heads out before I can tell her that it does matter how we feel, even if the deities have sent us on another path. I lean back into the warmth of the blankets. My fingers tremble as I unfold the note, knowing my heart will shatter no matter what’s written inside. It takes me several moments, a few long breaths, and whispered

prayers before I can read the words on the page.

Story Dehana, the bravest woman I was honoured to meet,

“If you’re reading this, Story, I know it’s because I made sure this note would find its way to you and no one else. There are a thousand moments I could start with, but for now, I want you to know a single thing. My body might be gone from you, but my soul is not. I will watch over you, be your friend, even in death. When I came back as a vampyre, I was horrified by my existence. After years of hating the vampyres and wanting their downfall, I was now a broken vampyre myself. The only thought that ever crossed my mind was that this life wasn’t what I wanted.

I wanted death.

I made sure I’d find someone who could give me that release from this world, and I chose the male who loved you so deeply, so intensely, that there wasn’t a line he wouldn’t cross to make sure you were happy and safe. King Ziven...he didn’t have to make that deal, and yet, he did. He made it for you, not for me. He knew I was a liability, and he knew you wouldn’t be able to stand seeing me in pain.

Do not blame him and ruin your chance at a happy life because of me. Do not let that man go, or I will haunt you.

All I ever wanted, from the moment I met you, was to make your life better. You deserved that, and I was determined to give you that life. But when the love of my life made his sacrifice, my purpose shifted.

After that, my only mission was to secure your future.

Now, I’m giving you my blessing—as your family. Marry King Ziven and be a queen. Adopt cute babies and you’d better give one of them my name, at least as a

middle name if you can. I want you to have a future—a brilliant, hopeful future.

Please, don't let me come between you two. Some people are just meant for each other. You and the king are made of the same fire, the same defiance, and the same hope. Together, you'll make the world better than it's been in a long time.

Love each other. Live for me. Give me something to smile down on, wherever I am.

I love you.

Kyrell, your brother in every way that mattered.

The tears come in a flood, spilling down my face as I clutch the note to my chest. It feels like my heart is being ripped apart, as this is all I have now. "Bye, Kyrell," I whisper softly, tilting my head as if my voice could carry to wherever he is now. "I hope you hear me, in your last moments, or wherever you are." Exhaustion weighs me down, and I cry myself into sleep—or perhaps I pass out again. I'm not sure which. In the haze of dreams, I see Ziven. He's floating in shadows, his form flickering and fading like a dying ember. He looks as though he's slipping away. I reach for him, desperate, but I can't touch him. My hands grasp at nothing.

Suddenly, his eyes snap open, those beautiful silver eyes that burn like dragon fire.

"I'm coming for you."

He's there—alive, somewhere. My lips curve into a smile, my heart clinging to the possibility.

I don't want to be saved by the sun. I want the moon.

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Chapter Seven

Avaluna

Page Seven. Deities above, I will write it all down. I must. Stories are our most important legacies.

I 'm a little jealous. No, I realise I'm completely jealous of how the fae here, the ones who haven't left a day since they were born, have lived such protected lives. They don't know anything of war or sacrifice. They farm the seaweed, they craft anything they like and smile around fires. They might not know about the outside world, except for the stories of the lost fae, as they call them here, but maybe that's why they are so untouched by war. They don't have bite marks. It's haunting to see more fae without bite marks, untouched by the vampyres, like it was back in the mansion.

There are little children here. I barely see them, but the ones I do are happy, joyful, free. A little boy runs past me and my heart warms. He could be the spitting image of my nephew. I watch him for a second before deciding to follow him. I know it's strange, but just seeing him brings back my endless thoughts about my family. Are they okay? That is the most pressing question that plays over and over in my mind. I told them to leave the city, and they must have done, but maybe I just hope they did because the reality is too much to think about. Hope is all I have of my family now. The king didn't know about them. I'm sure of that... But what if he did? I second-guess myself a hundred times a day, imagining horrors I wish I could push out of my mind. So many years of my life were his, and he ruined them.

It didn't surprise me when Story said he's still looking for me and that he wants me

back. The fact that the delusional asshole thinks we could go back to the life he controlled, when I finally tasted freedom, is insane. But he was always insane. If he thinks I'll be his blood slave again, smile, bow, undress when he wishes...no. I understand now that I'd rather be dead. I've found something real. I've tasted freedom. When someone has been caged their whole life, that first ounce of freedom is something they find themselves desperately fighting for. I've seen Story fight and I will be inspired by her as an example for the rest of my years in this world.

The dark-haired, pointed-eared boy runs up to a makeshift slide where three other children are taking turns going down. I sit on a bench near a house—the rotting wood is cool and damp against my back. I glance up, a sense for a different dark-haired male that runs right down my spine. Then I see him—Calix. He's talking to Etena in an alleyway, right behind the children. Seeing them together makes my heart drop. It feels like it falls from my chest straight down to my stomach and then vanishes completely.

I know I'm jealous, and I shouldn't be. He isn't mine. By the deities, I've never had anyone that is mine. Calix looked after me, cared for me, but he doesn't have feelings for me, because he loves her and I hate her for it. For having him. She's stupid because she doesn't seem to see him—or even care. They're arguing, shouting at each other, but it's not loud enough for me to hear. I watch, nothing but jealousy burning through me as he reaches out and touches her shoulder. She goes still. Both of them are staring at each other.

I've had enough of watching my heart, as tender as the remains are, shatter like glass.

I climb off the bench and run, feeling my cheeks wet with tears. I run until my legs burn, until everything blurs away, until I'm too close to the cliff's edge. I stop, my feet digging into the ground as rocks tumble right off the edge, my dark hair swaying in the breeze. My heart is racing as I stare into the depth of darkness below. My hair flashes with red as I tuck it behind my ears and step back, away from the edge enough

that I can sit down. I press my hand over my heart, feeling it race under my palm.

“A smart fae wouldn’t sit so close to the edge when dragons are about. One knock of their wing, and you’d be dead.” I tense as I hear Calix approaching, his heavy boots crunching the ground beneath him. He is slightly breathless and I realise he must have run after me. “Saw you running this way, Luna. You alright?”

“I’m fine. Just go.” I don’t dare wipe the tears from my cheeks, as I can feel his eyes fixed on my face. He doesn’t, of course. He sits right there on the edge with me.

He stares at my face, but I don’t dare look back. I stare at the mirrored crystal walls—or at least I think they’re crystal. The smooth, bouncing light around here is so bright. I almost miss the moon, the stars, the calmness of the night. I almost jump when he touches me, when he wipes the back of his finger across my cheek, collecting my tears like trophies. “I saw you looking at me and Etena... I swear I felt your stare in my soul. Etena was telling me about how she’s taken a lover, someone she met here, and it is serious.”

I look at him, surprised. He isn’t facing me now, and it gives me a second to truly admire him—the way his thick muscles press tightly against his dark green shirt, the way his dark hair is held back so precisely in a band, and it looks so soft, silky. His jawline is sharp, his lips a shade of pink that suits his complexion and his dark hair. When I first saw him, I saw what everyone else must, a brute with a huge body and soft brown eyes too pretty for the rest of his body. Then he smiled at me, and that smile echoed throughout my body, warming every part of me. Everything about him is precision perfect, and I feel safe around him.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt safe around a male before—other than my nephew, but he’s a kid. With Calix, it’s different. He makes me feel like he would keep me safe no matter what was coming my way. My whole life, I’ve never felt like that. “She was asking me if it was okay and if I wouldn’t cause any trouble,” he continues, “because

of that bond lurking between us. Because of memories she can't remember. But the truth is, I've been chasing a ghost for a long time, and that ghost is dead. That version of Etena died when she lost her memories. And even before that..." He pauses, and it feels like he's admitting something to himself for the first time, in the safety of only my ears. "We weren't good before. We used to argue all the time. We were together, but it was more like we accepted the bond because it was there, not because we were in love or because it was meant to be. Sometimes the bonds that lie between our souls are just that—a fleeting connection meant to help us just for that season of our lives—and we are destined for friendship. When she told me she had a lover...I didn't feel anything." He smiles at me, the same smile that could light up dark, lost worlds. "I don't know what fate wanted for us, but I know that I don't love her. I do wish her the best, even with her new lover."

"You're not jealous?" I ask, surprised. "I thought...well, sometimes when you look at her, it's with longing."

"It's not the longing that you're thinking of. It's something I felt desperate for. It's what I see when I look at Story and Ziven—or any couple, really. Two people who belong to each other, who have each other's backs. I like to joke around and not take life too seriously, but the only thing I miss from me and Etena being together is that I wasn't alone. I didn't want to be alone. But I realised that my desperation to avoid loneliness had me accepting something not real. It wasn't real between us." Then he says one sentence that rocks the ground under my feet. "Then I met you."

My heart seems to stop—literally stops pounding in my chest. My blood turns to ice, but not in a bad way. It's like I've been on fire and he is the cool ice, calming me down. "Cal..."

He touches a strand of my hair. "Tell me I'm wrong, but I felt this bond between us, from the second I saw you, but I didn't want to scare you with it. You just ran away from the king, and I don't know the half of what you've been through, but I could see

in your eyes that it was a lot. I've seen the same look in Story's eyes, and I want nothing more than to kill the vampyres who made you fear life." He pushes my hair back from my shoulder, revealing my neck. He looks at my neck for a long time, and I know he can see the echoes of bite marks there. The scars that will never heal. "You're so beautiful. Not just in looks, but in your soul. You are a survivor." He looks into my eyes as his words mend cracks in my heart. He thinks I'm beautiful? Even marked with a thousand bites by the king? "Now I want you to tell me everything—absolutely everything—when you can, when you want to. Because I think we're mates, and I want you. I want your heart."

Until he says it, I never really thought about this feeling between us. How suddenly it came on, how it felt like I knew him already and the feeling of safety I've always felt. Maybe even how I found the mansion in that giant forest...I was drawn there. Drawn to him. Calix is my mate. Of course he is. "I want to tell you everything too," I admit. "I was jealous of Etena just then. I was worried that I was feeling something for you that wasn't real or you didn't feel too. But I felt it too, from the moment I met you." I smile softly. "You make me feel safe, Cal. Only with you."

He looks proud, and he grins. "My dragon let you ride her because she told me that you were my mate. She has never said that about Etena, and I know she would eat her if she tried." He smiles faintly. "Dragons seem to know what's in our hearts way before we do."

I'm a big fan of his dragon now. "Your dragon's amazing."

"Maybe you'll get one someday." He winks at me. "For whatever it's worth to you, I'm yours now. I'm always yours."

I hesitate, my voice barely a whisper. "I don't know that I'm ready for a relationship. All I've known is abuse and pain." I look down. "I might mess us up."

He leans in, gently kissing my cheek. I close my eyes, savouring every second of his lips on mine. I want to lean into him, kiss his lips, find out how he tastes. “For now, I just want to know you. Everything. I don’t want there to be secrets between us. I’ll tell you everything about my life too. Then we can spend as long as you want getting to know each other.” He pauses, a small smile on his lips. “Starting with, what did you see in that boy you were watching? Your smile was so warm.”

“He reminds me of my nephew,” I admit, my cheeks lifting. “I don’t know where he is at the moment, but I think I’d feel it, in my chest, if he and my sister had left to be with the deities. One day, I will find them.”

“Together,” he vows, holding out his hand. I take it, watching as he links our fingers. I tell him everything for hours. Everything about my family, about the orphanage where I was found by the king, about the years of abuse. I can see he struggles to listen to it all, but he stays at my side. He stays, and he holds my hand. He makes me feel safe.

Somehow, every crack in my heart, every crack in my soul, is changing for the better.

Maybe love—maybe love can mend us.

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Chapter Eight

Page Eight. My wife is furious, and she won't listen to reason. She fears losing me, but how can I tell her she lost me the day our daughter was born a slave?

It takes me five days to be able to leave my room and to convince Calix, Luna and Hettie that I'm well enough to sit through a meeting. It's been five long days where even getting out of bed is a struggle, but in my dreams, I've seen Ziven. He isn't dead. I know it in my soul, even if I can't sense where he is, but my dreams are the tokens of hope I let myself hold on to. I need them; otherwise, I'm alone in the darkness. I'm without Ziven...who made the darkness home.

Healers come twice a day, trying their best, but they're nothing like Ruelle, and they don't have the natural power to fully heal. We lost nearly all the healers in the fight, and the ones who remain were in training. They're not skilled enough to fix my wounds, but they managed to save my life. Without the healing water from the mansion, these injuries take a lot longer to heal. I'd forgotten how vulnerable I was—almost took it for granted.

Calix and Avaluna are with me as I walk toward a hut where they tell me Daegan is staying. He's called a meeting, a war plan—the first one—and I have to be there for the Moon Dynasty. “Are you sure you're up to this?” Calix asks again, looking close to picking me up and carrying me back to the hut to rest more. I glare at him, wordlessly warning him not to try it.

“I'm fine,” I repeat. I want to be mad at him, but he is just trying to protect me. He keeps calling me his queen, and I know in his mind, it's how he sees me. I'm not

even mated to Ziven, and I'm not sworn into the Moon Dynasty yet. "I could literally run around the block and be completely fine." Not a total lie. I'd be close to passing out and likely sweating a bunch if I tried to do that. Calix only shakes his head at my sort-of lie. We both know the stitches have just come out and running would pop my wound back open, I'd bet. "Anyway, my main issue is Maeve. I want to see her."

Avaluna touches my arm, her eyes sympathetic. "Is she on her feet yet?"

"Yes and no. She isn't flying, but another dragon is feeding her, apparently." I sigh. "She keeps talking to me daily but avoiding most conversation on her wing."

"I can hear you," Maeve grumbles. "I could fly if I wanted to."

"I'm just as bad a liar as you, it seems," I mutter back to my dragon.

Calix rubs his chin. "Dragon healing can take weeks. She's still got a massive tear down her wing. My own dragon told me, but he is being strange. In fact, all the dragons are strange with their riders at the moment."

"Maybe they are tired of the deaths of their kind and their riders?" Avaluna ponders. "We mourn, and they must too."

Etena opens the door to the Sun Dynasty hut, where Daegan and his closest people are living. It's on the opposite side of the town from my hut and the Moon Dynasty people. She looks at Calix first, then Avaluna before her eyes settle on me. She nods her head toward me in greeting. "You didn't die, then. I would even go so far as to say it is good to see you alive after my king nearly sacrificed himself to save you." Her usual sharpness snaps through. She's always so lovely to me.

"Where is he?" I ask, skipping the verbal sparring match she's clearly looking for. Her overprotectiveness knows no bounds when it comes to Daegan. She steps aside

and I head into the massive hut, which is ten times bigger than mine and much warmer too. It's sparsely decorated, with tapestries falling off the walls and a fireplace made of greenstone, with a roaring fire within it that makes the room smell like smoke. The fabric hanging off the walls is ripped and faded, showing no discernible picture of what they might have once been. In the centre of the room is a cluster of tables shoved together, and they are smothered with maps, candles holding the edges down and little green stone figures of castles, dragons and people. Daegan is sitting in one of the chairs, wearing green clothes that match the locals, and he looks tired, staring at the map. I look down at my own dark green, long-sleeved tunic, tied with a rope around my waist, and under I have on thin, dark leggings.

"Story." Daegan notices me, rising to his feet, and the chair scrapes across the stone floor. "How are you feeling?"

"Recovering." I can't keep the tense feeling from being around him from appearing. "Thanks to you." It feels very strange to be thanking him. Calix seems to think the same, judging by the look he gives me.

"Very good. I was worried after you collapsed. Moving on... You"—Daegan points to Calix—"I understand being here at this first fae rider war meeting, considering you two are now representing the Moon Dynasty in this discussion. But you"—he turns to Luna—"I am less sure about being here. Can we trust you? You were a blood slave to the vampyre king."

"I am part of the Moon Dynasty," Luna says firmly, defending herself before any of us can. "And with that logic, Story can't be trusted either. I would wager we hate that royal family more than you do, and we are useful because we know them. We can offer advice on their armies, on their numbers and castles." She walks in, pointing at the map. "For starters, that castle is gone, and he had a new one built over here." She moves a castle to the east in the Sun Dynasty lands. "And it is a pleasure home, unguarded mostly."

Daegan assesses her for a second before nodding. He turns and heads back to his seat, and I finally look at the other man in the room. The man is older, maybe late sixties with grey short hair, wrinkled forehead and a slight hump on his back. A light green cloak covers him, clipped with a silver pendant. The pendant has a symbol I've never seen before. A sun and moon with their backs touching, held within a circle. An alliance. Daegan waves a hand, gesturing to him. "This is Leader Roan, the current ruler of this town we've found ourselves in. His family has protected this place for generations."

"Pleasure to meet you," he says with kind blue eyes, and I return the sentiment. "Lessborn or one of the slightly luckier powerborn?"

"Lessborn blood slave," I answer. "But that title is in my past. These titles are something I hope we erase if we manage to get this world back from the vampyres. The titles just create a boundary between us all."

"And they'll be gone," Daegan vows to me with utter distaste in his tone, like it can make up for all the history between us. It can't. But I remember when I told him the first time about the titles and the look on his face. I assumed it was to flatter me, but I actually think he hated the titles as much as every fae outside the mansion. Daegan told me "No fae is less than incredible, including you." Flattery or not, he was right. He goes and sits at the back of the table, and we all take random seats.

"I've mapped out everything I can," Roan begins, "from my ancestors' drawings."

"Thank you," Daegan offers him. "No map, no plan, nothing is going to help us, I'm afraid. I never want to be remembered as the king who said this...but we are extremely outnumbered and we have lost. There isn't a future for us outside this town." A silence echoes around the room. He is telling the truth, but it doesn't mean anyone has to accept it. "We have little over one thousand riders left, and two hundred fae without dragons—maybe much less than that if the wounded don't

survive. Everyone else is women, children, men who can't fight, and the elderly. We would need a miracle at this point to fight the vampyres and not be slaughtered. I feel like the world outside is going nowhere fast, and we can rebuild this place into something great. We spent five hundred years in the mansion protected, and we can spend another five hundred years here building an army. The dragons will breed, more riders will be found, and we can build up an army big enough to go out there and have a chance. This is not our time." He looks at me. "I know you want to use the books to help us, but if I am not proof enough that the books are not good, they are evil, then what is? They are selfish and want what is best for them. We cannot use them. You cannot, Story."

"So, you're planning to spend another five hundred years locked up?" I ask, incredulous. "And what about the fae out there? What about our people?" I rise up and put my hands on the table. "As for the books, you don't get to decide not to use them. They belong to the Twilight Dynasty."

"And are you claiming the Twilight Dynasty? Even when you're claiming the Moon, too?" He waves his hands out. "The books are evil! They should be dropped into the sea and forgotten about!"

"They are gods! They are deities, trapped within pages because of our ancestors!" I shout back. "You know we can't win this war, so give me the book and let me beg them to help us. We need a way to win and save the fae who are still suffering."

"And how exactly do you plan on saving them, Story, when those deities turn on you like they did me?" Daegan points out, his tone sharp.

"Look, I don't like risking our future on them, but—" The ground shakes violently, cutting me off. It's as if the earth is trembling beneath our feet. The maps slide off the table, and the stone statues tumble to the floor with it. All of us glance around, wide-eyed, but I look down. I look at the dragon markings on my hands and arms, how

they are dancing fast, and focus instead on a familiar feeling in my chest. A dark fire burning to life.

“What is that?” Avaluna shouts, her voice unsteady as I smile and turn to the door, and I walk out. I rush towards that feeling, knowing I’m right.

Daegan is at my side as I rush, running with all I have, all the pain disappearing from my mind. I look up—and my breath catches. “My king is back.” I can barely believe it as my bond with Ziven seems to erupt in my chest, pulsing with renewed life, and his shadows spread across the walls, making the place dark for the first time in centuries. I dig my feet into the ground to steady myself as a dragon soars above us—a massive, grey dragon, larger than Maeve. A little sadness touches my heart when I realise, if Ziven has a new dragon, his must be gone. I smile up at the sky, knowing Brythan will not be forgotten anytime soon.

“Who is that?” Daegan shouts over the loudest dragon roar I’ve ever heard.

“That is the Moon Dynasty king, and he is mine.” My eyes stay locked on the dragon and its rider. My heart races as I feel him looking at me, too. “And you said you needed a miracle to win this war, right? It seems your enemy has brought you one.”

The dragon lands near the cliff’s edge, and I sprint toward him as fast as my legs will carry me. By the time I reach the enormous creature, my stomach aches, and I’m clutching my side in pain, but it is worth it.

Ziven is still astride the dragon, and he looks more like a king than ever before. He leans down slightly to talk to the dragon, giving me a chance to take in this strange creature. The creature is a sight to behold—grey like storm clouds, with shadows swirling around its wings and body. It has tattered spikes that run from the crown of its head down its back, stretching along its wings. The dragon is muscular, colossal, with claws so massive they could rival my height. Its piercing silver eyes glint with

sheer menace as it snarls my way, but I know better than to break its stare when it's challenging me.

Ziven places a calming hand on the dragon's snout, smoothing it down gently. The beast snorts, breaking eye contact first, but lifts into the air and flies off, leaving a storm of dust between the male I love and me.

That's when I see Ziven clearly for the first time. He's changed—so much that he seems like an entirely different man.

