



Dragonrider Academy, Episode 11

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Who can I trust?

No one.

Not even myself.

After finding a slumbering Lost Dragon Queen, I was transported to a new realm and dropped into a whole new set of problems and secrets.

My instincts don't seem to work like they should. I can't tell who is friend and who is foe.

I don't know if my friends are okay, if Killian and his dragon are safe, or even if I'm going to make it out of this alive.

Because the Wrath have found me.

Too bad for them, I fight back.

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Who knew that all those years with my nose stuck in a fantasy book would prepare me for saving the world?

Fantasy books had things like this, mentally preparing me for a horde of goblins descending on the lone hero.

Or, at least, not immediately losing my guts to the Wrath Monsters descending on my poorly defended position with Kai. Because I wasn't actually alone like the heroes in the books I enjoyed reading.

And my preparations weren't limited to books, either. All my training at Dragonrider Academy had prepared me to survive unprecedented circumstances, even without my dragon in the event we were separated.

Minus the useless wings part.

"Fluffing useless appendages," I hissed as I swatted one of the frail wings out of my face.

I understood the general idea of what Violet had done to me.

I had found her in the Shadow Realm and she had misunderstood my intentions.

She thought that I had woken her after a long slumber during her rebirth cycle.

She and her sisters were likely ancient and had been waiting for the fated day someone would awaken them.

Except, I hadn't woken her.

My father had.

Still looking out for me, I thought as I ducked a passing claw. Too bad you never taught me how to fight, especially while dragged down by wings!

Kai's flute released a piercing sound, one that made me cover my ears as a shimmering ball of energy spread out like a shockwave, sending my hair flinging over my shoulders and my flimsy wings finally shrinking to my back.

"Kai!" I shouted over the ringing in my ears.

"Sorry!" he yelled back, having already apologized once for his fighting style that left allies out to dry. He was the lone fighter I usually read about in fantasy tales.

But this wasn't fiction. This was real, and Kai needed my help.

Wrath Monsters flooded the valley of ruins we had wandered into—or rather, Kai had wandered into. I'd just been following him hoping he'd lead me to Killian or a way out.

Better yet, I was pretty sure he'd led me to one of the Violet's sisters. I caught a glimpse of the vibrant pink gem now filling one of the empty slots in my magicked bracelet.

I had a Diamond Queen's soul—but where was her body?

The egg had vanished not because the dragon had hatched, or the egg had been taken.

What we'd seen had been a spiritual manifestation. We'd come across her soul that

had been separated from her body.

Meaning this Dragon Queen was in quite a bit of trouble and had been desperately seeking our help.

I'm not going to let you down, I thought.

Solstice mirrored my determination and lit up the sky, banishing the darkness with a burst of fire that drove back the goblins.

The creatures hissed as they skittered back into the shadows, but the goblins didn't seem like they could close in on us. The power of the Diamond Royal soul within my bracelet was keeping them at bay.

So why were they keeping us here?

"Vivi!" Kai shouted, then released a sharp whistle. His power activated the compass now tucked in his satchel, but its glittery power turned red as it sought a new target.

What is that? I thought as the ground shook with rhythmic thunder, betraying the arrival of a new predator.

This was what the goblins had been up to. They'd just been stalling for time while their buddy arrived.

Solstice roared, sensing the danger before a beast's red eyes emerged through the darkness.

Uh oh.

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G listening spikes emerged first, then a beast with shadow for fur took shape with an eerily human-like face.

This was what the goblins had been waiting for.

A manticore.

I immediately recognized it from the beastly form written about in many fantasy novels I had read over the years. Except this one seemed to be missing the scorpion tail—yet I suspected the beast was just as deadly as lore described even without it.

The manticore's massive mane wafted around its head like nightmares come to life and its claws dug deep grooves into the caked soil. Smoke drifted from its flared nostrils as a tail with a shadowed puff on the end flicked behind it.

One that turned into a sharp blade in the next instant.

Ah, there it is, I thought, unsurprised but not too happy to have been right about its tail.

Especially when it coiled.