His body is covered in tattoos, black dragon designs curling around his skin like living flames. They climb into his arms, neck, and chest, disappearing beneath the rip in his shirt. Across his forehead is a crown of dragons, their forms interwoven in intricate detail, with peaks that rise like spires at the centre of his brow. His black hair falls around the crown, framing his face.

His eyes meet mine, and I forget how to breathe.

In an instant, he closes the distance between us. His lips capture mine, and his hands tangle in my hair as he kisses me with a fervour that steals every thought from my mind.

“Story,” he whispers against my lips, his voice rough and filled with longing.

Every part of me comes alive, like he's somehow mending every crack in my soul.

“Where have you been?” I whisper, tears stinging my eyes. “Where the hell have you been? I needed you.”

He presses a soft kiss on my forehead before pulling back slightly.

“How did you get a dragon like that? Where is it from?” I ask, trying to process everything at once.

“We’ll talk soon,” he says, his tone possessive. “But first, my mate and I need to be alone.”

The way he growls the word mate sends a shiver through me.

Calix steps forward, and his grin lights up the space, right before he bows his head low. He isn’t the only one bowing. Everyone behind Calix is on their knees, except for Daegan. The words “dragon king” are whispered like a prayer around the building crowd.

Daegan moves forward. “We need?—”

“No, I need my woman. You can wait.” Ziven doesn’t wait for further objections. He scoops me into his arms like I weigh nothing, his grip firm but careful.

“You’re hurt.” His voice is low as he carries me. “And is Hettie here?”

“It’s not a story you want to hear,” I admit quietly, resting my head against his chest. “And yes. She is safe.”

“Where’s your house?” he asks.

I give him directions, and he strides toward it with purpose. When we reach the doorway, he seems massive, nearly filling the frame as he steps inside and shuts the door behind us.

The small room feels even tinier with him in it. There’s a modest bed, a simple chair, a woven rug, and a makeshift wardrobe. Ziven’s intense gaze sweeps over everything

before landing back on me.

He sets me gently on the bed, lifting my shirt slightly to examine the stitches, and his jaw tightens. From his pocket, he pulls out a vial of clear water.

“Healing water from the mansion,” he explains. “I sensed you weren’t well. We made a stop, killed a few Silkvir on the way, and left. I wanted to test my new dragon.”

I drink the healing water, breathing in relief as I feel my body mending. I glance down, watching in amazement as the cut fades before my eyes, leaving behind nothing but scarred skin and my unhealable bite mark scars.

“What happened?” Ziven demands.

“I ran straight into Prince Emyr in the forest,” I say quietly. “He had Hettie. I made a deal with him—that I’d go with him if he let her go. He was desperate enough to agree, and he did.”

I pause, swallowing hard as I leave out the part where I held a dagger to myself. How could I possibly explain that to him? That I tried to leave this world—leave us?

“Anyway,” I continue, “I woke up in the castle. He was there. He did this”—I gesture to where the scar is fading—“in fury because I wouldn’t be the blood slave he remembered. I didn’t want to be anything to him. He wanted me to marry him. He even brought the king in; it was all but agreed.”

Ziven’s eyes narrow. “How did you get out?”

“Daegan.”

His eyebrow arches in surprise, and I nod.

“I know,” I admit. “He flew straight to me, hid out all day and night, and then at dawn, he crashed into the castle to save me. He used the bond to find me, to know exactly where I was, and he was the only one who could do that.” Ziven’s expression darkens. “Other than you,” I admit softly. “I tried to kill myself.”

His face freezes. Shadows gather in the corners of the room, twisting and dancing as his anger rises. “I didn’t want to,” I rush to explain. “Please don’t think I was trying to leave. I just didn’t want to be his again. For some reason, the vampyre blood didn’t work when I...died. I healed and came back. He said it was because I was born in the Twilight Dynasty, that the magic doesn’t work properly on me. I’m still fae, but nothing’s changed.”

Ziven’s fury burns in his eyes. His voice trembles with restrained anger as he growls, “You tried to leave.”

“So did you!” I shout back, cutting him off.

He flinches, his breath hitching. “Story, where have you been?”

“Fighting for us,” I say fiercely. “Never giving up. I felt you die too. Don’t you dare be angry at me! I did what I had to do in that situation. Don’t you dare.”

“I have every right to be mad!” he roars.

“And so do I!” I scream back, the heat between us flaring like a wildfire in the forest, the trees only fuelling the rushing anger. We’re both breathing heavily, right before his lips slam down on mine, and he pushes me straight back onto the bed with him. Yes . I’m still angry, still furious at him as we both start tearing each other’s clothes off, but none of it seems to matter as long as I have him here, with me, reminding both of us that we are still alive. His lips devour mine with a branding claim, a claim I feel in my blood, in my very soul. He kisses his way down my jaw, to my neck where

he sucks and nips at my skin, softly marking me, before moving down my body. He groans when he gets to my breasts, lightly kissing my nipples one by one. The friction, the teasing, is too much as I moan under him.

“I fucking missed you, Storm.” He runs his hands down my hips, torturously slow. His eyes are still wicked, still full of the same thing that began this fight. Fear. I don’t—no, can’t —lose him. He starts yanking down my leggings. I can barely think of anything but him and how much I need him. He pushes my legs apart, running his fingertip down my slit before gliding two fingers easily inside me, already finding me soaked for him. His thumb runs around my clit as he pumps his fingers in and out of me, watching my body, watching my face every second. I clutch the bedsheet tight. “How fucking dare you try and take this— you —from me,” he growls, sending shivers up my body.

I snarl back at him, and his grin is feral. I push him back on the other side of the bed, climbing onto his lap and kissing with every bit of my anger. Oh, by the deities, he gives it back to me with every stroke of his lips. But he doesn’t take me, not yet. I feel his cock, hard and ready by my thigh, and he holds me up. He twists us around, pushing me against the wall, lifting us off the bed, and he grips the back of my neck. “Never again, Storm. Fucking promise me.”

“Promise me the same.” I give him the same question. “Then I promise.”

“Never again,” he vows, and I gasp as he drives his cock straight into me, and the fullness of him is home. He groans, digging his hands into the wall. “Fuck.” He pounds into me, pushing me into the wall, fury marking my body as his with his every thrust. I can’t stop the moans escaping my lips, the echo of them matching the sound of us. “This,” he groans, and I feel the sound right down my core. “Us.” He grips my ass tight in his hands. “This is permanent and forever. You don’t fucking leave me, do you understand? I want you alive at the end of all of this and hate me, but I am the only one who gets to die between us. Now promise me forever.”

I won't ever let him die.

"Forever," I answer with every bit of my soul that he owns completely. He carries me to the bed, pulling out of me to turn me over on the bed, and he drags my hips up into the air before slamming into me again. His grip is tight on my hips, but I can barely notice anything other than the pleasure of my building orgasm. I feel it turning down my spine, and he growls louder. Shadows dance in the room, blocking out every inch of light. I swear I see dragons within the shadows now. "Come for me, my queen. My mate." He has never called me those titles like this before, like they are mine now and not something I can argue with, and I cry out as my orgasm explodes through every part of my body and the pleasure is blinding. I can feel nothing except for his cock, nothing other than him taking me over and over, right before he finishes with a roar that shakes the walls of the hut.

My knees are ready to collapse as he picks me up, lying us both down on the bed and covering us with a blanket. He keeps me close as I trace the new markings, the hundreds of dragons that dance around every inch of his skin above his waist and under his neck.

"They are beautiful," I whisper, touching a particularly big dragon over his heart. "What do these markings mean?"

"I'm the King of the Dragons, and they listen to my every command now." He strokes his hand down my cheek. "And now we have thousands of dragons fighting for us. Shadow dragons, they're huge and I'm going to win this war for you. You are going to survive this war." Ziven leans over me. "Be my mate, my queen, and join the Moon Dynasty. Marry me, Story Dehana."

"Oh, Ziven." I stroke his cheek. "Yes. Yes to all the titles that come with loving you. It's been a yes for a long time."

His smile is wide, different from anything I've seen from him. A radiant smile. I can almost imagine what Ziven would have been like without the war, without the vampyres. Maybe we can have this when the war is over, a life of happiness. "I planned to ask for your forgiveness and then ask you to marry me. I am sorry about Kyrell."

"There will never be a moment I don't mourn him, but I know he asked you. He gave you an impossible choice, and I can't hate you for keeping your word, but..." I climb up onto him and lean down. "Keeping secrets will be the death of us. I'm yours." I lean down and kiss him softly. "And you're mine. Never again."

Something unreadable shines in his eyes for a second, but it's gone as quick as an ember in the wind. He winds his hand into my hair, a single word escaping his lips. "Mine."

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Chapter Nine

Page Nine. I write this final part to you. The deities are holy beings and they can be changed.

I dive straight to the left, barely missing Avaluna's swift and unexpected lunge in my direction. "That was really impressive. You almost got me."

She winks. "Calix is fantastic at training me." I bet. I hold in my comment but not my smile, and she rolls her eyes at me. "I think I like training and fighting. Using my body, training like this—it makes you feel like you can fight anyone, right?"

"Yes," I answer, knowing exactly what she means. In the early days of the mansion, I felt like training saved my mental health from plummeting more than necessary. I'll never be able to escape the memories completely but, for the most part, I will be able to use training to fight the worst days away. When I'm training, I don't have time to think of the past, to let my nightmares haunt me. An understanding passes between two people with the same horrors. I grin at her, and she grins right back before lunging at me again. I twist around her, knocking her back before swinging my leg out and kicking her straight out of the circle. She falls on her ass, her eyes wide. "Calix is good, but I was trained by the king." I offer her my hand. "And I learned I don't like to lose."

She laughs, taking my hand, and we both head to the water jugs by the mat. The cold air whips around us, and I look around as I take a drink, missing the forest. Missing the colours of the sky, the colours of nature, which are lost here. This place is a cave of grey and nothing much else. The green farms do not make up for the lack of life in

this place, and I'm so glad Ziven is back with a solution, because spending forever locked in here can't be a long-term option like Daegan planned. The people here might be content, but they are trapped, and they have no idea what it is like out there.

Calix claps as he comes over to us, my rival on the edge of the mat wheezing. "Well done. I was impressed by that move, Story." He winks at Avaluna when she huffs. "Want me to teach you how to block her next time? Ziven does the same twisting move, and I learnt a trick to block the bastard."

"Yes, but in secret." She laughs. "Then I can surprise Story."

I smile at them both. I've also seen how Calix blocks Ziven in sparring, and I have a good chance of stopping her. Calix turns to me, and it's like he has to physically drag his eyes from Avaluna. "Have you seen Ziven this morning? Only, there's another meeting and King Daegan is calling for him. He didn't attend the morning meeting. I was sent to find him, but I'm not brave enough to knock on your hut door when the ground is shaking and covered in shadows." He arches an eyebrow. "Like it has been for weeks."

My cheeks burn. I know exactly why he wasn't attending this morning. It's been two weeks since he turned up, and we've spent most of our time in the hut. Any other time, it's meetings after meetings, and they can be quite strenuous as Daegan and him can't seem to agree on anything other than they want the vampires dead. Every other plan has gone up in flames, and anyone in the room is stuck in the middle of them both, along with me. "I haven't seen him since he took off on his dragon."

He sighs, pinching his nose. "Right. He seems to do that a lot. How's Maeve doing?"

"I gather it's them practicing flying together and securing the bond," I add before answering him. "But Maeve is healing and sleeping most of the time to do that. She claims she'll fly up to see me in a few days, as her wing is nearly there. Honestly, I

miss riding her.” I touch my chest. “Being apart from your dragon is unnatural.”

“At least your dragon’s coming up and communicating with you. Mine is being strange,” Calix admits quietly. “Some dragons are not answering their riders. I think they are mad at us for losing the fight, and worse, they might not fight with us.”

“They will,” I firmly state. “I don’t think it’s that. I have a feeling it’s something else. Our dragons love us as much as we love them. You taught me that.”

I’ve asked Maeve about this subject, but she goes silent on me too.

He nods. “I know.” Straightening, he delivers more good news. “And you’re coming with me to the meeting if Ziven is still not here. Ziven told me not to punch Daegan, but if he keeps being a pissy little shit because Ziven is not turning up, I’m going to ignore my king’s orders.” I cough on thin air, and Calix pats my back. “Good, you agree. Let’s go.” He kisses Avaluna’s cheek. “See you soon. Watch Hettie until Dianyla’s, her new friend, mother comes and takes them both for lunch, okay?”

“Always.” She blushes under his intense stare. They smell like each other, I notice. I’m not sure what is going on with them, but something is. I glance over at Hettie, and she’s reading in the corner, chatting with one of the fae children that made it here from the mansion. A lot of her other new friends didn’t, and I can barely accept knowing that they’re gone. They were children. Calix and I wind through the busy town, and several people stop us to bow their heads or offer up prayers to the deities in the royals’ names. When it’s quieter, I lower my voice. “I’m not sure I’m used to the attention here from them. I’m not even the queen yet or his mate yet.”

“You are, pretty much in everything other than officially titled as one,” he points out. “And for the record, you’ve always been my queen. I knew it from the second you punched Ziven in the face after the Decidere. It was love.” I wince, remembering that moment, but Calix is laughing. “Talking of which, when is the wedding going to be?”

I don't have a suit, which is a shame because I look good in one."

"No idea, because we're in a war and there's a lot going on. A wedding seems, well, not the first thing on our minds," I answer as we wind around a hut.

"Because there's everything going on...a wedding should be the first thing on your mind," he counters. "Say the word, and I will plan with Luna the most amazing wedding ever—even in this place."

I shake my head. "I think that's up to Ziven, don't you?" But the truth is, no matter where we are or what it is like, I'd marry him in a heartbeat. A part of me wants us to have that ultimate connection before we go into a war where we might not survive it. If I face death, I want him as my king, my mate, and simply mine in every part of my soul.

We get up to the building where all the meetings are held, and I can hear the shouting from outside. I wince. Calix stops at the door with a pretend serious face. "I sense extreme danger out here. It's a prerogative that I guard the door." He winks at me. "Good luck!"

"Jackass," I mutter under my breath, reaching for the door handle.

"Very unladylike for a queen to be." Calix is barely holding in a laugh as I whack his arm before going into the meeting room. "Oh, and I saw the last volunteer rushing away in the opposite direction on our walk over here. Looks like you're stuck with the kings who hate each other all on your own this time."

Deities be with me.

Daegan is pacing by the door, throwing his arms in the air. "You can't just walk in here and demand everything your own way! You're not the only king in

existence—you know that, right?”

Ziven’s eyes are drawn to mine, and they soften in a way they only do when he looks at me. He is sitting on the biggest chair in the room, at the head of the table with his legs spread as he leans back. Comfortable. Relaxed. Cocky. He drags his eyes to Daegan. “While sitting around here, doing nothing, was probably the best plan, right?” He narrows his gaze. “What was your plan? Stay here, make pretty babies, and help the clueless rule and manage to take over at some point? Yes, let me listen to your plan again. It was epic.”

I cringe at the sarcasm dragging in Ziven’s tone. “That was not the plan, and if you?—”

Ziven smoothly interrupts. “Well, it was a shit plan, and it wasn’t going to work. This place might be hidden and protected for now, but the vampyre king will find a way in eventually. We need riders and quick. I have dragons. You have fae. Together, we stand one single fucking chance of winning this. Don’t let our past shade the alliance we can make for a future.” His reason is surprising, and seriously hot.

They both hold each other’s gaze, and I move around Daegan, straight to the seat in the middle of them. The sound of the chair scratching the floor as I tug it out is awkward, and I’m relieved when I can finally sit down. At some point, Daegan gives in. “Fine.” He blows out a breath. “I’m well aware I’ve not been stable as a king or made the right choices.” He glances at me for a second too long.

Ziven growls low. “For the record, she is mine. Don’t look at her like that again, or I will tear your heart out and see if it burns in the moonlight.” The threat echoes.

Daegan looks right at Ziven and nods. “Understood.”

The silence drags on, even as Daegan takes a seat at the table on the opposite side of

Ziven. I really hate being in the middle of this. I glance at Ziven. “The shadow dragons will take riders like yours did?”

He inclines his head. “They state only the worthy can ride for the war.”

“Worthy,” Daegan muses. “Then anyone who signs up has to volunteer. The dragons are temperamental.”

“Something we finally agree on.” Ziven taps his fingers on the armrest. “Can we agree on the flight plans next?”

“If I have more riders and more information on the city, then yes.” Daegan crosses his arms. “If Story and Maeve flew with us?—”

“No.” Ziven’s tone is final.

I glare at him. “You can’t make that choice. Daegan has a point. I have a massive dragon, and it makes sense to send our two biggest dragons to different cities at the same time. All that matters is that we win.”

“No, all that matters to me is that you are alive at the end of this war,” he counters with no apology in his tone. “And when we fly to war, it will be together.”

I sigh, leaning back. Being romantic is always his way of winning, and I’ll bring this argument up later when we are alone. Ziven rises from his seat, coming to the back of my seat and leaning down to press a kiss to my cheek. “I’m afraid I can’t join you for the afternoon like we planned. I will find you in a few hours.” Straightening, he calls out, “Calix!”

Calix comes in, followed by Avaluna. “Yes, my king.” It’s strange to hear him so formal, and I know it’s only because he is around Daegan.

Ziven's hand strokes a strand of hair, tucking it behind my ear. "Our queen is leaving. Defend her for me, and I will catch you up soon."

Daegan doesn't say anything, but I suppose there's surprise in his eyes for a second. Maybe even pain. He doesn't deserve to be hurt over my happiness.

Avaluna glances at me. "Why don't we go into the town, get a drink and lunch with some of the locals? It'd be good to socialise with them more, and we would be perfectly safe," she suggests. "And we don't need guards."

Oh, I love her. I rise to my feet and Ziven arches a dark eyebrow. "Sending a guard with me is insulting, Ziv. I might be your queen soon, but you trained me not to be helpless."

"You do need a guard." Ziven wraps an arm around my waist and tugs me against his own chest. "Only to drag out the bodies of anyone who dared to touch you when you're done with them."

Using my tiptoes, I lean up to brush my lips across his. "Find me soon and don't spend too long arguing."

Avaluna opens the door for me, and Calix gives me a pleading look to save him, which I ignore as he threw me to the wolves alone earlier, and we head straight into the town. It's quite busy, and both of us decide to put our hoods up and keep to ourselves. My red hair already attracts enough attention, and I haven't seen anyone else with red hair at all.

"I heard that you're sleeping in Calix's hut." I keep my voice low. "Hettie mentioned it."

"Listen, I'm going to need alcohol for us to have this discussion," Luna replies with

burning red cheeks, barely hidden under her dark hair. “But for now...he is my entwined mate, too.”

My eyes widen. I barely hold in a cheer, but my smile hides nothing. “Congratulations on the gift. I knew you two were something special.”

“Thank you. We haven’t...” She looks away and clears her throat. “I’m not ready for that yet. I don’t need to ask whether you and Ziven are sleeping in the same hut, because everyone hears the floor shaking multiple times a day—and night, I might add.”

My cheeks burn. “We need alcohol—definitely for this.”

She laughs, resting her head on my shoulder. I’m hit with a longing for Catherine, and every day, I think about her and just wonder. Is she dead? Is her dragon? I’m missing Ruelle, too. I still can’t believe she’s gone. When Ziven told us, we all gathered together to mourn. Hettie burst into tears, and I was barely able to hold back my own, even though I wasn’t as close to her as Hettie was.

I held her all night as she wept as she lay in bed between me and Ziven until she fell asleep sobbing. She’s still quite upset, and I don’t know how anyone will fill the void in her life that Ruelle left. We’ll have a funeral for her when the war is over, along with the funerals for all the dead fae that we have lost. Mazzis. I miss him and I can’t think of him dying with the books I loved so much, too. There aren’t many books in this place, and the twenty-odd Ziven found are about nothing that interesting. I’ve read three of them so far, and Hettie is reading them straight after me. Twenty books...I took the library for granted.

We head into the only bar in the entire town. It’s a huge room that’s slightly below ground, filled with small tables and stools pressed against them. It’s packed full of people and it smells like them too, mixed with the heavy stink of spilled drinks,

which has made the floor sticky in places.

It takes us a while to get through the fae to the bar, where we order two drinks. Their idea of alcohol is some green floaty liquid that's very strong. "Calix warned me this stuff could get you drunk in a matter of three drinks, which he thought was impressive. The stuff they had in the mansion required at least three bottles to make him tipsy."

I nod, barely hearing Avaluna over the noise of this place. We take our drinks, go back, and start looking around for a table at the edges of the room where it is quieter. We find one, but it's already occupied by someone in a green cloak, her slender hands wrapped around a pen as she scribbles in a notebook.

"We could just ask her for the other two seats?" I suggest, not being able to tug my eyes from the woman at the table. There is something about her that feels familiar. She lifts her head and my drink slips out of my hand, smashing to the floor.

Maeve is in my mind instantly. "Are you well?"

I don't notice the people looking at the drink on the floor. I don't feel Luna touching my arm or hear her asking what is wrong. I don't hear anyone as my mother's forest green eyes find mine, and we both just stare at each other. She pushes her hood down, her dark red braid falling over her shoulder, and I can't breathe as she stands up, comes around the stools, and slowly walks up to me.

She peels my hood back and tucks my hair behind my ears the way she always has, touching the black tips, and a sob echoes out of her throat. "Story," she whispers. "My Story."

The second time she says my name, it feels like it belongs to her in a way only a mother can claim her child. "Mum," I whisper back before throwing myself at her,

and she catches me as I breathe in her scent, as I take in the fact my mother is alive. I haven't seen her since I was fourteen years old, when she fought tooth and nail to make sure I had a good vampyre master. This is my mother, who brought me up like we didn't live in a breeder's camp, like we weren't lessborn, and she tried everything to make sure I had a good life. She holds me, tightening her grip, and it's as if there haven't been years between us. I cry, holding her as tightly as I possibly can as she cries too.

I don't know how long it is before she pulls back, looking into my eyes. "Story. How...how are you here?" She cups my cheek. "You've grown up so much and you're so, so beautiful. Deities above, you look like your father. I see him now." She raises her other hand to my other cheek. "Am I dead? Is this a gift from the deities?"

"We aren't dead, mum." My voice is trembling. "But deities have blessed us." Her smile is so big and I don't think I've seen her smile like this before. I realise I've never seen her free, either. Avaluna is awkwardly standing at my side as my mum lowers her hands, but she stands close still. "This is my close friend, Avaluna."

"A pleasure." She nods to her. "How are you here, Story?"

"I could ask you the same. I honestly assumed you were dead, mum," I admit. Her eyes are on my hands, on the dragon markings she can see there.

"I thought I was too. Come, come and sit with me," she asks, pointing to the table. "And explain to me how you became a dragon rider."

Maeve. I send an apology to her for scaring her with my feelings, but she only sends warmth back, and a hint of sadness. She lost all of her family, and this joy must be difficult for her. "By fighting for her, by being the daughter you raised."

"I'll go and get us another drink," Avaluna suggests, putting her drink down on the

table, her eyes wide as she meets mine.

“Thank you.” I nod to her.

I step over the broken glass, wincing at the mess. I can’t clean that up right now before I sit down, and mum holds my hands across the table.

“You tell me what happened to you,” she demands and somehow makes me feel like I’m ten years old again. “You were given to a kind vampyre friend, but then his house was burnt down. Everyone assumed you were dead. I assumed you’d died, but in my heart...” She pauses, searching for the words. “I felt like you were alive. I tried searching for you. I made deals with every vampyre I could to try to find you, but no one had heard anything. No one knew. I had to accept that you were probably dead. But I couldn’t do it—couldn’t believe it was true.”

“Keep telling me everything,” I ask, because the moment I tell her mine, things are going to change. I can see it in her eyes. She’s full of hope, love, and laughter right now—everything she always tried to be around me. She never let the harsh world touch me when I was a kid. I owe her so much for that. Parts of my childhood—the memories of her—are the only things that kept me alive for so long. She kept me alive.

“I got attacked by a vampyre royal guard when I was with Blaire,” she begins, her voice trembling. “He killed her, drained me and threw my body into the river. I don’t know how or why, but I was found by some people by the coast. One of them was a healer. They were escaping the city, and they took me with them. They said they felt this calling here, and we just followed tunnels. Endless tunnels. Until we found ourselves here.”

Blaire is gone? Kyrell would have been devastated to know that, but in a way, I’m happy they are together now.

“Once here, I realised I couldn’t leave. No matter how many tries—so many tries—it was pointless. It was like the magic didn’t want me to go, and I made a life here instead. A life where I didn’t have to be a breeder. I could just exist. I was never fully happy, though. I looked at every person who turned up, every day, asking them about you. But no one ever knew. Until somebody arrived about four weeks ago.” She pauses, her hands tightening around mine. “They said they’d heard of a woman called Story Dehana, whose very name began rebellions in the cities. She was the prince’s blood slave who escaped. Please tell me that the second part of that wasn’t true. That you were his blood slave?”

Avaluna comes back to the table and sits down. My heart aches as I begin to tell my mum everything. I tell her everything that had happened in the past. How I became the prince’s blood slave. About Kyrell, leaving out his second death because that should stay between Ziven and me and my friends who saw how Kyrell was at the end. I tell her instead about how he saved me and got me free. How I found the mansion—a mansion full of dragon riders and people like me. How I fought in the Decidere to become a rider. “Yes, it’s complicated, but...I found happiness there. I found Ziven, who is my entwined mate, and we are going to be married.”

“Who is Ziven?” she asks, her voice laced with curiosity and confusion.

“He’s the Moon Dynasty king and the King of the Dragons,” I explain softly, and her eyes widen. “He’s my king, my lover, my best friend and rival all in one. I love him with every bit of my soul.”

“And I love her back.” Ziven wraps his arm around my waist from behind. “And you are?”

I lift my head to Ziven and smile. “This is my mum.” His returning smile is pure light, direct from the moon in the night sky. “Mum, this is Ziven with a bunch of titles, if you want to hear them all.”

“The most important title of mine is being hers.” He offers my mum a bow of his head. “Thank you for creating my mate.”

My mum’s expression softens as she says, “I’ve not just been blessed with the return of my daughter, but soon a son, too.”

I almost feel how Ziven reacts to that. After losing so much of his family, it means everything she has accepted him. I love her more for it.

“I never thought I’d see you again,” I admit.

“Neither did I,” she returns with a soft smile. She hasn’t aged much since I last saw her, but there is a lightness to her features now that brightens the room. Ziven joins us at the table after grabbing us another bunch of drinks as the hours pass. We drink until we were all tipsy and laughing at the stories my mum tells Ziven about me as a child. The hours seem like minutes before leaving the tavern as it is closing and emptying out.

Calix is waiting for Avaluna, and he wraps my mum up in a bear hug when I tell him who she is. She only laughs and tells me she is happy I have friends. We walk my mum back to her hut, and she hugs me so tightly outside the door as Ziven gives us some space.

“I am proud of the brilliant, fantastic woman you have become. Deities hear me...this gift is a miracle.” She leans back. “And I know war is coming for us soon. I want you to keep fighting with every bit of your soul. I know you left out what it was like for you as a blood slave to that monster, but you survived it. You are a survivor, Story Dehana. You’re a warrior. Your father would be so, so proud, and I know this because I am too.”

I might be tipsy, but her words linger in my mind. I thought I was broken when I was

doing nothing but surviving, but I was training the broken pieces of my soul and knitting them back together. For moments like this. For a future I couldn't even imagine anymore. "I'll come over tomorrow and bring Hettie. You will love her."

"I cannot wait to meet your ward," she replies, kissing my cheek. "Now go with your mate. He is waiting."

I almost can't leave my mum as she goes back into her hut, feeling like she might disappear again. "Today was real, right? I'm not dreaming?"

"Not dreaming," Ziven confirms as we walk back. We are on the other side of the town, and it takes us a while to walk through it, but I don't mind; in fact, I enjoy the quiet walk with Ziven. "You're even more beautiful when you're happy, Storm." He cups the back of my neck, stopping us. "Smile at me, take my breath away. I need to remember this moment forever."

"As cute as this moment is," Etena's cold, chipped voice cuts through, "we have a problem." The effects of the alcohol seem to fade instantly at the tone of her voice. "King Daegan sent me to inform you of the news. A fae woman has turned up as a refugee with unsettling news."

"What did she claim?" Ziven questions.

I almost wish Etena waited till morning to speak, to darken this night. "The king and prince are burning fae in each of the cities every single day—thousands of them. It's a calling to us, letting us know that the days we spend here are costing lives. It's a warning that if we wait too long to act, there will be no people left to go to war for."

Chapter Ten

Catherine

Page Ten. Dragons are like deities, but dragged down to a mortal form. They should be free.

My dragon dives straight through another endlessly dark tunnel, taking the air from my lungs in a sharp snap. We lunge to the left and I grip her scales, clenching my thighs so I don't fall straight off. The children cry out from the quick changing direction, and I can't see the state of the wooden crate they are in. It's heavy for my dragon; we've had to make so many stops along the way, hiding from the Silkvir in the night, making repairs to the crate with anything we could find along the way. Niko is a good fighter, and that has been needed more than once along the trip when the vampyres have found us. Their hesitation when seeing their prince is useful because they don't suspect he will fight for me and not them. It only further proved to me that my gut feeling and my dragon are right. He is on our side. Now I have to convince my king and my friend. Story is going to take one look at Niko and see who he is, and King Ziven or King Daegan will attack him for his royal blood. Niko knows this, and yet he is here, flying with me into danger and never asking to stay behind.

There is a change in pressure that makes my ears pop, and I straighten, feeling the hum of the box tied to my back with straps. I don't like having the box so close to my skin, but I don't have a choice but to keep it close until I give it to Story. It's hers, and I want to be as far away from it as possible. I don't know if it is alive, but there is a hum that rattles in my blood, and it grows stronger the closer we get to the dragons.

To the fae too. I don't know what the book in this box wants, but it feels strangely agreeable to the flight.

It's rare I've flown alone on my dragon in the last couple of weeks, but for this final trip of the tunnels, where he warned me last night we are close, Niko decided to stay with the children in the crate to calm them. We don't usually fly more than two hours at a time, but today, we have flown for six hours straight to get here. Without flying high in the skies, it's been a slow flight, and my body is aching, not just with the flight but the pressure of knowing what is coming. Story is my friend, and she trusts me. I remind myself of it a hundred times because, otherwise, fear of losing what I just found in the Decidere might tear me apart.

"The other dragons hear us, they sense the vampyre, and they're not happy with me. They hunt us," my dragon warns, and he speeds up. The children scream and I can't do anything but hold on.

Command. I have to make a command. "Get us quickly to the kings. We need to plead our case before the dragons get involved in this."

The tunnel finally ends, and we glide out into fresh air, a crater of sorts deep within the ground, and on a ledge is a town. The brightness of the light in here makes me squint as I take it all in, wondering how this old town is even possible, and a bigger part of me is relieved. My people could be alive down there...my parents. I know it's so much to hope for with what happened, but I am hoping and praying it is true that they are down there, that they survived what happened at the mansion. I know I'm about to find out.

We land on a clearing outside of the town, dust blowing up a storm around us, and I cover my eyes as he gently drops the crate and lands next to it. His wing spreads out protectively over the crate, and I touch his neck. "Well done, and thank you. Those children and I owe you our lives."

“The young must be protected at all costs,” he replies in my mind. The walls are like mirrors, the stone so smooth, and I wonder if dragons used fire to melt the rock like this, to make it so reflective. Roars echo in the air, and the ground shakes as dragons spill out of the tunnels, coming right for us. The crate door slams onto the ground, but the children don’t come out and neither does Niko. They are waiting for me. Shadows explode in the air, in the ground, like grey whispers of clouds that follow the command of their king. Niko is dragged out and held in the air, struggling with his mouth bound in shadows too. King Ziven walks towards us, his hands resting in his pockets and a calm yet confused look as he finds me.

“You bring our enemy to us, Catherine?” he demands. King Ziven scares me, and I am shaking as I slide down my dragon to the ground. “Stop!” I beg, running up to King Ziven, close to where Niko is being held in the air. “Wait, please don’t kill him and listen to me. I know I’m not from the Moon Dynasty, but you know I’m Story’s friend, and I’d never bring anyone here that could hurt her. Please.”

“Give me one good reason other than blind trust, Catherine,” Ziven demands.

“He’s my mate,” I answer, because it’s the very best of reasons why he can’t kill him and why we can trust him.

Story rushes over and throws herself at me, hugging me so tightly it almost hurts, and I squeeze her right back. “Did you just say you have a mate?” She steps back and looks up at him, her eyes widening, and she takes several steps closer to Ziven, who wordlessly wraps an arm around her waist. “He’s a vampyre prince, and I know him. We met once.”

“All the reason to kill him,” Ziven coolly suggests, and my heart nearly stops. No. Dragons fly around us with snarls and roars that rattle the ground, but the world stills for me as Ziven’s shadows tighten on Niko, and he screams in pain.

“Please, listen to me.” I drop to my knees. “Please, he is not a villain.”

King Daegan steps out of the crowd and walks to me. He offers me his hand. I take it, rising to my feet. “You don’t bow to the Moon; you are one of my people and so is the vampyre now. I claim him, Ziven, let him the fuck go. Catherine is one of your mate’s friends, and she has never not shown loyalty to our kind.” He nods at me. “You ask me every single day to listen in those meetings. Well, maybe you should take your own advice right now.”

King Ziven and King Daegan stare each other down, and I look at Story, pleading with her to trust me. She nods, even as pale as she looks, and whispers to Ziven something I can’t hear. He drops Niko like a rock.

I run to him, touching his face as he rises to his feet and takes my hand. King Ziven’s voice is chipped. “One warning, vampyre—make a move against anyone here, and you’re dead.”

“Noted for the future,” he coughs out, and his clothes are torn from the shadows. I stay at his side. “But for the record, Catherine is right. I’m only here to make an alliance with you, and I brought a peace offering that was no small feat and cost many lives, none taken by me.” He waves his hand behind him at the basket, and I leave him to head up to it.

“You can come out,” I gently coax, leaning in and holding out my hand. “These are your people. Fae. You’ll be safe here. I’m sure they have food and places to get warm.”

A little girl comes out first. She looks thin and too scared in a grey cloak. She has shiny, almost black hair, and she takes my hand. I lead them out one by one. All their little faces silence everyone—even the dragons flying around.

Story speaks first. “Where in the name of the deities did you get these children from, and are they well?”

“They’re from the breeding district, and they are well, just hungry and cold. We ran out of food yesterday, but we have tried to keep them all fed.” I look around at them all. “Niko kept them safe, took a sword to the stomach for them and nearly died. He sacrificed for the fae and has done many times before this. I’m asking you to listen.”

Despite clearly being outnumbered, and I suspect nervous, he stands straight to address them all. “I’m part of the building rebellion of both vampyre and fae alike. I got word that their parents had desperately tried to save them and hid them away, but they needed a guardian. I did everything I could, fought for them, protected them. Catherine found me in the forest when I was nearly dead from those efforts, and all I could think of was that if I didn’t live, I wouldn’t be able to help these children.” More of the children are coming out, some holding crying, weak babies. “Catherine and I were brought together by fate, by the legendary stories of entwined mates, and I will help you win the war. You’ll need my help to take down my father and brother and my other siblings, too, who will side with him.”

Story walks away from Ziven to pick up a baby from a young girl who is struggling to stand. “We need healers and help. Catherine, do you have a headcount? Can you and Niko identify each of these children if we send them out with these fae?” After I confirm that we can, she calls out, “Everyone take a child with them to help!” The crowd of fae moves with her, and we stand watching until all the children are gone with the fae, including the baby Story was holding. She comes over, looking around at the awkward group of us. The two kings are in quiet discussions, with Etena watching Niko closely, like if he moves wrong, she will attack him. Calix is a few feet away with Avaluna, who is holding a dark-haired baby, and he grins at me before walking off with her to hand the baby away.

“Do you have the book?” Story asks me, and both the kings turn to watch as I nod.

Ziven wraps his arm around Story. “We have agreed he can stay as long as he swears into one of our dynasty with blood, and we will head to the hall to continue this conversation.”

Niko steps up to Daegan. “I want to join the Sun Dynasty, the dynasty of my mate, and serve you.” He bows his head.

King Daegan watches for a second. “For the children. Push up your sleeve.” He does as he is told, and Daegan places his hand on his arm. “By the sun, by the deities, you will join the light until your death.”

“Repeat it,” I whisper, and he does. When Daegan removes his hand, there on his arm is a sun marking that matches the one I have.

Daegan pats his shoulder. “Welcome, and let’s win this war.”

Story stays close to me on the walk through the town, and I try to take in everything I can on the way. The people really love the colour green. The building is one of the few that is built with grey stone, and the walls look higher than the others, with big wooden doors at the front. We go in with the kings and Story, but Etena stays to guard the door.

“Do you trust him?” Story directly asks me when we have all sat down. “You’re my best friend and we have fought together, and I trust you. Even if you sit there and tell me a royal vampyre is trustworthy for more reasons than your feelings or bond. Do you trust this vampyre?”

I answer her directly because what she doesn’t say is that this vampyre is the brother of her tormentor, her old master, and there must be so many memories for her when she looks at him. “Yes. He is my mate, and nothing he’s done so far has done anything but help me and the fae. He feeds from animals. He’s never once tried to

bite me, and he must have been part of the rebellion to save this many children. The children told me their parents knew that a good vampyre was coming to save them—they knew to trust this vampyre. I don't think that many parents would have made that mistake. They trust him with their children. I feel like I can trust him, too."

"And what happened to their parents?" King Daegan questions rather bluntly. "One day these babies and young children will ask, and I want to be able to tell them the truth."

"Slaughtered by vampyres after getting them out. There was meant to be more children, but..." Niko drifts off. "I only found these, and any others...I pray to anyone in the skies for their safety. The breeding camps were burnt down. All of them." A bitter silence enters the room. "I did meet you once, Story Dehana," he speaks to her. "And did I have a blood slave? A favourite, or did you see me carting around a poor fae blood slave?"

She shakes her head. "No. But that doesn't mean you couldn't have found one."

"No, I never had one." He is firm. "I always fed from animals and made a point of only feeding in front of my family when they demanded it. I would try my very best to make sure that they weren't in pain when I did feed on them, and I would drug their food with pain relief remedies. I don't enjoy pain. Not every vampyre born does. Some of us do not want this life or the hunt for fae blood. There is a whole rebellion of vampyres out there who will turn against my family the minute they are given the chance and I call for the rebellion to start."

He leans back in his seat. "I met a vampyre man called Griffin, who is high up in the cities. He is deeply in love with a fae woman called Helen, and he has built a secret army of vampyres to protect her every move. I believe they are mates; their bond is strong, and there are so many like them. I've been building the rebellion with them for over one hundred years." He looks at King Ziven directly. "You have my

information, my rebellion army, and my life if needed, but I have conditions.”

“You don’t get to ask anything other than your life,” King Ziven growls at him. Shadows prick the walls and make the candles flicker.

King Daegan waves a hand. “I will listen to those conditions. You don’t come across as someone unreasonable.”

Story leans into King Ziven. “I knew a kind vampyre too—remember my first master I told you about? He would have fought for us, and I think we need to give some of them a chance, Ziv.”

Niko carries on. “I have an younger sister and she’s too kind for this world, and she feeds on animals too. Her name is Caelina. She must be left alive when this war is over.” He clears his throat and looks at me. “And Catherine is given a formal place in the Sun Dynasty and a portion of land for her to live peacefully in when the war is over.”

King Daegan smiles and nods. “Catherine has proved herself continually since the Decidere, and I do not have a court yet. I will begin one today with you both, with titles of protectors of the king, and when the war is over, you can choose your own land and homes to rule a district under my command. As for your sister, I will not touch her.” My cheeks are burning. This is really happening.

“Neither will I,” King Ziven finally adds, his eyes on Story.

She kisses his cheek and looks at me. “Congratulations!” I almost grin, but the pressure of all their eyes makes me pause slightly. I take Niko’s hand under the table and squeeze.

“Now that is over, how much do you know about these cities?” King Daegan waves

his hand, and in the middle of the table, protected by magic, is a map of our world with statues and markings for cities.

“Everything.” Niko grins. “I can tell you exactly where the weapons are held, where the soldiers will be stationed, and how to win.” The next few hours go quickly as Niko, King Daegan and King Ziven make adjustments to their war plan and to the city.

Only when it’s somewhat darker outside and a bell rings, does Story stand up and come over. She hugs me tightly. “That’s dinner. I have so much to tell you, and I get to introduce you to my mother.”

My eyes widen. “Your mother?”

Her smile is radiant. She is literally glowing and looks so happy. I’m about to ask about my parents when another voice stops me. “Catherine, you understand he’s a vampyre who will need to be watched continuously under someone’s guard?” I nearly jump at King Ziven, who steps around me to Story.

“Let me guard him,” I ask of the Moon king. “He’s my mate and I know he’s not an enemy.”

He crosses his arms and looks between us as Niko comes to my side from the table. King Daegan has wordlessly left, leaving the door wedged open. “Fine.”

I pull my bag off my back and tug out the box before handing it to Story. She looks reluctant to take it, so King Ziven does instead and tucks it under his arm. She looks paler somehow as she smiles my way. “Thank you for protecting it.”

“I’ll be glad to not have it near,” I admit, my eyes dragging to the box, to the hum of something held within. “It’s...” There aren’t words to explain the feeling from the

box, and I don't try either. I clear my throat. "I need to know if my parents are alive."

"They are." Story's smile is as wide as mine. "I'll show you to a spare hut, and then I'll go get them for you. They might be coming this way if they heard, but since your mother is a healer, she might be busy with the children. We don't have many healers."

Relief nearly makes me collapse, and I lean into Niko, who seems to just know. Story and King Ziven show us to a small hut. It's got two single beds in a room with a fireplace. "There aren't many available, so you will need to share, I'm afraid." Story winks at me. "Have fun. I'm so glad you're alive, best friend." I hug her one more time before she goes, leaving me alone with Niko in what feels like a very small box of a room. I open the only other door and find a tiny toilet in the ground but no shower.

Niko is sitting on one of the beds, tugging off his boots when I come back.

"How are you going to feed?"

He looks up. "I'll find a way out of the caves and?—"

No. He can't risk himself by going out there. "If you can bite me on my wrist and feed off me occasionally to keep yourself alive, you won't break any rules because I'm agreeing to it."

I know he is shocked silent when he barely moves. His look is instant and it sends shivers all across my body, building at my very core. "As much as I want to sink my teeth and other parts of me into your beautiful body, I won't bite you. I'll survive for a while, then I'll figure out a way to get out."