“Kai, move!” I shouted, then pushed him out of the way just as it struck where we'd been standing.

Solstice clamped her jaws around the manticore's tail, making the creature screech as the two hauled themselves together.

No! I shouted at her as I abandoned Kai and dove for the distracted manticore. I flapped my useless wings, struggling to do anything to get around the manticore's neck.

Blind panic overtook me as I sank my fingers into the cold, dense fur of its leg and hauled myself up.

"Are you crazy?" Kai shouted as I struggled my way up the beast's side.

"Probably!" I shouted back as I gripped on for dear life when the creature shook. Goblins chittered and growled from a safe distance as they watched the spectacle unfold.

Cowards, I thought.

The manticore trembled and groaned, and I realized I'd left a path of pink energy behind me that burned into its shadows, leaving ash behind.

Don't like that, do you?

The Diamond Royals had power here. Whoever or whatever had created these Wrath Monsters likely had something to do with whoever had betrayed Violet and her sisters many lifetimes ago.

She might never share her history with me, but I was certainly going to check the library archives at Dragonrider Academy whenever this was all over. Her tale had to be written out there somewhere.

The manticore twisted and I lost my grip as my body was flung to the side. The wind knocked out of me when I was smashed against its flank. Stars blinked across my vision as I kept one grip holding myself up.

It would be quite the fall, now. I didn't need to knock my head a second time.

Solstice released a targeted breath of fire that singed the manticore's mane, forcing it to redirect to the dragon. But doing so meant Solstice had to release the beast's lethal tail.

Worry about yourself! I told her as I curled my aching fingers and hauled myself up.

The manticore twisted and its tail coiled as it readied a strike. Solstice was wide open and fear tightened my chest, but a sharp flute's note sent an invisible rope tangling around the creature's tail.

"Thanks!" I shouted at Kai as I pulled myself up to the manticore's mane.

And I wrinkled my nose as I dove in.

When I found the soft spot at the back of its neck, I drew out the foil that Kai had given me and I plunged the sharp end into the beast. Pink light blasted out from my bracelet as a roar blistered my ears.

But it was done. I had found its weak spot.

And the Diamond Dragon Queen I had secured was helping me end it.

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The goblins shrieked in the distance as they retreated.

The battle was over, for now.

“Care to tell me what that was all about?” Kai asked.

At first I thought he meant my ability to use the power of a Diamond Queen Royal’s soul, but his gaze tracked to a full-sized Solstice, instead.

“Right,” I said on a loose breath. “I guess I should fess up, I’m not actually from here.”

He gave me a raised brow. “No kidding,” he said with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

Yeah, I guess I deserved that.

Sighing, I hurried over to Solstice and began examining her for injuries.

“You need to revert to fledgling-size, girl,” I whispered to her. I said it aloud for Kai’s benefit.

She had cuts and deeper wounds all over her hidden underneath her scales. I could sense her pain when she moved, better understanding the pain she was in, even if she tried to hide it. The manticore had cut deeply within a short amount of time.

Solstice sent a soothing wave of reassurance into my mind, making my chest pinch. She was the one who was hurt, but she still tried to comfort me.

I didn't deserve a dragon like her, but that was the beauty of fate. Luckily, we didn't all get what we deserved.

Or unluckily, in cases like ancient evils such as Nera.

I had to believe she'd get what she deserved one day.

I had assumed her taken care of, but still, she proved to be a thorn in my side.

Her Corruption reached out like tendrils on a poisoned vine seeking the Lost Dragon Queens to sink her teeth into.

If she won, she'd come back stronger than ever before. The realms didn't deserve what horror she'd unleash in the process.

The realms don't deserve what she's already unleashed, I thought grimly.

But I would fix it, because when fate didn't want to cooperate, I would grab it by the shoulders and make it listen.

Solstice glimmered as faerie magic kicked in, sweeping over her in a wave of purple motes before she was small again. She fluttered to my neck and curled around my throat before settling in just underneath my hair.