I shake my head. "No, it's too risky for you to be leaving for food. You haven't fed

and hunted in days. I know that because we've been together all that time." I hand him my wrist and step between his open legs. His eyes seem darker somehow as he looks up at me. "I'm stubborn and determined to keep you alive. I know you don't want to hurt me, but this is my choice."

"Catherine, are you sure?" I nod and he surprises me by gently kissing my wrist first before sinking his teeth in. Surprisingly, it doesn't hurt that much. I hold on to his other arm as he feeds from me, his hand snaking around my back, holding me to him. It's surprisingly intimate as he feeds, and I like it. Slowly, he pulls his teeth away and brushes his thumb across the marks. Our eyes lock, like they have so many times before. "You taste like...you taste like home." I should hate seeing the blood on his lips, but a part of me likes it, likes knowing it's me that is keeping him alive. Becoming a part of him. "Keep looking like that, Catherine, and I'm going to kiss you because you're ravishingly stunning in every single way."

My heart pounds at the compliment, at the way I feel how much he means it. He pulls me to him and slams his lips onto mine. There's a metallic taste in my blood for a second, mixed in with how he tastes, and deities above, I love every second of him.

I don't stop him, not as he carries me to the other bed, not as he marks me as his in every way that a mate can. The world could burn, and it wouldn't matter to us. We'd burn forever as one.

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Chapter Eleven

Page Eleven. Please...please understand my fire-touched babe.

I 've talked myself in and out of this plan about a hundred times, but I'm still standing here like we discussed yesterday. Still in front of the locked room where Daegan keeps one of the books, and I know he'd rather I'd not be here at all. Ziven is in rare agreement with him on this subject, but the books are in here. The books, the locked-away deities and our chance of fixing everything in a much less bloody way. But still, I hesitate at the door to the locked room.

Daegan spelled it so only he and I can get in there. If I hold anyone's hand, they can come in with me. Avaluna looks at me with the same hesitation in her eyes as she stands at my side. When I asked her to face the books with me, she didn't even ask why. I might never know how I got so lucky to have friends who come with me into anything without needing me to explain. "Are you sure we should do this? You told me what happened last time—the tree, the threats..."

"No, I'm not sure any fae alive should go near that book, but she was right." I stare at the simple wooden door like it might suddenly spring up with a big warning or answer to the million questions I have. "She said I would die, and I did. Emyr brought me back, but I died and that is the point to all of this. She knew. That means she knows the future." My eyes drift to the box that Luna is holding for me. "That book in there—this is her sister. It's what she wanted: to free her or for me to bring the books together so she can. This time I'm not walking in clueless, and I have a bargaining chip. The box won't open unless I will it. Ziven and Daegan have made sure of that with spell work."

“And what exactly are we asking for?” Avaluna presses.

I take a steadying breath. “I read a book of an ancestor of mine—a life account of one of our ancestors—and he told how two deities got trapped in books. I explained it to Ziven and Daegan in a meeting yesterday.” It’s the only way we got him to agree to let us near the book. We could have fought him for it, but going forward, this peace between all of us—it’s the only way. I meet her gaze, unwavering. “I want the deities to stop the vampyres by undoing the magic that turned them from fae to vampyre in the first place. To turn them all back into fae at the same time and end the war. In exchange, they can be free.”

Avaluna stares at me for a long moment. “We are asking them for a considerable amount of power.”

I nod. “Who better to ask for a miracle than mad deities?”

Her voice drops to a whisper. “I’m not sure we should do this. These are our gods. Two of them are here, and one is in my hands right now, in this box, and it feels wrong.” She touches the box. “Why not use this book to help and not that one in there?”

“That one helped the vampyre king make an army of Silkvir to beat us. So, no, I don’t trust it.” I arch an eyebrow at her, and she nods. “It is likely more nuts than the one in there.”

That one in there has also done awful things. I think about the disease that wiped out so many in the mansion, about how it twisted Daegan’s mind, and finally about the threats made against me—the pain it inflicted last time. I’m not here to plead with some benevolent, kind-hearted gods, because they do not exist in this world. These deities are evil, but even evil has its desires, and we can make a trade for my people. For my future.

“I don’t like this,” Daegan mutters.

“Neither do I,” Calix adds from his place, guarding the other door.

Ziven sets his eyes on me. “I don’t believe the books just happened to end up here. Of all the places in the world, they landed with us? There’s a reason and I trust Story.” It means a lot that he isn’t trying to hide me away, make me not fight, and treat me like a possession rather than an equal at his side.

“You can pull me out,” I tell them. “Both of you can because of our bonds. Calix is here for Luna, if she needs to be pulled out, too. But the book I read said that two heirs from the Twilight Dynasty would stand with the books, and we are two heirs from the Twilight Dynasty—we’re what’s left.”

Calix exhales sharply. “We only have your hair for proof of that.”

“It’s more than that,” I argue. “It’s a connection to the books. It’s my dragon telling me. Maeve knows, and it’s why we were bonded in blood,” I point out.

“Dragons are not wrong about matters of our ancestry and blood,” Ziven finishes the argument. “And I sense your fear. We all feel the same, but if we don’t try, what rulers are we?”

Silence echoes from his point. This is for the fae, for the lessborn and powerborn, for the riders and the trapped from the mansion. It’s for every fae born into a world of vampyres where their blood means more than their souls. It’s wrong, and it ends.

Avaluna takes my hand, and I open the door, looking back at Ziven once. I hope he can read every bit of how much I love him in my eyes before we slip into the cold, stone room. The walls are mossy and damp, and the book is thrown onto the ground in a puddle of water, but it is not wet. It hovers above the water, untouched by the

elements. The moment my eyes land on the leather-bound, blood-red book, my feet stop working. I lose control of my body and am pulled straight toward it. This time, I glide across the floor, hands slamming down onto the pages.

“Story!” Luna cries out.

“No! Stay back!” I warn her, barely able to hold off from the power of the book taking control of my very voice.

“You didn’t come alone,” comes that female voice, that ancient, echoing voice I remember from the last time I opened this horrible book of untold power. The power of it reeks in this room, and I can feel it slithering against my skin, against my mind, too.

It lets me reply. She does, but I don’t know if she is female or if that voice is just for me. “I know what you are now, and in that box over there is your sister. Just what you wanted.”

She is strangely quiet. “Open the box.”

“No.” I smile as I realise she was trying and failing to open it. “If you kill me, the box stays locked forever. It is bound to me.”

Silence. Then?—

“Why?” The word is cruel, pointed, furious as it is screamed in my mind.

“Outside, in the cities, vampyres are burning fae every single day. I want to make a deal—one that will stop it. Stop the war that’s coming and, in return, I will open that box, and you can have the book,” I tell the deity. “I know you were once a powerful being from the heavens above, and I want to return you, but we will make a deal for

it.”

“I do not make deals with mortals like you,” she snarls.

A burst of red light explodes from the book, like a storm, and I brace myself, but it moves past me. It slams into Luna, throwing her against the wall with a sickening crunch. I scream as I hear bones snap, her body hitting the ground with a thump. Red blood pours from her mouth, her nose and her eyes as her body shakes, and she cries out my name for help. The box crashes to the floor next to her, but it doesn’t move as the red power, like a rain cloud, hovers around the box.

“No!” I try to get to Luna, but I can’t move my feet. “You lost your chance. Fuck you! Die in the fucking pages of that book and?—”

“This is your future,” the voice hisses in my mind as it cuts me off.

Then I’m not in the room anymore. I’m somewhere else and I’m sitting on a throne in a strange castle, with views over a massive city I’ve never seen. Emyr is beside me, a small child perched on his lap on his own throne that towers over mine. The boy has bright red hair, red eyes, silver fangs slipping from his teeth, and a coldness that no child should ever have at a young age. I don’t know how old he is, but there’s no doubt—he is my child and Emyr’s, too. Fear makes my throat clamp up, and I glance down at myself. Thick gold chains bind my wrists, and they have cut into my skin. My hands have burn marks over the place where my dragon marks once were, and instead there are bite mark scars all up my arms. I’m wearing a sheer, flowy red dress, and my stomach is swollen.

Pregnant.

No.

It's cruel to see this, and I know I can't get pregnant. My infertility is why I ended up a blood slave in the first place, and even when it's Emyr's, even when it's not something I want, I touch the lump while looking at the little boy. My son. He is so beautiful, and looking at him is seeing my own features in a way I didn't know was possible. A sinking, dreading feeling pools inside me as I realise Emyr is king now, and that means we lost the war. How did I get here? Why was I fighting in the first place? My eyes lift to the night sky—to the shining moon hanging in the stars.

No.

I remember who I am. I am Story Dehana and I have never given up. Even to a cruel vision like this. The children are not real, and hot tears fall down my cheeks as I turn from the boy and scream at the top of my voice. Everything fades and darkness swallows me whole. Thick arms wrap around me, yanking me backward, and I gasp as a door slams shut with a violent bang. Ziven's handsome face comes into view slowly as my eyes adjust, and he is cupping my face. "Storm, talk to me!"

I blink rapidly, barely able to register what's happening. "Luna—she's injured," I manage to say. The box is on the floor by my head, and Ziven sits me up, pulling me into his lap, kissing the top of my head as my heart races. Daegan is staring at the box, his back pressed against the door as he shakes. "I'm okay. Get the box, Ziven." I turn to see Calix carrying Luna out of the room, her limp body in his arms.

"She's alive," Daegan tells me, snapping out of it as Ziven picks up the box. "She needs a healer. What happened in there?"

I rush out after Calix and Luna, knowing Ziven is following close behind, and I don't have it in me to explain it to Daegan right now. We cut straight through town, heading toward Catherine's mother's house behind Calix.

Catherine is already there and her mother is already examining Luna when I come

into the hut. Her mother doesn't look up. "Unless you need healing too, my majesty, please step out so I can work. Everyone out."

"I'm not leaving her," Calix says firmly, settling into a chair in the corner. "Tell me how she is and if you need anything."

I want to apologise to him. This was all my fault. "I'll wait outside." I barely close the door behind me before I burst into tears, and Ziven is there, pulling me into his arms. He holds me through my tears until I can breathe again, until I can calm down. "We're on our own. The deities aren't helping us. In fact, they deserve to rot in their pages forever at the bottom of the sea."

He tilts my chin up. "You are not at fault. Luna chose to go with you, and she decided to take that risk. When she wakes, she won't want you blaming yourself."

I know he is right, but the guilt is still there as we wait hours for Calix to come out and tell me she is awake. "All her ribs are broken; she has internal bleeding, but she will live. Luna wanted me to tell you both to go back home and that she doesn't blame you, Story." His gaze hardens on me. "But don't ask her to go near those books again. She is done. Promise me."

"I promise," I whisper, understanding. His eyes soften and he comes over, hugging me under Ziven's gaze before going back to Luna.

Maeve's voice drifts into my mind, warm and steady. "Don't worry. You don't need any deities when you've got a dragon to fight your war. I am with you." I exhale, feeling the fire deep inside my chest. I can fly again.

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Chapter Twelve

Page Twelve. The rebellion is being hunted. We will make one last stand in hopes the deities guide us.

I wince as Ziven takes down ten more fae volunteers to be riders. Without the Decidere to weed out the weak, Ziven doesn't have a choice but to test the riders with actual dragons, and the shadow dragons are mean. They are not used to fae at all, and they do not want riders, as Ziven explained to me. He took six fae males earlier—only two of them managed to ride dragons. I don't need Ziven to tell me what happened to the other four, because we heard the screams. The trials are not going well, but none of us suspected they would do.

Every day that we train down here, every single day, thousands of fae are dying. It makes me feel sick to my stomach at the thought of their deaths, but I know we are not ready, and without more riders, we will fail. We are the last hope of every single fae out there, and it's a lot of pressure for us all to handle. After yesterday, with the failure of the books, we could have used a better outcome on the first day of the trials. Maeve telling me she's ready to fly again is the only thing keeping me from sinking into despair. At least with her, I'll be able to fly and fight next to Ziven. Be useful. Avaluna is recovering, but it will be a long road and she will not be leaving her bed for weeks. Calix knows that means he will have to leave her to fly with us, and I know he doesn't want to do that.

I sit at the edge of the cliff with Hettie, who is finishing off a painting of a dragon, a dragon with streaks of silver scales and green eyes. "Where did you see that dragon, Hettie?"

“In my dreams at dusk,” she answers, looking up at me. “I’m painting it for Luna. She loves dragons like me!”

I touch her light hair. “She does. Are you going there after lunch with my mum?”

“I’ve made dear Luna an herb tonic to help her sleep.” My mum’s voice comes to my ear, and I tilt my head back to see her coming over. Hettie jumps to her feet and runs to her, hugging her and holding the painting up behind her back. I turn to the cliff, feeling Maeve coming closer, and I pull out my new black clothes with red stitching. “Those are lovely,” my mum tells me.

“Ziven made them for me. He knows my hands get cold in the sky,” I explain to my mum and smile. “Now step back with Hettie.”

Hettie squeals in excitement as she steps back with my mum, whose eyes widen at the dragon who swoops up over the cliff behind me, the flapping of her wings sending my hair braid floating off my shoulder and dust into the air. Maeve soars high above us, and several people scream as she dives around the edges of the town. Even if they are used to dragons, she is enormous. Her red scales reflect the light, and I run my eyes over her wings, noting the scar on one side—but it’s fully healed.

“Like you. Broken but healed. A survivor who can fly.”

“You’re beautiful, Maeve,” I tell her in my head and out loud too.

I feel her warmth through our bond before she lands on the edge of the cliff near me. I walk over and climb onto her back, noticing children peeking their heads out to watch behind my shocked mum and Hettie. I can tell from her eyes alone that she didn’t expect my dragon to be this big. Hettie waves and I wave back. Using my other hand, I run my fingers over her scales before settling into place on her back, pressing my body close in a near hug. “You don’t know how great this feels to be back with

you,” I whisper.

“We haven’t even flown yet,” she teases before leaping off the cliff in one smooth dive that nearly throws me off, but I hold on tight, the instinct kicking in. The air whistles in my ears, and I laugh—because besides having sex with Ziven, this is the most alive I’ve ever felt in my life, and it is addictive. Being a dragon rider is an honour.

A roar shakes the ground, and I glance up, catching sight of Ziven on the back of his shadow dragon before they tail behind us. His dragon catches up quickly, and Maeve snaps at him when he comes close. Ziven shakes his head, moving his dragon away.

“Be nice,” I warn.

Maeve huffs. “Those dragons are cowards compared to the rest of us who fought and trained. They hid. They take too much.”

“It’s also Ziven’s dragon, so it would be appreciated if you didn’t try to bite him when he has my mate on his back,” I remind her, and smoke blows out of her mouth as her only answer.

Her tone changes as she flies lower. “It has been decided you are to see our secret with the king.” She dives downward without warning. I grip her scales tightly as we plunge into one of the tunnels and into darkness, only the sound of her wings, the heat of her body, and the smell of dragon to remind me I’m not free-falling into darkness alone. We go deep into the land—so deep that my lungs begin to ache as it warms with every second until heat is pressing in onto my skin.

Finally, we emerge into a massive cavern, larger than the one where the town is. Lava pours down the walls in glowing red streams, and it smells like fire. Each intake of air hurts my lungs from the heat. Dragons of all colours are perched on jagged ledges,

their eyes watching us, but most of them are brightly coloured, like the sun.

And then I see them. Eggs. Hundreds. No, thousands of them in circle patterns fill the centre of the cavern, which I realise is also shaped like an egg. I stare, speechless, as we circle above and on the far edge. I spot something familiar. Four red eggs, glittering like Maeve's scales. "Are those your family?"

"Yes." I glance over my shoulder at Ziven behind us. He's looking down at the eggs, and he looks up at me, his eyes wide with shock too. The dragons below stir, not at Maeve, but at the shadow dragon following behind us, and I know we are not welcome for long. They are protective of the eggs, and I don't blame them one bit. Maeve doesn't linger long, and she turns, taking us out of the cavern, back into the tunnels, but through a different path. This one glows with red light, flashes of fire casting shadows along the walls, and I see where we are going this time. "The Moon and Sun kings didn't just make a haven for the people, for the fae," I tell her what she must know. "They made one for the dragons, too. Those red eggs mean the Twilight Dynasty helped."

A future. For everyone. "Are there Dawn Dynasty eggs?"

"And Dusk too. Every egg, every chance of a future for our kind. We could stay here forever in peace," she admits. "Many dragons wanted this, and it was a choice. We all decided to fight with our riders and not abandon you to your war."

I don't know what to say to her as we fly back to the town, and she lands on the cliff, Ziven and his dragon landing nearby. "I preferred Brythan for your mate." She leaves me and flies off, Ziven's new dragon chasing after her like he has a death wish or something. I look at the town for the first time, noticing all of the lights. There are lights hanging everywhere, a smell of flowers in the air, and Ziven walks up to me. He tugs my forehead against his. "Your friends and mother are waiting to dress you, and Hettie was the distraction. Today, you become mine in every single way, and I

become yours. We are getting married and mated, Storm. I do not want to fight this war without knowing if I die, you are bonded to my soul the same as I am to yours.” He looks into my eyes. “Say yes?”

There was never an inch of hesitance in my heart or soul. Only joy. “It’s always yes.”

Chapter Thirteen

Page Thirteen. Burn bright, my fire.

“Where did you get this dress from?” I ask my mother as I stare in the mirror, completely lost in the gorgeous dress. I never liked dresses with colour, because they reminded me of the slavery I grew up in, but this dress is pure white. It looks like a cloud, and it is as soft as one. I might never be as pure as this colour, but it is fitting for today. For Ziven and me, and the new start to our life that begins from this day. We want forever, and I thought my wedding day would be simple. I don’t need a dress, or anything fancy, I just need Ziven. I only want him. But, this dress is unmistakably the prettiest thing I’ve seen in a long time. I was surprised by all the planning Ziven has been doing behind my back to get this wedding ready today, and he has been conspiring with my mother. I can’t tell anyone how happy it makes me feel to see them both getting along so well.

She smiles at me, touching my cheek. “I made it and it mirrors the same one I wore to my own wedding. Admittedly, it is better. It took a long time, years, but being a seamstress was always how I put a bit of extra money away, even back in the breeder camp.” She touches the soft fabric, and I admire it right along with her. She spent the last hour making adjustments to my size and fixing loose ends, and I thanked her a million times, even when she said to stop.

It’s beautiful—white, with layers and layers of delicate fabric, held together with a bodice in the middle that pushes up my chest and is laced at the back. The dress falls to my feet, moving with me, and my shoulders are bare. I know my mother has seen some of the vampyre scars I have when I got changed, but she did nothing but tell me

how brave I am. It was healing; some deep part of me needed my mother to look at me with nothing but love, no matter how broken I might be. I don't think of myself as broken anymore. No, I'm healed now, but the scars are not forgotten. They are there, like cracks smoothed over in a vase, noticeable, but no one really cares unless they stare close. Only those I love will see I was ever broken. It's how I want that to be.

My hair is tied up in a complicated braid bun, thanks to Avaluna's expertise in braiding, with a few strands curling around my face. "I didn't know why I started making it," she continues. "This fabric...it's woven from spiders' cobwebs from deep within the caves. It cost a fortune to get even a small amount of it, as it takes days for them to find the webs. But I worked, I did odd jobs because I wanted to make this dress. I didn't know you were alive, but something told me to make it, just in case. I never thought I'd be lucky enough to be standing here on your wedding day, watching you marry a man you are so in love with, who loves you just as much." She pauses with tears in her eyes. "I never told you much about your father. He desperately wanted a better world for you. That was all he fought for—for you, for me, for his family. Being powerborn, oh, he hated his life before we met. We both did in our own way, but he needed a reason to fight, a reason to live. He said it was me, and then he saw you, and that was it. He had two reasons. The day you were born, the moment I first saw you, is not something I'll ever forget, and I vowed to the deities that I would not ever leave you. I know it was the same for him, even when he left this world. I know he never..." She trails off, then shakes her head. "This is your day. My beautiful daughter, becoming a queen, and I wanted to share something your father used to say about us."

I wait. "That fire lurks in our souls, shines as bright as our hair, and one day it will burn this world anew." Her smile is so bright. "Burn this world anew, my daughter. A queen. A woman who never let this world dull her fire."

"I love you, mum," I whisper through sobs. "And I wish my father got to see this day...I wish I knew him."

“I love you too. No tears, though.” She wipes my cheeks. My tears have already fallen, and she brushes them away. “I will tell you a thousand stories about your father. One day, stories are all we have left of those we love. We cling to them and share them. It keeps them alive.”

“Then tell me a thousand of him. Of you both.” I hug her tightly. “Thank you for always fighting for me. You taught me how to fight, even on your worst days. I am blessed to have you.” She cries in my arms and I cry with her, knowing we needed this moment to connect. I hear music playing from outside, a melodic sound, and it’s loud. “I think that’s our cue.”

“May I have a moment before you go?” Daegan is standing in the doorway alongside Catherine. “You look very nice, Story. I’m sure you want to throw me out, but I promise I’ll only take a minute of today from you and Ziven.”

“Leave us, it’s okay,” I gently tell them both.

“We’ll wait outside,” Catherine suggests as Daegan steps in and Catherine holds the door until my mum has stepped out. I wipe my wet cheeks with the back of my hands as Daegan awkwardly stares at me.

He steps closer. “I wanted...”

“If you have anything bad to say, please don’t,” I cut in. “Please don’t, Daegan. This is the happiest day of my life, and I don’t want it tainted with anything bad, like us arguing. If you’re here as my ex, wanting me to choose another path, then I’ll personally kick your royal ass off the nearest cliff. I choose him in this lifetime, in every lifetime I am blessed to live.”

“This is for you.” He hands me a small silver box with a long breath. “Before, when royals got married, they would accept tokens from older families. It was said that if

you got married without a token, it was a sign of bad luck against your entire marriage and you wouldn't be blessed with children. Ziven doesn't have any family to give him a token, other than Hettie, and she's too young to understand this." He continues to hold out the box. "I will never, in any of my lifetimes, make up for anything I did. But I want to bless your marriage going forward. If you think that means nothing, then you can leave it here. But for my parents, who would have given Ziven something, for Ziven's parents, who definitely would have blessed him with something too...take it. Please."

I wordlessly take the box. I wasn't expecting any of that from him. "Why?"

"This bond between us is only a fraction of what you have with Ziven, but I cherish it because you remind me to feel. To not dip into the darkness and lose myself there. I used the bond between you and me, and I lost anything we could have had. There isn't a day that passes that I don't wish I hadn't. But I did and there will not be a day in my life that I do not try to be better. I'm sorry, and that is why." He exhales slowly. "Enjoy your wedding, Story. The girl who reads, the girl who was broken and used, is becoming a fierce queen. The books you love will be written about you. They will write your story to inspire millions long after we have all left this world. I just don't want to be remembered as a villain."

"Thank you," I tell him softly. I think this is the first time I'm seeing the real Daegan. "I wouldn't be here if you hadn't done what you did. I might never be able to forgive you for all of it, but we were bound together in a way I'll probably never understand. But for what it's worth, I accept your gift, your token." He walks to the door. "Please, do come to the wedding. You are invited. You are our guest."

He nods his head. I catch a glimpse of a smile on his face before he slips out the door. I open the box, finding a bracelet inside—pure diamonds all the way around in a circle. Each one of them is shaped like a sun and a moon, side by side, as one. I clip it onto my wrist, sliding it so it fits perfectly, before looking at my reflection in the

mirror just once. Peace. It's a token of peace and it matches my dress too. I don't spend another moment in my mother's hut, because he is waiting for me. My king, my mate and my future. Outside, the lights are everywhere, above every house, twinkling like stars. As I get closer, I realise they're moons, crafted out of glowing green fabric, but so bright they almost look white.

Mum walks on one side of me, Catherine on the other as we go down a path marked on the ground with petals. They sway against the bottom of my dress, and I can barely keep from crying more when we move toward the centre of town, where a large platform has been built with five archways forming a circle. The arches are covered in beautiful, vibrant blue flowers, and in the centre stands Ziven. The love of my life. So many people are gathered all around the arch, and Hettie is the only one standing on the platform under one of the arches. She smiles at me so widely, and my mother finally lets me go, glancing at me once before staying behind with Catherine.

I touch Hettie's hand as I walk past, squeezing her fingers for just a second before stepping forward to Ziven, who waits in the centre of the circle.

He's wearing a white shirt tucked into his rider trousers—clean, but the best he can do when clothes are rare here. But none of it matters when his eyes lock onto mine. His gaze travels slowly down my dress and back up, heat spilling through my body at the intensity of his stare. His eyes flicker to the bracelet for a second, but he says nothing. I step into the circle of flowers on the ground with him. He leans in slightly. “I cannot wait to get that dress off you, but you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I thought I saw the most beautiful woman yesterday when you woke up and smiled at me, but every day, you beat yourself in my eyes.”

“Charmer.” I blush under his stare, under the pressure of his gaze, and I know that will never change for us. “You're going to have to tell me what to do,” I whisper, feeling nervous in case I do something wrong, as silence settles over the crowd like a wave coming in from the sea.

The officiant steps forward and I've never met him, but Ziven nods his head in greeting. "Greetings to you both. I heard there was a wedding, and I wished to offer myself as officiant as my family has done every marriage here, and I am fluent in the old rituals of dragon rider marriages and royals. Are you both ready?"

Ziven looks right at me, right into my soul. "I've never been ready for anything more than this moment." Deities, I love this man.

The officiant waves to the circle in the centre of the platform. "Please stand facing each other and hold hands."

Ziven shows me how, crossing our arms over and joining them in the middle. I realise he must remember this from the Moon Dynasty, from weddings so many years ago. I know he wishes his family were here, his parents and his sister. His eyes turn to Hettie for a second, and I squeeze his fingers. He has family here and, soon, I will be his family too. A single scale, one made of glittering silver, is pressed on top of our joined hands. Magic bursts from it, wrapping our arms in glowing red and black binds that look like smoke.

"We join together these two under the watchful eye of all the deities in the sky. We ask that their days be long and their nights be short. We ask that they know love, eternal and true. We ask that they be watched over, both in their health and in the days when they are closer to the deities than any fae would like." I don't look away from Ziven. "May time stand still as these two become one—one soul, one flight to the deities together, one entwined soul and one entwined life." The red and black shadows spread up my arms, but to me, there is only him and me. Timeless, endless and everything I've wanted since I fell in love with him. Our relationship has always been complicated and messy, filled with so many trials that pushed us apart, but in the end, we fought together to win.

"Do you, Story Dehana of the Twilight Dynasty line, mark your soul to the Moon

Dynasty king to serve as a royal, as a queen of the Moon Dynasty until your last breath?”

I don't hesitate. “Yes.”

“Then, King Ziven Moonsilver of the Moon Dynasty, do you take Story Moonsilver as your queen, now and forever?” he asks Ziven.

Ziven touches my cheek. “Until my last moment in this world.”

“Then may the deities and every living creature bless this holy binding of souls and royals.”

The officiant's voice starts to fade away, but it doesn't matter. The second the words are spoken, Ziven crashes his mouth onto mine, taking claim of every bit of me that is his. Cheers erupt from the crowd, along with music and laughter and joy, but I hold onto him. I hold onto my source of happiness like I plan to forever. I laugh as Ziven holds me tightly, joy and happiness flooding through my body. He lifts me into his arms and carries me through the crowd as they throw delicate flower petals into the air, drifting down around us like falling stars.

All I can do is look at my husband. There is music playing, laughter, and celebrations as he carries me through the town. But I can tell—he wants me alone, and I don't disagree. He walks us straight back to our hut, and he closes the door behind us with a kick of his foot. “I could have stayed, danced, celebrated.”

“After,” he promises, dropping me onto the bed. “But first, I want to give you this alone.”

He pulls out a box, old and weathered with time, and he clicks it open to show me a ring—a beautiful ring. “Where did you possibly get that?”

“I couldn’t get your crown for today, but this is my mother’s ring. I always kept it on me, just in case you agreed to marry me. Please wear it and remember me every time you look at it.” I offer him my hand. Remember him? It almost sounds like he plans to go away somewhere, when there isn’t a chance I’m letting him go. He slides it onto my wedding finger, and I admire it in the firelight—the stunning black diamond surrounded by small, shimmering gemstones. Each gemstone is a different shade of grey and white, though I’m unsure of their exact name. Each is shaped like a moon, circling the diamond in the centre.

“It’s an heirloom of my dynasty,” he tells me as he touches it. “There was one more moment I wanted us to be alone for. Let me put the mark on you and finally take you as my mate.” My heart races. “Where do you want to put the mark?”

“Here.” I take his hand and place it directly at the centre of my chest. Closing my eyes, I trust him completely. All I feel is warmth, a slight sting, and then...something else deep within my soul as it clicks into place, like this was the irrevocable part of me I was missing. When I look down, a moon mark now rests on my skin, right next to my heart. It’s perfect. Like it was always meant to be there. Like I was always destined to be part of the Moon Dynasty.

He kisses me softly, gently, but the second kiss is not gentle at all as his hands find the lace at the back of my dress. He pulls at it, loosening it until the fabric falls from my body, pooling at my feet, leaving me bare before him. Ziven sucks in a deep breath as he watches me, his eyes dark with hunger.

“Mating,” he murmurs. “I gather you have no idea about the technical side.”

“You’re going to have to explain it to me,” I ask, heat pooling between my legs.

“It’s words said when we’re intimate, and an exchange of blood before. The old fae used to do it by biting. Even when there were no vampires, that was our way of

ming. I don't want to ever bite you," he vows, and I nod in agreement. Biting would throw me back to before, to my life I escaped, and I'm not sure I'll ever be able to do that. He turns slightly, reaching for something on the bedside table, and I grin as I see it. A black and red jewelled dagger. He's thought of everything. "A cut on our hands will be better," he continues. "We can join them together when you're ready for this. For us."

I reach up and take the dagger from his hands, dragging the blade lightly across my palm—a shallow cut, but blood pricks. He does the same with a smirk only Ziven can pull off.

"You sure?" he asks. Like he needs to hear me say it. Hear me confirm my choices.

"Husband, there was never a moment I wasn't sure about us." We press our hands together at the same time, our blood mixing, and in that moment, something feral takes over him.

He pulls me to him in a way that screams mine. There is nothing short of a passionate kiss as his lips devour me, as he digs his hands into my hair—not roughly, not enough to hurt me, but enough to show me that I'm his, that I've always been his. I couldn't be more certain of anything else in the world, other than I love him. If this world is going down in flames and blood, I will be at his side. Ziven pushes me down on the bed, kneeling between my legs as I watch him. Without saying a word, without even touching me right now, the way he looks at my body sets me alight. He slowly undoes the buttons of his shirt, too slowly for my liking. But there's a smirk on his perfect lips, a smirk that tells me he knows exactly what he's doing, as he does each and every button, my heart racing at the darkness of his eyes, the way he looks down at me, at the outline of him that I can see in his trousers. His moon ear piercings catch the light of the flames from the fire, but throughout the smoke, all I can smell is his scent. The oakwood and moss, mixed with the scent of a rider. Fire. It makes every drop of my blood buzz for him. I want to touch his soft, short dark hair and the

shadow of a beard growing through, which makes him look slightly older in looks, at least. Are the fae from the mansion aging now? I assume so, and it means we could grow old together in this world and die in it too. As long as he is with me, death doesn't scare me one bit.

Watching him as he pulls off his shirt is devilish, his chest is not soft anywhere. In fact, not much of him is. There is nothing but chiseled muscles, and his new markings swirling around every inch of tight skin. The dragons move slowly, so slowly if I look at them I can see it; otherwise, it just looks like he has hundreds of markings of so many dragons. I find myself tracing him over the musculature of his forearms up to his muscled shoulders, down his chest past his pecs to the deep V-line and the ripples of muscles that disappear into his trousers, along with a light graze of hair that I want to see all the way down.

He undoes his belt and makes me watch as he slowly pushes them off, standing up off the bed to take them off completely until there's no clothing between us, but yet he's still so far away. I curl a finger in the air. "Come here, husband."

"I used to like the name Ziv," he murmurs, kneeling back onto the bed, kneeling before me. Deities, I like it when he kneels before me, especially now. I can see every inch of him and I see that a brilliant, proud man who has done everything for me is overwhelming. I love him so much. "But I think I enjoy the title husband far more," he murmurs, his deep voice promising pleasure only he can give me, sends shivers down my spine. He lifts my leg onto his shoulder and his lips twitch. All amusement is gone when he drifts his eyes down my body, past my breasts and to my core. He kisses down to my knee and then to my inner thigh, and my heart races harder, louder, even more as he pushes my thighs apart. Ziven looks down at me in a way that's nothing short of hungry. The groan that leaves his lips as he's down kissing my thigh is music to my ears. There is something about hearing his pleasure, even when he isn't inside me, that I need to hear. one torturous kiss at a time until he finds my core, and he presses a kiss there that sends electric buzzing all the way through my

body. I gasp as he parts me, and slowly rolls his tongue around my clit. More torture, more teasing and it feels like he's savoring every moment. It's a game I'm happy to play because we both win at the end. "I'm going to very much enjoy calling you mate." He swirls his tongue more. The vibration of him speaking against me is just getting me close to—"Or wife." I moan as he swirls his tongue faster this time. His hands grip my thighs tightly, locking me in place. "But perhaps, knowing that our souls are bonded... it doesn't matter what I call you anymore, Storm. Just that you're mine."

He doesn't make me wait any longer as he glides two fingers into me, finding me completely soaked for him and swirls his tongue faster, sucking and nibbling at the same time, sending me into a frenzy. I grip the headboard of the flimsy bed, holding onto it tightly as I moan, as I crash into an orgasm that feels like it burns my body from the inside out. My back arches, and he's ferocious, pulling out every inch of pleasure from me before he sits up, still on his knees, and picks me up to him. Ziven sits on the bed, pulling me against him, and his hard cock runs right up against me. His head drops back and there's something so sexy about sitting on the lap of my mate, even when we're not joined, and seeing him nearly losing it.

"Ziv," I whisper, brushing my fingers down his cheek. I lift my hips, kneeling over him. He watches me, looking deep into my eyes as I slowly drop down an inch at a time onto his cock until he's fully inside me, until I feel full in a way that's the best way possible to be. His hands slide down my back slowly, while grabbing my ass and pulling me up and slamming me back down again and again and again as he loses all control and I enjoy every second of it. I moan as the sound of us fills the room until I can see he's splitting with the control that he's trying so hard not to let go. "Tell me what to say to be your mate," I moan, unable to help myself.

Ziven, my husband, grips the back of my neck, my nipples rubbing against his chest every time I slam up and down on his cock. "Take me as your mate, in front of the deities. Let all that are listening entwine our souls."

I repeat his words, breathless, moans escaping through every word that escapes me. A connection like nothing else building within my soul, burning and binding me to him. His eyes seem to glow with it too, as he kisses me, deeply absorbing every moan as I ride him. Harder, faster, both of us chasing our pleasure, but I need this never to end. Like we will never end. Our souls are one, in front of the deities, and I dare them to try to part us now. My orgasm burns through me like a fire, touching every inch of me until I'm blinded by it. Gripping my hips tightly, Ziven groans as he finds his own release. We breathlessly both come down from the moment together, his forehead resting against mine. "You're mine."

His soft laugh sends shivers across my skin. "You're my mate, but I've always been yours. Doesn't matter what titles are between us. Everything I am is yours." He softly brushes his lips across mine. "I've loved you for so long, Story. But it doesn't feel like long enough. I want an endless future with you. One where it's just me and you."

"We'll have that," I say, raising my hand to stroke his cheek. He leans into my hand. "Tonight is ours and we face tomorrow, and the war, when the sun rises." I whisper.

"When the sun rises." He vows. I grin as he kisses me again, pushing me down onto the bed and he makes every minute of the night count. Once I thought I wasn't beautiful because I was scarred, because it wasn't just the outside scars, it was what was rotting on the inside. I thought the vampyres tainted me, they changed who I was deep below. But Ziven showed me that nothing can change who you are—no one can scar your soul enough that it warps it into something unbeautiful. No. My husband showed me that there's always something worth living for.

Chapter Fourteen

Page Fourteen. He is gone, and this book...how can I show her the failures of her father?

I toss and turn in the sheets, rolling over and over again until I realise that I'm lying on the ground, deep within the forest, right before the mansion, and there are the brightest yellow and silver flowers blooming right in front of my face. I turn over, staring up at the mansion in the brightness of the moonlight shining down on it. The glass top shimmers in the light, and it is stunning like this. It stands so tall, towering above me—not derelict, not broken, not burnt down like I imagine it is now. No, the towering mansion looks as if it has been freshly built. The bricks shine, the gates rise tall behind me as I stand up. Rows of perfect flower and garden formations line the pathway to the steps, to the door, with dragon statues perched along the path.

My heart races as I see a woman tending to the flowers, and something about her makes me stare, as goose bumps prickle my skin. She is pale, her skin like pure ice, and her hair matches the same, falling in wispy strands all the way to the floor, but her hands are painted red, along with a strange red mark on her right cheek. When she lifts her eyes, I freeze. Her eyes are white, no pupil or iris, just white and all-seeing. She looks so familiar, and I know why. She is the deity I've prayed to, begged for help, asked to save me. I know it in my blood, and she looks like Ziven.

“It's about time we saw one another,” she whispers, her voice as soft as lullabies sung to babies in the dead of the night.

“Who are you?” I whisper. My voice echoes, sounding odd—like it doesn't belong to

me in this strange place. I'm dreaming, I have to be, but it's more than that. This place is alive with magic, tempting and pushing, and I simply don't exist here.

"You pray to me. Many do, even when my sisters are locked away and my power is not—not at my strength without them. You chose to walk away, and that was not your choice, Story Dehana." She looks up at the moon. "I do not have a name that fae like you can pronounce or call me. I am simply one of the three." Her eyes look like the moon, so bright in the night. "I am not a being, not a thing to be named. I am a deity. A magic bound into a form that comforts you. I have blessed your birth, watched your life, and lent you my power. Your magic is mine."

"My name has changed. I am married now," I correct her because I don't know what else to say to that claim of hers. Suddenly, she is in front of me. I jump back, but her hands grab onto my arms. She doesn't hurt me like I'd expect her to; instead, she simply stands there, making it hard to look away from her. Her sisters would have hurt me by now, and I learnt from them never to trust a deity.

She closes her eyes. "They were once kinder than even myself." When she opens her eyes, her lips are pressed into a thin line. "When you wake, do make the right choice," she warns. "You're playing in a game of power that is much stronger—much more than you can possibly understand. I set things in place when the curse was set. I wove my power into the land to make your soul exist and be bound to the sun and moon heirs. United. My sisters are locked away from me, and I chose you to change it. The sun, the moon, the stars. Light, dark, and the shadowy grey between them—it's all the same. All three. Only one can undo the errors of the past." She touches my hair, and a single strand turns the brightest of white. "When you wake, make the right choice and make a future of peace for us to bless again."

She pushes me back, and I gasp as I wake up, reaching for Ziven, for him to chase away my nightmare and remind me what is real, but my fingers find nothing but cold stone lined with dirt. My eyes widen as I look up to see the book—the deity

book—right in front of my face, hovering above a puddle. Next to it, a box floats in the air with its sister held inside. The box and this room were laced with protective spells, and this shouldn't be happening. My mouth is dry as I crawl backward, shaking my head as I look for a door, but there isn't one to be found. There's no way out. Eventually I know I don't have a choice but to speak to it. "How did you break the spells and get me here? Are you the reason for the dream of the deity?"

"My sister's power overtakes the sun and moon," the book answers in that female voice. "My sister cannot touch us. The one that's always been free and not tainted by any of this has left you before us to make the right choice and set us free, to be with her in the skies once more."

"No," I snap. That is not happening.

I'm surprised when the voice that speaks to me is different, and my eyes drift to the box, to the book that is somehow speaking to me. "When you beg us deities for help, does it come?"

I think of all those who have prayed, of all the horrors I have seen, a million times over—including ones done to myself.

No, because we are not free. "She cannot alter our path, cannot change it. If she did, she would be no better than the vampyres we want to overthrow. We deserve to be free," I whisper. "Every single one of us, and it's what I fight for, alongside my mate. We want a world where my life isn't on repeat for thousands of blood slaves, for all the slaves. It has to stop."

I'm not sure which one of the books speaks, their voices are similar now. I know it's not what they sound like; they are using the voice for me. "And what is it you believe you deserve?"

“My life with Ziven. I fought for us.” I rise to my feet, but I do not want to fight with them anymore. Because, despite everything, I actually pity them, both of them, because they are like this and it’s clearly sent them mad. They are trapped within the pages of a simple book—powerful deities that we once worshipped. “You once loved us fae and helped us. I was told about how fae loved you all.”

“We loved you once,” she tells me. “And you loved us. You built temples and statues. You prayed to us, and we blessed you with everything you asked for. If you could not conceive a child, we found a way to bring children who had no parents to those. If their crops failed to grow, we wove them fresh fish in the rivers and animals to hunt so they would not starve. When the water from the mountains was tainted with poison, we broke a new waterfall into the mountain with clear water to fix this. When you were sick with illnesses, no one thought you would survive. We kept you alive. We saved your children. We granted your kind long lives of high health. And we did so as a gift because we enjoyed the joy on your faces and in your hearts...and then you did this to us.”

“I didn’t,” I remind her, my heart hurting for them. They were our deities, and we betrayed them. “I wouldn’t ever have done that to you, and not many would. We are not evil. I am here, still debating helping you when you hurt my friend.”

“A mistake in anger.”

“Look into my mind,” I challenge. “You’ve been there often enough now and see what your mistake did and cost. She was innocent.”

“What I see in your mind is love.” She exhales sharply. “And that makes you very, very risky to make any sort of deals with, Story Dehana.”

“Why?” I tempt fate by asking.

“Because your mate is dead.”

She shoves into my mind, forcing me to see the truth, and it kills me. I see Ziven—his body dying, absorbing too much power until his heart stops. I scream as time stops, and he dies right in front of me, and I can’t move as I watch dragons, one by one, tearing him apart, only to use magic like shadows to fix him. Mark him. My heart plummets into my stomach. I reach for him, desperate—only to grasp at nothing but thin air. I stumble back, breath hitching, before I realise—I am still in this room with the books. I dig my feet in and stop. “That isn’t true.”