I gave her a pat as I turned to Kai. He watched us with curiosity glinting in his gaze and I noted that the wariness I'd seen there before was now gone.

Probably because we'd just taken down a manticore, which I guessed was one of the larger Wrath Monsters in the Crystal Realm. Kai seemed to be the type of guy who was impressed by acts of heroism.

Like a good fantasy character should be, I mused, then mentally pinched myself for constantly comparing Kai and this realm to the books I'd read.

He was real. He had a family he sent money to, meaning they were in need and suffering because of the Corruption Nera spewed.

And given I was a member of Dragonrider Academy, and a descendent of the Goddess, it was in part my responsibility to fix it.

"I'm sorry, Kai," I began, trying to decide how much I was going to reveal.

Violet had made a whole cover story for me, but lying didn't seem to be the right course of action. Especially given that she was nice and cozy back at the Academy while Kai, Solstice, and I risked our lives for her sister.

Whatever her plan, I wasn't going to go along with it anymore. Not when it all felt like a giant setup.

I would help her sisters. But we would do this my way.

Kai gave me a raised brow.

I bit my lip, then decided to just go all in. "I'm not a Companion Faerie," I began.

He tilted his head, sending a tendril of red strands into his eyes. "If you're going to try and tell me you're a Dragon Faerie, I don't think I'll believe you." He eyed Solstice now sleeping around my neck. "You're something else entirely. Even if you do have an actual dragon."

I rubbed the silver bracelet that now seemed hotter than usual while my birthmark throbbed. Apparently, holding onto a piece of Violet's soul, and now a new Diamond

Royal's on top of it, was draining my Goddess magic even more than before.

Violet was giving me the burden of her curse while she walked around, doing whatever it was she was doing back at the Academy.

Her sister—the one whose soul I had just found—I imagined wasn't in as good of a shape.

It would empower her to have the burden of her soul secured with me.

I could feel the drain as she kept her body alive within its real shell.

She was already taking slivers of what she needed to eventually free herself without going mad from the dark influence of Corruption.

But I wasn't an endless battery for Royals to feed on. I couldn't keep this up forever.

The drain was manageable, for now, but I needed to find Killian and get us back to the Academy to figure this out before I became too weak.

I refused to wonder if Killian had been dropped out in the wastelands, facing his own manticore problems alone, because no matter how capable he was, I still worried.

And if anyone was going to help me find Killian in this unfamiliar land, it would be Kai.

"I'm a Dragonrider," I told Kai, deciding to be completely honest with him and hoping he would be honest with me, in return.

"Not a faerie. I'm human, or, er, well I thought I was human because I'm from Earth.

” I rubbed my birthmark. “I’m a lot of things, it’s complicated.

” Somehow, Avalon Enchantress, Goddess Conduit, and Dragonrider mutt didn’t quite have a ring to it, so I left it at that.

“Dragonrider,” he said as if the term had no meaning to him—which, given that dragons didn’t exist in this realm, probably didn’t. “There’s an Academy for people like you?”

I nodded. “Yes, there are people from all over the realms that are drawn to Dragonrider Academy, a place where we bond with an egg and raise a dragon from a fledgling. Our job is to protect the realms. Which, is what I’ve been trying to do. But I can’t do it alone. I need my allies.”

He pulled his flute from his satchel, making me stiffen, then he sighed and sat on a rock as he toyed with it. “There are more of you, then.” He hummed. “We were only taught of the other realms recently, but I always knew they existed.

“You did?” I asked.

“Hmm,” he said, then added, “because of my dreams.”

Sitting on the ground next to him, I dared to hope that he’d be as honest with me as I was with him. Even if we’d just met, Kai felt like a kindred spirit.

And if he’d been dreaming of other realms, then it might not be a coincidence he was the first person I had encountered here.

My instincts were usually right. I’d grown a lot from my days at Oakland High where I’d been naive and taken advantage of more times than I could count.

That had been before I'd begun the journey of self-discovery and understood where I came from, who I really was and what I was capable of.