“It is. I will not lie to you. You cannot lie to me.” I swear there is empathy in her voice, and I hate it. Ziven can’t be dead...I would know it. Magic, no matter what, couldn’t hide that from me. But I felt him go, felt the bond empty out into nothing, and then he was back, and we can’t talk in our minds. We... Was that why? Not this place...but what he did to save me and his people. He took too much power from the shadow dragons, and they took his life for it. “The time is coming for the war, and when the war is over, the dragon’s magic will fade. His body will not survive it—neither will his soul. He has nothing tethered to this world anymore, and he took the power and the deal, knowing he would die and only get these moments with you.”

“No.” I shake my head, wanting to step back, but I can’t. My feet feel rooted into the stone. And I know—I know—she’s not lying. I can feel she’s not lying.

“You have a choice. A choice that has been foreseen for thousands of years.” Her voice snaps me back from the feeling taking over my body. A desperate feeling.

“What choice?”

She continues. “You have two futures. One—the war that never truly began and was won from the start. The war stops when you make the deal to turn the vampires back into fae, one by one. It would drain us of our power, what is left. But we would make

it to be free. It would cost you everything.” Everything. My everything is him, and that is too high a cost to lose. I won’t lose him. “And the other future is this.” She brushes into my mind like a storm, and I don’t fight her. I am in a warm library, painted black with silver bookcases and glass moons, hundreds of them, hanging from the ceiling high above me. The library is multi-levelled and rich with books, setting my soul on fire just thinking about reading them all. It’s bigger than the mansion’s library, and I just want to stare and stare. A laugh from a boy jolts my head up, and I see him, wrapped up in Ziven’s arms, and they are both laughing. The boy has red hair and bright silver eyes as he looks down with a moon marking on his neck.

“Mum!” he calls out, waving wildly. “Mama!”

I raise my hand and wave, feeling someone else holding my other hand as Ziven’s eyes search for me. I look down and see a little girl—she’s older than the boy, maybe ten, maybe a little older. Her hair is also the brightest red, but black streaks run through the front, braided back neatly in a way my mum used to do for me. “You said there was a new book, something found deep in the South that you read a week ago and thought of me. Mama, are you okay?”

“What’s your name?” I breathe out, and I barely get to touch her face with my fingertips before she begins to fade away. I take in how she looks—the perfect mixture of Ziven and me. She looks like the boy I saw in the other vision with Emyr but something is different about her, strange. The name Mama rings over and over in my head as I open my eyes, and I stare at my fingertips. “No!” The girl, my future daughter, is gone. Not that she ever existed, but she isn’t here. I am suddenly right in front of the book, my fingers reaching out, hovering just above it.

“That is the second future.” It almost warns.

“I can’t have children, and you must lie. This is cruel.” I shake my head.

“You carry a child right now.” She brushes off my concern and reveals something impossible. I can barely move, barely take in her words as my hand drifts down to my stomach. It’s all I ever wanted—a child. A child with Ziven.

“Promise me,” I whisper. “On everything that makes you a deity, that you’re not lying to me, because I already know you can be cruel.”

“I vow it on my power and my sisters existence. I sense the life inside you. New, innocent and real. I want to be free, and I want my sister free.” A warm breeze blows around me. “Make your choice. You can ask me to turn the vampyres back with my sister or ask us to save King Ziven.”

“If I ask you to save Ziven, I’m condemning millions to death, and I am his queen now. Their blood would be on my hands,” I whisper, staring at the book, my mouth drying. “I can’t make this choice like this, not without something more.”

“What if I told you there’s another way?” she coaxes me. “But...there will be a price for power. I will give you something to win the war.”

My hand tightens over my stomach. Not me, but her. A warning of what the price will be. “You’re telling me you’ll take the child from me?”

“Not take,” she corrects. “Send on a divine path when they come of age.”

I double-check. “A path that is without danger?”

“No life will be without danger. She will be god-touched.”

I take another step closer to the book, tasting its power in the air. “And what does that mean?”

“You will see—if you choose Ziven.” She waits, her voice steady in my mind. One word. One choice. Vampyre or Ziven. “What is your choice?”

As selfish as it is, as desperate as it is, I would choose him over the world a million times. Because there isn’t a world without him for me. I have tried everything. Everything for a life with him, and if it makes me a monster to choose him, then it does. I love him and he has already chosen me and given his life for a chance to save me. I will always be his, and he is mine. “Ziven.”

Magic explodes around me and it’s bright, dangerous and unholy to witness. The box opens with a click the moment I touch it. The two books slam together with a smack that shakes the very ground beneath my feet, and then—I free fall into the magic, knowing nothing and everything all at the same time.

The deities are free.

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Chapter Fifteen

King Ziven

Page Fifteen. I will find a way to save her when her father couldn't. I miss him.

I rip the door open with shadows, knowing this is where she was last because she is my queen, my mate, and there is nowhere in this world she could go that I wouldn't be able to track. Whatever is left of my soul and existence is hers, and I know she wouldn't willingly leave my side. The only magic left other than the power of the dragons is these evil books, and they have always been too interested in my mate.

Story was here. I can smell her in the air, but there is no blood in the empty room. The books are gone, but they didn't hurt her. Giant cracks are split across the walls, and the room darkens with my power, grey shadows bursting out the edges with my fury. They took my bride on your wedding night. They took her from me, and fuck those deities. They aren't going to exist if they have hurt her.

Daegan rushes in to my side, half-asleep still, but he is wide awake when he sees the books are gone. "She isn't here, is she?"

The bond between them will irritate me to the end of my existence, but right now, I don't care. "Story and the books are missing." I turn. "I have to go after her and?—"

He grabs my arm, and the urge to throw the asshole across the room is tempting me. I can't think of anything but getting to Story, and he is lucky I'm restraining myself. "If you leave without an army, you will lead our enemies right to her. Don't. Just give

me an hour. We can wake everyone and be ready to fly to war. Don't damn the people she loves to go after her when we both know your wife is more than capable of dealing with this." His eyes trace back to the room as he lets go. "Those books and her, they are linked. The deities want her alive."

I grit my teeth. "I?—"

"You love her, but you trust her. I can sense she's still alive. Wait," Daegan reasons. "For your people and mine. I will beg if you need me to, Ziven. We were once friends, and I promise you I will fight to fix this world. Let the Sun and Moon Dynasty fly together one more time."

When I die, this is all she will have left. A Sun king who she can never trust and a bond that is an echo of what we were once. Now we are so, so much more. I need to be with her, to explain everything, when the magic fades from me and I really die again. I will meet the deity in the sky only when I've said goodbye to her. This is all for her. She wouldn't have just left. I know that. We do everything together and she wouldn't have put those books together and freed them. It doesn't make sense. My every instinct, my love for her, wants me to tell him to fuck himself, but Hettie steps into the light of the doorway, alongside Calix. My shoulders drop as she yawns. "I felt like I had to wake up. The dragons are loud."

Calix frowns, tilting his head in Hettie's direction. "She ran off, and I chased her here. Where is Story?"

I reach for my dragon, commanding him to get ready. I roughly grab Daegan's arm. I used to trust this fucker, and even when so much shit happened between us, I found it hard to imagine killing him. I could have done it a million times over for things he has done, the worst involving my sister and Story, but fuck, the bond makes sure I don't. He is bonded to my mate, and I believe he is her friend. She wore a token from his dynasty on our marriage day, and I've seen that bracelet before. It was his

mother's, and to give it to her...fuck, it got to me. "Our dynasties fly as one. Ready them and we use the plan. The war ends this day."

Daegan knows. He must know. This is the only chance I will ever give him. "The sun is slowly rising—it's the best time for us to fight. It'll be at least eight hours before nightfall. If we go now, we'll still have some daylight before they can ready their Silkvir to fly. We can burn the vampyres." We begin planning as we walk out, and I tell Calix the plan and command him to leave Hettie with the other children in hiding until we are back. She fights him as he carries her away, but I can't focus on my niece when Story needs me, when she is out there and I need her more than I can breathe.

"I will send the shadow dragons with you under your command. If you find Story in that city, you save her." I make sure Daegan understands. I know she isn't that far, but magic like nothing I've ever seen is at play, and I can't trust she will stay close.

"Sound the alarms. We go to war!" Daegan roars to the town, and bells ring loud. I block out everyone rushing around me as I return to our hut, throwing on my weapons, tightening my armour.

Something feels off. A strange sensation builds within my soul—like a crack, a deep fracture, since I made that deal. I did it for her and I don't regret it. I don't think it's possible to ever regret sacrificing my life for her. Every moment I've had up to our marriage—last night—felt like cheating death. Like I was given blessed moments, and I cherished every one of them. How could I not? I know she will be angry when she finds out, but the world will be free. Vampyres will be on the run and hunted unless they bend to us. I want a new world for her, and she can live in it. I promised to keep her safe, and this is the only way I could do that now. I've lost too much in my life to expect a happy life at the end of this war. Story, my mate, being in my life, was always a special gift that I never knew I needed to feel alive. Not even death can part us. I hope she knows that. I remember her under me last night, our mating. The word mate I whispered in her ear as I felt her tighten around me. I could be hers for a

lifetime, and it still would not be enough time.

“Where is your mate?” my dragon questions when I climb onto him.

“Gone.” I climb higher onto his back until I settle between his thorns and grip the scales in front of me. Riding him reminds me of Brythan and, fuck, I miss him. I already let him down, and I will not let her down too. “And we’re going to find her for one last flight, my dragon. I command you, and you will all fly to war with me.”

My dragon roars, and the ground shakes under us. A roar cry for war. For the world the dragons want too. I’ve seen their young, understood they want peace almost as much as the fae do. A world where neither of us are hunted for just existing.

I don’t command him to take off. Not yet. Not as other riders mount their dragons on every inch of clear ground, but no dragon lands near mine, the scary fucker. It takes an hour, just like Daegan predicted, and my skin is itching to find her as I see Calix mounting his dragon next to me, and I know it hurts him to leave Avaluna behind when she is this vulnerable. The vampyre king dies on this day, and then he can get back to her.

Eyes turn to me, countless riders watching me, and many of them are from the Sun Dynasty. They aren’t looking to their king but me. I know I can’t take off yet. Not without saying something. Many dragons roar, the sound splitting through the air until they all go silent. The silence echoes across the cliffs, and even the other dragons don’t dare move under the shadows moving around them. Our shadows.

I take a deep breath. “A final fight that will mark us as saviours and liberators to the fae, who have never had anyone fight on their side,” I shout, my voice steady. “A fight for those who have been trapped. For those who were imprisoned in the mansion. For all those who have spent a lifetime as a slave. But today—with our dragons—we have a chance. A chance to remake the world that was stolen from us

by the vampyres, and we will claw it out of their hands. With fire and death. We will demand our world back and free our people.” I lift my arm. “For the dynasties! For the fae, and for a free fucking world!”

A thunder of roars answers me. I lean down, gripping the reins, and my dragon jumps off the edge of the cliff. He spreads his wings wide and dives straight down through a tunnel. I’m followed by Calix and the riders from the Moon Dynasty. Then come the shadow dragon riders, thirty in total, those I’ve managed to pair with beasts of their own. They’re not great riders, but they don’t need to be. Not when their dragons breathe pure fire. All they have to do is hold on and guide. We shoot out of the tunnel and into the bright sky. I don’t care about anything but her as I reach for Story.

I feel nothing but a wall of fire between our souls. A fire that burns deep inside me.

She’s west.

I know it.

That’s where the vampyres are. Could the vampyre prince have taken her? No, I snarl to myself.

“To war!” I shout at the sky. The sun rises, burning in the sky with reds and oranges like it knows, but as I look up, I see something new. Three bright, massive stars shine around the moon that is fading under the brightness of the sunlight, and they are casting their red, orange and pink light in dancing waves across the sky. Like a celebration.

If this is my last day in this world...I will spend it fighting for her, making sure she survives this, because nothing else matters to me. This world needs a reader like Story Moonsilver as a queen because her story will rewrite it all. She rewrote my soul after all, and it burns for her alone now. It always will.

Chapter Sixteen

Page Sixteen. I failed, but deities, if you still believe in love...please save her.

I wake up with my face pressed against moss—stony moss—and the wind blows across me, carrying the scent of smoke in the air. Turning over, my head hurting like I’ve banged it a thousand times, I see the sky. The night sky and it is extraordinary. Bright lights of reds, silver, yellows, and gold are dancing across the sky. I’ve never seen anything like it.

Screams echo in the air, just as a dragon swoops across the sky above me, blocking out the light for a second, and then it is gone. What happened? My head hurts the more I try to think about it, and a flash of light catches my eye. Not light. Silver. Like moonlight. I lift my arms, blinking as I see silver marks swirling around my skin. I know they’re everywhere, all over my body, even before I check. The marks are like Ziven’s, marking him as the King of the Dragons, but what do these make me? I don’t just have dragon markings; I have other symbols of moons, suns and stars. “You are our warrior, Queen Story Moonsilver, and these marks are a touch of our power. With it, you have what you wish.”

What did I wish? Ziven. I touch my chest, knowing exactly what this means. Ziven is going to live. Memories of everything that happened come back to me as I hear more screams from a distance away, and I flinch. Ziven is alive and I need to get to him. His soul is mine now. And mine is his. I can barely breathe as I reach for him through our bond, and he is there, in the depths of my mind, like a shadow I’ve longed to see. “Where are you? What happened? When were you going to tell me that you were going to die?”

Silence for a second. Then—“Story... Thank the deities. Where are you?”

There is so much relief in his reply, and I can feel him through the bond. He is fighting nearby, and his relief makes my heart pound. I’ve always been connected to him, but this is so raw, so strong, and we are one and the same, now and forever. “I made the deities link my soul to yours,” I speak to him, my voice shaking even in my mind. “I woke up from our bed, and I was somehow in front of the books. We made an agreement, a deal that I had to make to save you, and I am mad that you kept it from me, that you took that power to save me, knowing the cost, but I only care that you’re alive right now.”

“I’d do it again.” His deep voice is steady. “I’m not apologising for choosing the path that was needed to win this war. To save you. I would save you again and again—and never once apologise for it.” He pauses for a long time and fear makes me want to run to him, even if my body is currently reeling. I shakily try to stand and grab onto a pillar to hold myself up. “What else did the deities take?”

Our child’s future. I can barely think it, let alone tell Ziven yet. He will only blame himself, and we have a war to win. I can’t get my mind wrapped around the thought of being pregnant or how it even happened in the first place. “Ziven, we need to win this war, or it is all for nothing.”

“We win or I’m flying with you and our people to safety. We won’t come back,” he vows, even if I know he would hate himself forever for giving up on the fae and I would, too. “Where are you? I’m above the city, and I sense you to the north. The city is burning, and the Silkvir are falling back. I see the vampyre king, but I am turning?—”

“No!” I shout. “Stay there and end this. I will come to you, and I’m fine.”

There’s a stillness to the forest around me that cools my blood, and I don’t think I’m

alone. I don't know how I've ended up at a temple, but it is now just broken pillars, retaken by nature, clawed back in by ivy and thorns. The trees form a perfect circle around the ruins, towering high, but they are trimmed back, and there is a clear pathway to the south. To the burning city. The forest will no doubt burn too, and I need to get moving before the smoke gets to me .

"I love you," Ziven vows, like a vow of storms on a hot day. Vivid, strong, and endless. Like us. "For the fae. For you. It's all for you, Storm."

"I love you too," I send back, and I push Ziven away in my mind, blocking him the best I can—making sure he doesn't feel the sharp, cold fear that surges through me as I see him step out of the forest.

Prince Emyr. He looks at me like he can hardly believe I'm here in front of him, and neither can I. "I sensed you out here," he says, voice smooth, eyes sharp. "Smelled you in the air, but I thought it was a trick..." There is a smile that sets my teeth on edge. "Did you come back to me? Have you finally seen sense and remembered how much you love me?"

I want to laugh and scream, to tell him that his hope is impossible. I am never to be used again. Or fed on. I will be with Ziven, and only Ziven, forever. Something breaks inside me as he looks at me with what I assume is how he thinks people in love stare. I lift my arms as it begins to rain, slow drops at first, but the coolness of the rain only fuels me. The silver markings on my body glow. Through my dark top and leggings. Through the night, they glow bright enough to reflect in his eyes. I smile as he shakes his head in disbelief. In fear. "What have they done to you?"

He moves fast—so fast. But it doesn't matter. He can't hurt me anymore. I saved a part of my soul, through all the years of abuse and pain he caused, and that tiny piece became a spark that burned into the woman I am now. The queen. The mate of King Ziven of the Moon Dynasty. I became what I was always meant to be. Shadows like

Ziven's but brighter. Mine. They wrap around me in a protective shield, and Emyr is thrown back when he gets close. The shadows swirl around my legs, turning silver—bright like the moon. They are protecting me and it is effortless. The deities gave me what I've always wanted—a way to protect myself.

His eyes widen as he looks up from the ground where he was thrown. He looks at me in fear, and if that isn't a blessing from the deities, then nothing ever will be. I never had power, but I did have a deity watching over my every move. She made sure that if I needed power, I could have it. I could borrow it for just a second—to protect myself. The red light. All of it. It was her guiding me because they needed to be free. The mistakes of my ancestors are undone, and now to truly free this world, the vampyre king and prince, and all who stand with them, have to die.

“What have they done to you?” He keeps ranting as he rises to his feet and steps back. His Silkvir comes out of the forest, the stink of its rotten flesh hard to ignore as it bares its teeth at me, and bones rattle with every thud on the forest floor. The glow from its body, from the light somewhere within it, lights up everything in blue.

Emyr moves fast, stepping onto his dragon's back and climbing up. “Come,” he demands. “We can go. Fly back to my castle and forget all of this. I will forgive you for all of it, Story.” He stares at me with the obsessive gaze I'm used to seeing, used to fearing, but I don't anymore. He is one vampyre, and he is nothing. “I knew when I first met you that we were destined for each other and nothing would ever come between us. I know I've made mistakes, but I will change, and we can?—”

“No.” I speak the single word, a word he isn't used to hearing. “You think I'm coming with you?” I take a step forward, the shadows flaring higher around me. “I am not your blood slave anymore. I am Story Moonsilver of the Moon Dynasty. I am their queen and I am his mate. The only male I belong to is him, and he is a thousand of what you could ever have been. I will forget you in time, and so will this world. I'll make sure no books speak your name. I'll make sure you're a ghost forever, a

nameless prince who died in the war as nothing... You should be terrified of me this time, Emyr, because this world—the one I will remake with Ziven—will not include you.”

Dragons rush across the sky above, shadows streaking toward the city, and Emyr screams my name as he leads his Silkvir towards me. My shadows make a wall between us, and the Silkvir slams into it, but it doesn’t dent. It snarls, smashing and attempting to crack the shadow wall, but nothing happens. Emyr is screaming and shouting for his Silkvir to get to me, to kill me, but he can’t get close, and I smile as I feel her.

A dragon crashes down through the rain clouds with a smack of thunder to hide her dive—Maeve. She lands on the back of the Silkvir, with her claws cutting through the Silkvir’s back and rotten flesh, the bones collapsing under her weight. Her jaws snap around his neck—teeth sinking deep—then she whips him into the air as Emyr leaps off to the ground. He runs at me, slamming himself into the shadow wall in a feral rage, his eyes burning with hate as his Silkvir dies behind him. He doesn’t look back or care. It’s my mother who lands behind him. My mother—who has never ridden a dragon—and all I see is her red hair as she lifts a dagger up. A familiar dagger. She slams it through his back, straight into his heart, and he silently gasps.

“For all the days you caused my daughter pain and for all the years you stole her from me.” She pushes the dagger deeper, her voice steady, cold and merciless. “You stole her and now you die for it, prince.” She twists the blade. “May the furious fires of the deepest hell keep you company.” She rips the dagger free—then plunges it back in. Deeper, and he screams this time, reaching for her, but my shadows snap around his body in a vise and hold him still.

I walk up to him and stare into his soul. He screams and screams and screams. “You lost.” And then—my shadows rip him apart. Into pieces. Into nothing but ash that scatters into the wind, and he is gone. The male that caged me and abused me for so

many years of my life is gone. I never have to fear him again, and I know it will be years until I can really accept that fact and understand it.

In one final breath, I'm finally free.

My mother is windswept, her hair a mad mess like mine, and she wraps her arms around me with a delightful laugh, clinging to me tightly. I laugh with her for a second, only a second, and grin. "You rode my dragon, mum."

Maeve snorts from behind us, the Silkvir's dead body thrown into the forest in bones. "I knew we need the blood of fire and revenge to save you, my rider. Your mother is very similar to you and demanded I bring her."

"Thank you for letting her ride you," I tell Maeve in my mind.

"Hettie woke me up and told me the dragons were going to war and you were missing. I knew, other than that mate of yours, there was one being who would be able to find you. My heart nearly stopped when she flew," my mother says. "Hettie knew the deities had something to do with your disappearance, but she wasn't sure what. Tell me what happened," she says, shivering, "while I warm up a second, as it's cold on a dragon. You never mentioned the cold you feel to your bones, even in a coat."

I let out a breathless laugh, shaking my head. "I know, but you get used to it." I tell my mum everything, leaving out the part about the baby because when I first say it out loud to someone, it will be to Ziven. I want to see his smile, see his joy and live in it for a while before we inform anyone else, even my mother. I want her advice, her guidance, and then maybe I will find a way through this new adventure. I exhale, steadying myself from my mother. "I have to go to Ziven."

"I'll be fine." My mother nods. "The town is that way. I'm going to go into it—to

help the fae who will be fleeing from this war.”

I squeeze her hand. “Be careful, please.”

Maeve lowers herself to the ground for me, and I rush over, wasting no more time here. I see my mother running into the forest, down the winding path, and I silently send a prayer up to the deities to watch over her as they celebrate above. I hope my mother is quick enough to lead others away from the fires. If anyone can lead survivors to safety, it’s her.

The moment I settle, Maeve takes off—soaring straight into the sky—slamming into a Silkvir who was coming right for us. Red scales and blood flash before me as she spins around, and I barely hold on, my stomach twisting as she comes around with the Silkvir in her mouth. The Silkvir screeches, and my ears sting from the noise, which is dampened by the wind, along with the crunching of bones in Maeve’s mouth. Another comes at us, and this Silkvir is much smaller than her, making it easy for her to knock into it. The force sends it crashing down into the forest below.

The bright light of the dancing colours in the sky makes it easy to see everything in the night, and my heart clenches as I take in the devastation of the city. I’ve never been to this city, not once, and it is grand. Or it was. The city is a thousand pillars of all different levels, with homes built around them, and most of them are burning like torches in the night. Dragons and Silkvir fill the night, and with the storms, the heavy rain that has soaked me to my bones, it looks like a nightmare. A war. Maeve’s voice cuts into my head. “Focus.”

She is right. Ziven. He was with the king, and if the king falls, the war is nearly won. I sense Ziven near, and I search for him, looking around the sky to the left, away from the main part of the burning city. Maeve follows my line of sight, and within a few minutes, we find them. Ziven. His dragon is breathing unholy silver fire, trying to catch a Silkvir that is just as massive as him. The Silkvir is burnt everywhere and

bleeding black into the air, but the shadow dragon Ziven rides is no better off. I lean down. “Let’s go and finish this!”

Maeve shoots across the sky, straight for my mate. Ziven’s shadows burn in the air, writhing around them as the city below burns. Burns with dragon fire. Maeve lurches up and we dive, spiralling toward them—toward the king’s Silkvir.

Ziven and the king are locked in a fight in the air, their dragons climbing higher and higher with each beat of their wings. Shadows flare around me, falling like silver ink through the air as we slam into the other side of the Silkvir, hitting the king’s Silkvir with as much force as possible. I lurch, nearly falling backwards, but my fingertips grab her scales, and I hold on with everything I have, even as the fear of falling this high up makes me feel sick. Maeve’s claws rip down its back, but she can’t reach its wings as Ziven’s dragon turns around and comes back closer. The Silkvir pushes off Maeve, dragging its teeth down her neck, and dragon blood pours down my arms. I scream as she roars in pain. “Maeve!”

The Silkvir gets free in her shock, but she doesn’t give in, ignoring the pain, and she shoots up after him in the sky.

More Silkvir flood around us, chasing us as we climb higher, and I look down, seeing Ziven’s dragon fighting twenty of them off on his own. My mouth parts as I feel his worry, his desperation for my safety like it’s my own. “Don’t chase him. It’s what he wants!”

The king fights them off, but Maeve is not going to stop. I know she won’t. Ziven’s eyes meet mine through the chaos, and he roars as the Silkvir pile onto his dragon, pulling him down in the sky, and soon we are higher than the clouds, we are in the dancing lights, and they are blinding. Both our dragons swirl around each other, flying higher and higher, so high we might touch the heavens themselves to join the deities. The king is clinging to his rotting beast like it’s a lifeline, like it can save him

from me, but it can't. "Don't leave me, Maeve."

It's the only warning I give her before I jump off her back, the air whistling in my ears as I land straight onto the back of the king's dragon, my hands digging into its bones, and I hold on tight as it snarls into the air, but it doesn't stop climbing. I can't breathe as I look up at the king, who hasn't noticed me. He is panting, holding onto the saddle his Silkvir wears as the air literally runs out around us. I don't have long. My silver shadows coil around me as I climb, step by step, higher and higher, up the rotting flesh and bones to the king. Every step, every stretch of my body hurts, and I'm covered in sweat by the time I get close.

The king turns at the last second, grabs my arm, yanking me in front of him and onto the saddle. He flashes his teeth, his fangs, and snaps at me to bite, but my shadows protect me first. They hit him like a thousand arrows, cutting through his body one by one. His eyes widen in shock, and I punch him hard, just the way Ziven taught me. His head snaps to the side, his grip loosening on the saddle. Maeve is there, latching herself to the Silkvir and biting its belly below me. Going for its heart.

The king stops fighting me, and he just stares, like he's seen a ghost. Like that ghost has finally come for him after all these years. I shout over the wind, over the crying wail of the Silkvir. "I'm sure you'll see her," I whisper. "I'm sure she'll take you straight to wherever the most rotten of souls go to burn for eternity. Your son will be there already."

Magic—red magic—deity magic—explodes out of me. It burns through the king and through what is left of the Silkvir below me, through everything, and red flames consume the world, burning like a star in the dancing lights until there is nothing left around.

And I fall.

The wind whips around me, the world flickering past in a blur, and I know, I just know, I'm going to die. Maeve is falling too, and she is too far, way too far, to get to me. "I'm coming!" she screams in my mind, but we both know, just know, it will be too late.

I think of him as I fall, as I can't breathe, and the pressure of the air feels like it's tearing my body apart, destroying me from within. "Ziven, I will always love you. I didn't want us to end like this."

"I will save you!" he growls. "Open your eyes, Storm." I do and I see his dragon is diving for me, far closer than Maeve. But they're not close enough. "Nothing will take you from me again." His dragon moves with impossible speed, like the moon itself is powering him, and seconds before the treeline, he catches me in its sharp claws, but my head smacks into something hard, and darkness crashes over me like a storm.

In it, I only see the man I love.

Chapter Seventeen

Page Seventeen. This is a true account of the life of Pagen Dehana.

Everything's foggy when I open my eyes, but I can make out dark green trees—towering familiar trees high above me. The leaves are turning brilliant shades of red and orange, some of them even falling from the branches into the wind as I watch. The air isn't warm, but it isn't cold either, and I am fine under what must be at least three blankets. The blankets are wrapped tightly around my back, and I search around for the source of the noise of many people talking and whispering to themselves. I also hear the sound of fire crackling nearby and something flapping in the breeze, maybe clothes on a line. High in the trees is a cover of fabric, blocking out the heavy rays of sunlight. I stretch out my body, like testing it for injuries, but I don't feel anything but a deep ache everywhere. Until I move my head and wince at the non-physical pain that slams into my mind.

Hair strokes my arm, and I look over to see blonde hair and a curious, innocent face watching me as she lies on my arm. "Hettie," I whisper.

Her returning grin could light up the world. "You're awake! Uncle Ziven said you'd wake up soon, but I was getting really worried. It's been three weeks!" She hugs me under the quilt, and I hug her right back, breathing in her scent. We lie like that for a long moment, a moment of comfort I needed.

"Three weeks?" My voice cracks. Did she say I've been asleep for three weeks? That's a long time after the fight with the king and the war. Did we win? I assume so if I'm lying here, happy and alive.

“Yeah, three entire weeks.” She nods against my chest. “But uncle Ziven was so sure you’d be okay. Anyway, my uncle’s never wrong. At least, that’s what he says.”

“It’s best not to tell him that, or he might never stop mentioning his all-knowing knowledge,” I tease, and she giggles. I sense him nearby, coming closer, and I can’t wait to see him. Her giggle stops, and she looks up at me. “I don’t remember having a mother, but I think you’re the closest I’ve ever got. I want to honour my mother’s memory, but I want you as more than my aunt and Ziven, my uncle. I’ve been really thinking we are one family, and I’m yours.” She looks so nervous, and it breaks my heart that she is worried at all. “I mean, you can tell me no. But I love you and you’re like a mum to me.”

“You can call me whatever name you like, and I will be your family forever, Hettie. I’ve looked at you like a daughter for a long time, too.” I stroke her hair. “And you’re so much more than just a niece to Ziven, too. We will always be together, and I want to raise you as mine.”

She bursts into tears, and I hold her, crying too. Both of us are a mess within seconds, and I let myself be, let myself enjoy this little girl whose life I have been blessed to be part of. When we have calmed down, she lies back and looks up. “One question. Why are we outside?” I ask.

“Well, the mountain place...it changed.” She shrugs a shoulder. “The dragons made it clear that they didn’t want us there anymore—not now that the war’s over. We had to come out to the forest to be safe.” She lowers her voice. “I secretly love it outside because I can see the sky and feel the wind again. I don’t want to spend another second trapped again. I like running free.”

“I like that too,” I whisper, yawning. I don’t know how, but I fall back asleep. When I wake again, Hettie is gone. Instead, thick arms are wrapped around my waist, holding me from behind, and it is night again. I must have slept another day and night away. I

glance ahead, seeing Hettie sleeping in a smaller bed next to this one, and I sigh, sinking back into him, and he hums, pressing a kiss to the side of my neck.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” he speaks directly into my mind. “I was getting worried, even when I felt you were fine.” I turn over to look up at him, stroking his face. “The war’s over, Story. The king’s dead—you know that. Everything’s over. We won.”

“Tell me everything,” I whisper. “What happened after I passed out?”

“I caught you just before the treeline. I think you’ve changed.” He runs a line down my arm, tracing the silvered marks there. “The power—it was a lot for you to use, to wield, and it knocked you out. This connection we have now, us together...I was sure that you would wake. I kept you with me, close by, along with all our family and friends.” I listen in silence as he continues. “The city fell, not without dragon and fae deaths, though. Daegan won and took over, executing the vampyres that were left alive. He’s called for the other vampyres in the south to bend to him or die. Niko came up with a better solution to those who did not want to join the dynasties. He and Catherine are going to rule in the islands to the south sea, where no one has lived in centuries, and welcome vampyres who will feed off animals there and fae who wish to join, not as slaves, but as free people. But Niko is loyal to Daegan, and we both agreed through letters that this is safe—at least for now. That’s all that matters as we rebuild, Story.”

“That’s true.” I touch his chest, looking at him, enjoying every second of the slowness of the time we get together right now. His gaze flickers over me. “You...you’ve taken vampyres into your dynasty?”

“A good four hundred of them now and many more fae who clearly love their vampyre masters and don’t want to be apart from them. I’ve claimed my parents’ lands, and this is our home now.”

“These lands are our home,” I murmur.

“I want to rebuild with you,” he softly suggests.

It isn't hard to tell him what I imagined for us, what I've always wished to call home. I've dreamt of us, of any future we could have, a million times, and it seems almost unreal to imagine we could have it all. “I want to live by the sea. I want to hear waves crash in the morning as we wake up together, and I want a library with moons hanging from the ceiling.”

His lips twitch into a smile. “A library?”

I nod. “Many levels. Many books. Even if I have to write them all myself.”

He smiles at me—smiles so bright, so pure. “I will design and build it.”

“I'm still mad at you.” I glower at him. “No more secrets and self-sacrificing bullshit. It makes having a future with you a little difficult.”

“We can do the mad, burning, passionate sex where you forgive me later.” He grips my hips, and heat pours through me for a second. His lips are soft as they brush mine. “But right now, I just want to stare at you. Just see you. Alive. Happy.” He exhales. “We've got a long road ahead of us, but with you, I know it's possible. Anything is.” The future. It was once a fleeting dream of something unreal, and now it's not. “To make something...to build you a home by the sea. For Hettie too. She can have it one day when we are gone together, when she is queen.”

“Not just Hettie,” I murmur, my heart pounding.

I take his hand and press it against my stomach. He frowns in confusion. “What?”

“The deities told me that I’m pregnant.” His entire body stills. “And I believe them because it’s true. Unbelievable and magical, but true. A miracle.” I take a breath, still trying to process it myself, and his shock is mirroring mine. “I don’t know or understand how this miracle has happened. I’m still in shock, but...it’s true. I know it’s true.”

He stares at me for so long I wonder if he is even breathing. “You’re pregnant.” A slow exhale fills the space between our bodies. “I thought you smelled slightly different, but...” His fingers press gently against my stomach, reverent. “You’re carrying my child.”

If I thought he was happy before, it’s nothing compared to the smile he gives me now. He pulls me to him and kisses me deeply. “Storm.” He groans. “You have given me everything I could have ever wanted.”

I smile as brightly as I can at him, just so I don’t cry all over him in bliss. We lie together for hours, not talking. We don’t need to talk—just holding each other until sleep pulls us under, is enough. When morning comes, I wake to find Calix standing over us, and he is grinning at us. He winks at me before putting on a pretend mad expression. “My mate is injured, and she said there is no excuse for lying in bed.” He crosses his arms. “You might be the king, but you don’t get the same excuse. Get up.”

Ziven groans and shifts beside me. “Remind me to kick his ass later for being a dick.”

Calix kicks his foot. Hard. Ziven glares at his best friend. “Your majesty, get your royal ass up, because there’s a fuck-ton of fae who want to swear allegiance to your pretty face, and you’re lying in bed.”

Ziven snarls. It’s playful though, and I chuckle low. “Did you just kick your king?”

Calix kicks him again, and I can just tell he enjoyed doing it. “We can train first. If

you want to try to teach me why kicking you is bad?"

I roll my eyes as Ziven grins and stretches before sitting up. "I'm going to enjoy handing you your ass for breakfast." Ziven kisses me and climbs up to his feet.

My mother walks past them, shaking her head as she watches the two of them with me while they are wrestling.

"That's not very king-like either," she murmurs, amused.

"They're so big on training," I muse. I love to see Ziven so laid back.

"Do they do that a lot?" my mum questions. "The fighting?"

"Yeah." I grin. "It's better when they are shirtless."

She laughs and gestures for me to move up so she can sit next to me.

"Have you seen Avaluna? Is she recovering well?" Ziven didn't know when I asked him earlier.

"She is not far from you and asks about you, too. I'll take you to see her if you wish. But first, I have something for you." I watch as she reaches into a satchel, pulling out a green book. It's old—extremely weathered. "I went to the breeding camps with some of the others," she explains. "I wanted to look for survivors, but also...I went back to our old home. There was something there—something really important that I wanted to give you."

She presses the book into my hands, and I run my fingers over the cracked leather, feeling the weight of it. "What is it about?"

“This is your father’s family diary.” Her voice is thick. “It holds generations of dedication to the deities. It’s how I knew about them, about everything—including you. About the rebellion he started.” I swallow hard, my fingers curling over the edges of the book. “There are a lot of empty pages after it.” She clears her throat. “You should write in it if you want to. Your story would be interesting—worth adding.”

I blink, looking up at her. “Thank you, I will treasure this. Why did you call me Story?” I ask. “I mean, of all the names in the world...why that?”

She takes a slow breath. “My mother...” she starts, and her voice wavers. She looks away for a moment before continuing. “My mother was never in my life for more than a minute. She died in childbirth, giving birth to me. I was her sixth child. I don’t know if I ever told you that, but I was. She was from the breeding camps too, and there wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t wish I knew what she was like—what she looked like.” Her eyes grow distant. “My siblings and I lived together,” she murmurs. “My eldest sister looked after all of us, but she was only twelve—twelve years old, looking after all those children, including a baby, when my mother died. It changed her.” Sadness lingers in her every word. I don’t move. I barely breathe. “When she was eighteen, she was sent to a new breeding camp with us, and it was the one you and I lived in,” she explains. “She got sick—not from pregnancy, just...so sick. She’d spent so many years taking care of all of us. We all got sick and there was no help. No medicine to help the fevers.” Her sharp inhale echoes in the air. “They all died, and I remember it. It is my first memory. A part of me went with them, too.”

My heart clenches. “I’m sorry.”

She carries on like she can’t stop or she might never be able to tell me it all. “I became a breeder, just like my mother, like my sibling...what they probably all would have turned out to be.” I shake my head in disgust of those camps. “I had no life. Nothing. Nothing good anyway. Nothing worth living for. No family. I was

empty of anything. Empty of a story that could live on beyond my mortal years.” She lifts her head, and for the first time, I see the light in her eyes—the warmth of something more. “Then I met your father,” she whispers, and she smiles like she is seeing him in my face. “It felt like everything began with him—like the first page of a book was turned.” She swallows. “And then, when we had you...it wasn’t just like turning a book page. It was like exploding straight into a story that grabbed my heart. Made my blood flow. Made my soul feel alive.” Tears burn my eyes. “And I knew,” she finishes. “That first moment I held you, I knew you were a special beginning of a story.”

“I really love you for telling me this, even when I can see it hurts,” I admit.

She presses my hands around the book I have. “That’s why you have this name,” she finishes. I exhale shakily, looking down at the worn leather. “Read the book,” she says. “Recover. And I’ll get you some food.” She winks. “In your condition, you definitely need to eat.”

I blink up at her. “How did you?—”

She laughs. “I was in a breeding camp for nearly all of my life. Pregnancy was a common thing, and I know all the signs. I’ve known for weeks.” I gape at her. “I was just waiting for you to catch up, find out, and tell me.” Then her face softens. “And then...my grandbaby will need food.”

I watch her go, warmth filling my chest. Of course she would know. The joy in her eyes—the future she sees with us is worth every fight I had. Ziven, my mother, Hettie and our dynasty. My family.

I sit back, exhaling, and turn the first page of the book my father wrote in. The book my grandfather wrote in, and my great-grandmother before him.

A story of fae who were brought into a world forgotten.

And as I begin to read about a rebellion, I see that it didn't fail like my father thought.
It just began and lived through me.

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Chapter Eighteen

Page Eighteen. The power of books should be feared as much as deities.

It's days before I can get out of bed without nearly falling back or everything spinning. The healers are constant and soon begin to get on my nerves as they check on me and the baby, which Ziven has agreed we should keep to ourselves until we want to share the baby news with the world. There is so much going on, so many unfamiliar faces, and we don't have anything other than half-built huts to live in right now as the cities and towns are burnt, or raided, and destroyed. Ziven doesn't want us to move into remains of places that were vampyre-controlled; he wants us to rebuild something new, so the huts in the forest are our homes for the considerable future. I don't mind where I live when I'm free and with Ziven and my family. I already have everything I could ever want.

I don't know whether it's the magic, like Ziven suggested, or whether the pregnancy is exhausting me, but everything aches, and it's near impossible for me to get up until today. I feel better today and I've been finally walking around the camp town, and I got to see Avaluna. She is nearly healed herself, and she hugged me and asked us to not speak about the books for a long time. I completely agree with her.

Unfortunately, all the time I've spent in bed, Ziven hasn't been with me for a good chunk of it. There are thousands of refugees from the city who want to rebuild, who have bent a knee to him and are working with him. He is on crowd control nearly constantly, and any time I found him today, he has been surrounded. Several groups of fae bow to me too when I walk past without even knowing who I am.

I miss Catherine again—I haven't seen her since the war—but she is with her mate, and he will keep her safe. There's a strange quietness to the world, like the humming of injustice is just...gone. At least, most of it, and we will make laws, rules and protect people. It's the honour and responsibility of any ruler. Ziven looks back at me, while hundreds of fae and vampyres are staring at him with their new moon marks. I've learnt from Calix, he can use his shadow magic to mark hundreds of fae at a time and bind them to his command.

"Excuse me," he says to the crowd, who begin asking for him, and he ignores them to head straight to me. My cheeks are burning as he wraps his arms around my waist and kisses me like no one else is here. "Wife, are you healed enough for a flight on Maeve, if I can join you?"

I reach for her and find her waiting, like she knew somehow. "Will you let Ziven join me for a flight?"

"You risked the world for him. I can allow a flight." She accepts with her usual snark.

"One last flight." Ziven kisses my forehead. We walk south, through the forest, for a good mile before we reach a clearing where Maeve is waiting for me. Every time I see her, I'm impressed, and I smile at her beautiful scales. It's good to stretch my legs and be beside Ziven in the quietness, away from the camps and people.

"Why one last time?" I eventually ask when we head through the field to her.

"The dragons have all left." Ziven squeezes our joint hands. "Maeve is the only one who stayed."

My heart leaps. "Why did they leave?"

"The shadow dragons...they have gone, too. The riders have all lost their connection,

and it was because it was right. They are free too. I wondered why Maeve stayed, but I know it's because you haven't said goodbye." His voice softens. "I didn't think Maeve would go without it. Brave and stubborn enough to hold out against her own kind for a moment with you."

"The dragons don't want riders anymore?" I whisper. I look at Maeve. Does this mean I have to say goodbye? I can barely think about it, let alone ask her if she is really going to leave me behind. I cling to the denial, let it keep me going. "Where are we going?" I ask instead.

Ziven doesn't push me further, and he just accepts my silence on this and answers me instead. "To the mansion. I want to show you something."

"I'm not sure if I want to see it all burnt down," I admit. "Those books. Mazzis. Those people that are gone."

His eyes sparkle with something. "Trust me. You want to see it."

I do trust him. With everything. With every inch and part of my heart, and I ask Maeve to take us there. I climb onto Maeve's back with Ziven, feeling the heat of her below me. As she lifts into the sky, Ziven protectively wraps his arms around my waist, holding me to him, his hand flat against my stomach—the same way he's held it every time we've slept together at night. As he talks to me about what our child could be like, he's adamant it's a boy, but I know it's a girl. One day, before the baby arrives, I'll tell him about the visions of our children, of him, of the future I know that we're going to have. Of the little girl that we're carrying with red and black hair, but how she looks like Ziven. The cost of winning this war, of setting her future down a path I'm not sure of, will be a harder discussion. I'll be there with her wherever life takes my child. She won't be left alone.

It doesn't take long to get to the mansion before we're landing outside, in the ruins of

the gardens, right before the gates.