He gazed into the darkness. "My family is hanging on by a thread because they believed in the old stories—the ones that the gods had created the Maestros—male and female alike—and imbued them with power to run our villages and our realm. The Elders in my village don't appreciate such outspoken opinions and...

" His jaw flexed before he met my gaze. "There are worse things than Wrath Monsters out here, Vivi. I believe you when you say you've come to stop the invasion we've experienced from other realms, but I don't think you can help us with the true rot at the center of our people. "

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, not sure how to respond to that.

Fighting monsters was something I'd learned to overcome. Fear still festered inside of me, but I burned it out with dragonfire before it could even think of touching me.

The way Kai spoke was of a different kind of Corruption, though. One that even a Dragonrider couldn't help with.

But I could help bring peace to this realm, at the very least, and give them the space to figure it out.

"Tell me about the old stories," I suggested, instead of picking at the obvious wound of whatever these Elders had done to his family, I could learn about what I was dealing with.

I had a feeling that's where we could build an understanding with one another. Maybe I couldn't help with the power struggles within this realm, but I had a feeling there was another hero born to rise to take on the challenge.

Maybe that hero was Kai... maybe it was someone else.

Perhaps it was my Goddess blood giving me such certainty, but I felt a sense of peace when I focused on the things I knew I could control.

Such as the expulsion of Corruption where it didn't belong.

Kai's lips curled in a smirk as he gazed down at his flute, then back at me. "You really aren't from here, are you? I don't care how hard you hit your head. No one forgets the stories we were told as faelings."

I hummed. "They sound riveting already," I said as I tucked my arms around my knees and pulled them to my chest. Solstice squeezed over my collarbone and pricked my skin with her tiny claws, giving me a sense of nostalgia from the early days at the Academy.

I felt exactly like that bright-eyed newbie student again. Maybe it was something about this new realm and all its fascinating differences, but I had to be careful, or I might like it here.

And I knew I couldn't stay. Not when there were other Diamond Royals to save.

Kai smirked again, then took on a somber look.

"The gods once favored us and gave us not only Maestros, but queens. The old stories teach us about the queens who ruled the land and guided our people into a glorious era of magic and overabundance, assigning a Maestro to every village to spread out their power and provide peace through strength. Our realm is called the Crystal Realm for a reason—everything used to be made of crystal. Magic was so thick, it sprung from the ground like glass and could be tapped into by simply reaching out one's hand and touching it.

” Kai extended a finger, as if imagining one of the crystals, before curling it around his flute.

“It’s a nice story, but, it’s still a fairytale. ”

I rose an eyebrow. “Well, you are a faerie. How farfetched can it be?”

He chuckled. “You have a point there.”

“Of course I have a point. But, besides that, I thought that you said your village didn’t allow women to lead?” I asked as I tilted my head. “If they followed the old ways, wouldn’t they approve of women being in charge? Given there were powerful queens and also female Maestros that they selected?”

Kai’s lips twitched. “You’d think so, but no.

They say the lesson in those stories are about how they end—when the queens failed us and darkness descended on the land.

The gods sent their Wrath as a response, or perhaps as a test. Either way,” he waved out one of his hands, “this is the result. It doesn’t matter who is right or who is wrong. This is what failure looks like.”

I thumbed the new gem on my bracelet as I surveyed the dried landscape. I had a feeling that the drain I was experiencing wasn’t secluded to me.

Violet and the Diamond Royals were from this realm, and just conveniently everything was dead or dying because of the “Wrath?”

I didn’t buy it.

Violet had something to do with the state of this realm, and it was time that she owned up to it.

“I’m not the only one who’s been lying to you, Kai,” I said.

His gaze snapped to mine. “What?”

I took a deep breath. “Violet,” I said. “There’s something you should know about her.”

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I told Kai everything.

Violet's true identity. The Diamond Royals she had sent me to find.

And Killian, my boyfriend, was trapped somewhere in this realm with a dragon of his own.

He'd taken the last bit in stride, or perhaps I'd noticed a touch of disappointment. Maybe I'd misunderstood his flirtations with Violet as nervous energy, but from the moment I mentioned my bond with Killian, Kai had gone quiet.