“I’ll wait for you,” Maeve speaks to me, and she sounds sad. I know why but it’s unspoken, but I know now. I know it’s time for her to be with her family.

How do you claw out a part of your heart and give it back? That’s what it will be like to lose her, even to lose her to her own happiness with her own kind. She gave everything to win the war with me, fought with me, chose me in the first place—I push the worry out of my mind for a second. Just long enough to really look at the ruins of the mansion.

Half of it is burnt down. A goring space in the middle of the building is horrid to see. This is where I first found a reason to live. It’s where I fell in love with Ziven, claiming to hate him, but deities, I did not. Not for one moment. The building is brushed with ash and black soot, and the bricks are broken everywhere. But thankfully, there are no bodies. “Where are the dead?” I question. I mean, I thought there would be some. That’s why I didn’t really want to come back here and see it like this.

“We buried them. Well, I had people come and bury them and find what they could here.” Ziven pauses. “And they found something unexpected. Look.”

I follow Ziven as he points at the side of the building, and I have to blink twice to believe what I’m seeing. Mazzis. He smiles at me, grins so brightly that for a second, he reminds me of the light of the dawn. I laugh—a laugh of pure joyousness—as I run to him. His embrace is soft, like a brush of cotton wrapped around me, and I burst into tears. Mazzis is alive! “Darling Story, I’m so glad to see you are well. I am sorry I could not fight in the war with you.” His voice is warm, steady. “But there was a war here too. I stayed to protect the books, binding myself to this very mansion, giving it my magic to protect them, as I always said I would.”

“The books are unharmed?” I whisper in shock.

“Yes. As are the fae inside the library that stayed with me.” He cups my face. “Oh child, how you glow.”

“How?” I whisper.

He lowers his hands as Ziven glares at him from my side, and I elbow to stop the possessive, jealous thing. “We people of the Dawn Dynasty had our own secrets. We were always very good at hiding things. Protecting ourselves.” He gives me a knowing look. “I hid the entire floor and protected it from the fire. The vampyres didn’t even know we were here. We had enough food and water to keep ourselves alive. Congratulations,” he says, looking down at my stomach. “Your scent is very strong, as must the baby be! A delight!” He bows his head to us. “I will prepare the books on fae royal pregnancies and birth customs of the Moon Dynasty.”

“I just can’t believe you’re alive.” I can’t fully process he is here. I’m absolutely shocked and in awe. “Oh, and we are lucky. So lucky to be blessed. I would like to have a book on how I’m pregnant at all,” I admit. “It is...a confusion for us.”

“Well, I might have an answer. The fae who were sent here to clean up explained everything that happened to you, my dear. You’ve become a legend.” He touches my arm. “And I believe you were given vampyre venom to turn you when you died, and it didn’t work. Correct?” I nod. “Now you’re pregnant. My theory is confirmed.” He tilts his head. “The vampyre Dawn king was always looking for a cure, not a power, but a way to fix the princess’s infertility—to have heirs. Perhaps he found it, but it did not work in the way he expected. Not on anyone except for the princess because of the blood of the Twilight being pure fire. She could have been cured of infertility when she was given the venom and just...not known about it. That was the cure for all.” He exhales. “You being pregnant is rare for royals like Ziven, but this is a miracle.” He rubs his chin. “I would enjoy writing a book on this phenomenon.

Come, Story. I know you must want to see the library for yourself.”

“I’ll join you both,” Ziven suggests.

“Wait.” I stop. “I need to speak with Maeve alone. Go ahead.”

Mazzis doesn’t question my desire, and Ziven doesn’t either. They know I’m about to break my own heart in two, but if anyone can put it together like it’s new, it’s my husband. “I love you,” he murmurs, kissing my cheek. “I’ll be just in here.”

I breathe in his scent for just a second to strengthen myself before I walk to my dragon. Maeve turns her eyes onto me, and I hesitate. If I just run away, nothing will change, and I’ll still have her. But as easy as that sounds, I know I can’t do that.

“You should be with the others,” I tell her softly. “With those eggs that will hatch and be your family. Maybe you can even have eggs of your own. I want that for you.” I pause, my throat tight. “But most of all...most of all, I want to thank you. For fighting with me. For choosing me when you knew I was broken. For never giving up on me, even when I chose Ziven over the entire world.”

Her voice is softer than ever with me. “You never gave up, and I was honoured to be yours for a time.”

“You’re my dragon.” I sob. “I never want you to leave.”

“This is not forever, my rider,” she vows. “But it is a time of peace for us. The dragons are now free. We will live independently from you, like it always should be.” She exhales softly, wings shifting. “But you will see us in the skies, training our young, I imagine, in years to come.”

My heart warms as tears fall down my face. I walk up to her and I rest my head

against hers, feeling the heat of her breath against my body. “I have been very blessed to be your rider,” I whisper out loud. “And make sure this isn’t forever. I want to see you again, Maeve. One day. Fly with you one more time.”

“We will fly once more, Story Moonsilver. Queen of the legendary Moon Dynasty.” A sharp beat of wings cuts through the air as she spreads them wide, her brilliant, massive wings glinting in the light. She takes off into the sky, shaking the ground at my feet, and I watch her fly into the sun. I remember her words to me when we first bonded, and I cling to them as she flies.

“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.”

She doesn’t look back.

My eyes lower to the mansion, and I wipe my tears away because I’m not sad. No. This is a happy moment. We are all free in our own ways.

I walk toward the mansion, to the library of books that has always felt like home.

Being a dragon rider saved me, set me free, and now, she is free, too.

Chapter Nineteen

Months later...

Page Nineteen. I wish I could tell the writers of this book that the world they fought for has come to be, but instead, I will write for my children to read of our history. Of the dynasties that returned.

“By the light of the dawn, you are wed.” I clap again, wanting to jump with joy, but my giant pregnant belly makes that nearly impossible. The glowing light of the dawn casts over my mother and Mazzis as they embrace, like a kiss of true love, haloed forever. I can’t take my eyes off them, off how they glow like deities for just a second. I find my eyes turning to my husband, who is clapping for them, and he is glowing too with a lightness to his soul I enjoy seeing every day.

It’s been over six months since the war, and yet, six months feels like a lifetime because we can live in peace. Ziven’s eyes drop down to me, those beautiful silver eyes, and I reach up to brush a lock of his dark hair to the side. My husband. My king. He holds his arm around my waist as the crowd still cheers for them, and his smile is bright—bright enough that he can warm every inch of me. His stunning crown is nestled in his hair, and I like him wearing it. “My king,” I murmur. It matches my crown, which is the same colour as the night black dress I’m wearing. Everyone from the Moon Dynasty is in silver or black, mixed in with the Dawn Dynasty oranges throughout the crowd.

His grin is wicked as he leans down to kiss the tip of my ear. “Yes, my queen?”

“I love you,” I send to his mind.

“And I you,” he effortlessly replies. I lean on him for support as my mother laughs and Mazzis spins her around in a circle. It makes me think about the moment they first met. It took me weeks to find time to take my mother to the mansion. She fell in love with Mazzis from the moment she met him, and he told me that she might be the most stunning thing he has ever seen, even more than any book he has read. He might as well have proposed to her right there and then.

I didn’t think my mother would ever love again after my father, but with them, it is easy to see they were meant to be together in this lifetime. The two of them might not be entwined mates, but they didn’t need a bond, nothing, because it was just them always. Mazzis asked for my permission to marry her, which I thought was sweet, and he proposed a month ago. Neither of them wanted to wait long; they waited a long time to meet each other already.

Cheers echo all around us as everyone claps so loud I feel the vibrations in the air. Our people begin to throw petals as my mother and Mazzis walk hand in hand, her beautiful orange dress—the colour of sunsets—brushing against the ground. She stops near us and she comes right up to me, kisses my cheek, touches my bump, and nods her head to Ziven. “A blessing.”

I know exactly what she means. Mazzis waits for her as she heads back to him, and they continue down the pathway between the groups of people who came to see. We watch them go before they walk off straight into the centre of the courtyard, where we’re staying while the Moon Dynasty castle is being built. So much is being built that it’s hard to keep track, but I know Calix is in charge or managing the construction, and Avaluna is organising the homes for everyone.

Ziven has been working every hour of every day to ensure peace, and I help wherever I can. Shadows make a good job of lifting up the thousands of bricks that will form

the towering, beautiful white castle that sits right on the edge of the coast to the west. The new town spreads around it, being built by everyone who wants to be close, and it makes the shape of a crescent moon.

It will be beautiful when it's done, and it's our home. Our city. A city of peace.

Hettie rushes up to me, a beautiful little tiara sitting in her hair, one that has a sun symbol and a moon circled around each other—a sign of who she is now. Her dress matches that, a yellow dress with a black moon stitched into the skirt and vest. Daegan marked her as his heir, his sole living heir, from the moment that he claimed his city. Ziven did the same, along with my blessing. No matter what children we have, Hettie will rule, because it's meant to be that way. The Sun and Moon Dynasties have always been apart, and being apart was the reason everything went wrong in the first place. With Hettie on the throne for both, guided by us all, the world will know unity.

“Uncle Daegan's sent a gift along with the wedding present.” She holds it up—the brightest yellow flower encased in a glass box. “Isn't it beautiful? He says it's from his new friend who works with plants.”

“Oh?” I raise a brow. “Did he say anything else about this new friend of his?”

“No, but I'm sure I'll meet her when I go to visit in two months' time.” She grins. “Mama, will you dance?”

My heart leaps every time she calls me mama, and she has been doing so since the war. “I'm sure you will, but no to the dancing. My feet may fall off.”

“Will you dance with me instead?” Ziven offers her. “Story will need to rest.”

Hettie giggles as I roll my eyes. “And as we've talked about before, your uncle is

right on only this one occasion.”

Ziven takes her onto the dance floor, where people are already dancing, the soft sound of piano and violins filling the air.

Avaluna comes to my side, looping her arm through mine just as Catherine sees us and comes over. “I’m surprised Calix hasn’t got you on the dance floor immediately,” Catherine teases.

“I escaped by saying Story needed some support with that giant baby bump of hers.” She touches my bump. I haven’t got used to that yet. The touching, the bump, and I’m not sure I will. I know it’s a nice gesture, but it’s still strange to me. “When is this lovely darling child arriving?”

“Our daughter will arrive when she wants to, I imagine.” I stroke the bump. “If she’s as stubborn as her father, that will be when I can barely walk from the weight of carrying her.”

Catherine looks down with a laugh, then back up at me. “Pregnancy suits you, my friend. I miss you.”

“It’s good to see you, Catherine. It’s been weeks, and I miss you too. Stay longer this time.” I rest my head on her shoulder.

She sighs. “I miss you too. It’s not as easy to travel between us now that we don’t have dragons.”

There’s a longing in her voice—a longing I understand completely.

“I miss Maeve too,” I say softly, “but I know she’s happy.”

“I wonder if any of the dragon eggs have hatched,” Avaluna muses.

“I think they have. When I think about it, I always think they have. They have their young, and they’re happy—like us,” Catherine says decidedly, and I want to believe that too. Maeve was always so lonely, and those eggs, the last of her family, meant she would not always be alone. I love that for her.

Thinking of happiness and family, I glance over at my mother, who is deliriously happy in wedding bliss with Mazzis and his very dark orange suit. “So...my mother told me that pregnancy was in the air for my friends this morning.” I glance between them. “Now, Catherine—she’s not seen you for more than a day, so my only other friend that’s female...well, I’m looking right at her.”

I stare at Avaluna expectantly. “Oh, look at that. There’s my nephew and my sister coming this way. I think I need to go over and see them.” She escapes, and she knows that I can’t move faster than a waddle after her. I shake my head with a laugh.

Catherine’s mate grins as he steps in front of me. “I’m going to steal your last friend away from you to dance.” Catherine is nothing but smiling as she is swirled around and pulled straight onto the dance floor.

I watch them for a long moment and hold that memory in my mind, keeping it there for the nightmares and dark moments that might haunt me for the rest of my life. Moments like this, they chase them away. I don’t think I ever imagined a future like this, or even thought it could have been possible, but it is. And it’s worth it. All the times that I nearly gave up, I have held out for this—because it’s worth it.

“I promised to dance with you softly,” Ziven murmurs as he comes to me, and Hettie is now dancing with Calix. “My mate, I want to hold you.” I can never say no to him. He swirls me around, leaning my back to him, and wraps me in his arms as we sway gently to the soft music.

“There isn’t a day that goes past that I don’t love you,” he whispers. “Do you know that, my queen?”

I look up at the sky.

The deities that I know I prayed to, begged, and freed in the end.

They gave me this. A story that will never end in anything but love.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:35 am

The last page. This is Queen Story Moonsilver, and I will write the ending.

I t's been five days since I gave birth and my body still feels like it's fallen off a dragon, been dragged through a sea, and then I ran a hundred miles in a forest.

I'm told it's normal, at least what my mother and the healers have said, but I'm still wincing as I barely manage to walk to the balcony where Ziven is.

I could find him anywhere.

Our bond has only deepened in the months after the war and I love it, as much as I love him.

He is there to wake me when the nightmares drag me from sleep, when I can't tell if Emyr is still alive and hurting me, or if it is a dream.

Ziven is there when I'm happy to see me smile, when I'm sad or sick, despite the intense pressure of the throne.

When I went into labour early in the morning, Ziven never left my side and told me repeatedly that this pain is good, and I needed to hear it.

It will bring our child into the world, and he was right.

I never liked pain, never could stand my own blood, but none of it mattered when she burst into the world and changed everything for the better.

This blood loss was good, and it had nothing to do with the horrors of my past.

My daughter came into the world screaming, as the moon hung high in the sky and the night was still outside.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, even in the dead of winter.

The weeks before her arrival had been filled with storms, storms that threatened to bring down the new castle, but they never did.

Ziven thought the storms were a sign from the deities that our child was coming soon.

Florentine Kyrell Moonsilver of the Moon Dynasty. Second to the throne. Born on a silent night.

It's the middle of the night, but time seems like nothing when you've just had a baby. Our beautiful little daughter sleeps sometimes—not often.

She likes to be feeding or held, and luckily for her, there's a million people in this castle that would do anything to hold her, including my husband.

I watch him in a black oak chair that he made himself, touching her lovely onyx locks of hair that curl into her forehead. "Sleep, Wren. My night dragon."

I smile at his nickname for her.

When she was born, he was the only one that wasn't worried at all.

Wren was born with so much dark hair that reminds me of Ziv's, but it's her eyes—they're purple, like glowing purple, nothing like I've seen before.

When I saw a vision of her, she had Ziven's eyes, but something changed.

There's a mark in the middle of her chest: a sun and moon with four stars pointed around them.

Ziven has a army of people searching every book for this marking because no one knows it.

Ziven even let Daegan come and see Wren, to see the mark, and he didn't know either.

Mazzis has made it his mission in life to find an answer, and I'm grateful so many people are trying to find answers.

Being both her parents were heavily marked with dragons, the healer said it must be a gift, but Ziv claimed she is god-touched in private.

He and I know what that means, but we won't tell anyone else.

I told him about everything, about the deal I made, but we both know the Deities can be cruel, and whatever fate she has, she will not fight it alone.

We will love Wren, cherish her, through every part of her future. "Come mate,"

Ziven whispers so quietly, not daring to wake Wren up. When I lift my eyes from our daughter, I find him smiling at me. "You should still be resting."

"All I've done is rest, and it's just—I need to start walking around a little."

I speak back into his mind. I know he can feel how tired I am, how my body still hurts. He pats his knee. I roll my eyes and walk over. It hurts to sit down, but he pulls

me against him and continues rocking the chair as I stretch my legs out and touch our little daughter's tiny hands under the blanket of stars that watch over us. The moon is shining light down on us, as we don't say a word for a long time.

"Hettie's in love with her new sister."

Ziven murmurs into my mind. "She wants another sibling."

I struggle to not laugh and shake my head. Ever since I told him about the vision, he wants to meet both our children one day. "One day and I will miss Hettie. I'm sure Wren will too."

Hettie's traveling with Daegan back to the castle tomorrow. "It's good that the people of the Sun Dynasty see their princess as often as they do on the moon. But a part of me will never fully trust him. Is that wrong?"

"No. Part of me thinks that it's his redemption by bringing her up alongside us. I trust that Hettie is smart enough to know better. Plus, her new royal guard is going with her."

Ziven's voice is smug. The new guard is a massive fae male, with fire bending powers and a mean right hook. Ziven was sparing with him from the moment he showed up with his young nephew and asked to join the moon dynasty. Ziven asked him to be Hettie's guard only a few weeks later, and he has fell into the job like it was born for him.

"Yes, he is actually quite terrifying until his little nephew is around."

I say back.

Ziven hums. "It will be strange to have the house full of children, with Calix's baby

coming in only a few months. The healer said she thinks it's twins."

"Deities help them."

I smile, imaging the twins. They will be stunning with Avaluna and Calix's genes. Ziven gives me a smile, and it's so relaxed. Not a smile that I think I'll ever get used to. But I love it. I love every inch of this life we fought for and won. At some point I must have fallen asleep because when I wake up, I'm in the bed, and Ziv and Wren are missing. There's a note on the pillow:

Gone to the sea for a walk. Come join us if you're well enough. If not, we'll be back soon. Z.

I smile at the note and decide this is the morning I'm getting up and leaving this room. There's a knock at the door the second I push the blanket back. "Come in!"

My mum looks in. "Morning. I saw Ziven down the beach with the baby, so I assumed you might want some breakfast before you go after them. I was never good at resting after birth and I suspected you'd be the same, Story."

"You know we do have people for that,"

I tell her.

We've hired people to work in the castle and I'm never going to get used to letting them do things for us.

Ziven pays them a lot, and it's become a very desired job to work for us.

Ziven's family hid gold everywhere and protected it too, so it was all there when Ziven went hunting.

The Sun Dynasty didn't have the same, but after the war, we don't have slaves anymore and that is the law everywhere.

Fae are hired, they are paid, and they can leave whenever they wish.

Including the people that Ziv hand-picked himself with me to work in this castle. The Moon Dynasty, the people that are left, all live here as well.

"Yes, but..."

She holds the breakfast tray out.

"I took the breakfast from them this morning and ran away before they could catch me. They were actually pretty mad about it. I think they were desperate to see the royal baby, unaware that the baby's not in here."

"She's a princess of the Moon Dynasty, and she's a little different."

I shrug a shoulder. "And no one in this castle isn't trusted. Ziven made sure of it."

"Different but perfect. I'll have no one say any different."

She comes over and sits in a dark orange dress that brings out the red of her hair, even with the grey strands sneaking it. She looks happy, happier than I ever saw her. The dawn dynasty, Mazzis, is good for my mother. Sometimes I look at her and don't know how I managed to get so lucky. "I wanted to ask you something. For Wren."

She sighs. "Mazzis and I do not have heirs, and one day, we will leave this world. We would like to name Wren our heir. Hettie will rule the sun and moon, and the Dawn will be left somewhere in the middle."

She touches my hand. “You do not have to answer now, only know it is our wish. Whatever our future is, Wren will shall have us supporting her, too.”

It’s not something I had considered until now. I’ll have to speak to Ziven about it before anyone else. “Thank you for the breakfast and I’ll think about it.”

“Love you,”

she kisses my cheek before leaving the room.

I quickly eat the delicious fruit and pancakes that have been made for me before going to have a shower.

My body still hurts, but I know that I can walk to the beach.

It’s only a short walk through the castle and down fifty odd steps that are going to hurt.

The castle is still being built.

Half of it is still a mess, but the half that we live in is completely done.

We have several lounge rooms, an enormous kitchen and many bedrooms.

We have training rooms that are still being built, and formal rooms, but the living quarters are done.

I head down the dark blue stairs, decorated with silver stars, saying hello to everybody on the way before getting out straight onto the path to the beach.

It’s only a three-minute walk before I find them.

Ziven is sitting in the sea, which surprises me a little, but he's holding our daughter in his arms.

She isn't in the water and I'm thankful for that because it's too cold this time of year. When I get closer, I pause because the water is rising out of the sea in small little bubbles and they're hovering around Ziven in the air.

"Are you doing that?"

I whisper, not wanting to wake Wren up. When I get there, I see her eyes are open and she's smiling. I didn't even know babies could smile this early. I can't help but grin back at her, but as I look at the bubbles of water that start floating around me and touch one—"This is her, isn't it?"

"Yes. Apparently, she has control over water."

Ziven proudly murmurs. "She will be able to drown anyone who looks at her wrong. I couldn't be happier."

"She's a baby!"

I hiss and Ziven winks at me. "But it is interesting, because I don't believe anybody has had control over water. Shadows, yes, light from the sun that could manifest as fire, yes, but I didn't read about water."

I kneel in the sea at his side, and he hands her to me. I breathe in her scent and hold her close to me as waves lap around my body. Ziven kisses the side of my head. "God touched."

A dragon roar makes both our heads snap up when we look to the distance, to the edge of the sea where the sun is setting in shades of dark orange.

I can just make out a red dragon flying high in the clouds, with small little dragons behind her, all their scales red and glittering.

My smile widens and I feel Maeve inside my heart, my chest.

She doesn't speak to me, not now, but she doesn't need to.

I just know. Wherever we are in this world, we'll never be far apart.

Because she is my dragon, and I am forever her rider.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:35 am

YEARS LATER...

“Sometimes breaking an arm is considered building resilience and strength. Other times, one might call it reckless when the princess broke said arm jumping off a tower into the sea.”