We walked through the ruins in silence as we followed the glimmering trail. Hopefully, it would lead to the physical egg belonging to a new Diamond Royal that was out there, somewhere.

And I hoped that she wasn't hurt, but I suspected whatever had captured the egg would keep it alive.

It was the soul they'd be after. And if the body was killed, well, the soul wouldn't be sticking around and I wouldn't have a gem in my bracelet that was sucking out my Goddess energy.

"Do you think Violet is one of the queens from the old stories?" he asked. He kept his voice low as shadows curled over craggy rocks. There weren't any glorious crystals here, but their memory remained if I looked hard enough.

Everything Kai had told me was true.

“I think she’s the queen,” I murmured.

Solstice keened in protest, and I patted her. “You’re a queen too, girl. I know.”

Kai paused mid-stride. “That’s one of Violet’s sisters?”

I laughed harder than I intended too, which earned me another wave of irritation stemming from my bond with Solstice, as well as a strong nip on my ear.

Fine, I deserved that.

It took some explaining, but I told Kai it was a term of power when it came to ranking dragons. Solstice didn’t rule, but she was capable of leadership and stronger than a typical dragon would be—it’s why Nera had wanted her.

Maybe Solstice had ruled a kingdom long before I had been alive—but now, she was with me helping dragons and people everywhere. Keeping the realms safe was a full-time job.

She would never turn into a human like Violet and some of the other dragons I knew did. Lily being a prime example—she was a graduate and a human-dragon in her own right.

Some I shared with Kai, some information I decided to withhold. Sure, at first I hadn’t trusted him, but after facing death together, I felt like I understood him a whole lot better. But some things weren’t my stories to share.

And, Kai was the one who had faced death with me and refused to run away. He’d demonstrated his ability to work as a team, even after professing that he was used to working alone.

He was a candidate for Dragonrider Academy, if he played his cards right. Then, he'd learn everything there was to know.

Pain shot through my chest and I fell to my knees as Kai crouched, searching the darkness for any sign of danger.

"Are you okay? Did something hit you?" he asked. He kept his voice low, but the sudden alertness in his tone said he was ready for anything.

A vision of a small settlement with a massive crystal tower in the center of it flashed through my psyche.

"Killian," I whispered, knowing that he was hurt, or in danger. That's the only thing that would be strong enough to show me what he was seeing through our bond. It had been broken, or at least blocked. I hadn't been able to feel or reach him at all, until now.

Something had changed that, and I had a feeling it wasn't anything good.

"A purple crystal tower?" Kai repeated after I had told him what I'd seen.

"I know where he is," he said grimly. "It's not far from here. But I have to warn you, Vivi, he might not make it by the time we arrive."

Steeling myself, I refused to accept that sort of conclusion. "Which way, Kai. Tell me which way to go."

Because I wasn't going to give up hope, not now that I had a lead.

Kai pointed down a shadowy path that seemed to go even deeper into the darkness.

I curled my fingers as I drew to my feet. “Let’s go.”

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“We can’t stay here,” Kai told me when I stopped to catch my breath.

Solstice keened in my ear with agreement.

It didn’t matter if my power was draining fast, Kai was right. The ground shook with a reminder that the manticore we’d taken out had only been the welcoming party.

Kai checked his compass again, noting the red streak that flashed from it and spiraled down the worn path we were following.

“Do you know what that’s pointing to?” I asked as I used the broken remains of a dull crystal to stand. “It can’t be a coincidence. It’s pointing in the same direction that you’re saying this village is.”

Killian was alive, for now. I could feel his steady heartbeat inside my chest as if it were my own, but that’s all our bond would allow me to feel. I couldn’t pick up his thoughts or see through his eyes again.

I didn’t even know if Topaz was okay. But, if something had happened to the dragon, I imagined I would have felt more grief and sorrow from Killian rather than panic, so that gave me some reassurance.

“My compass picks up magical disturbances that don’t belong in this realm,” he said, glancing down at the device as he studied it.

He’d been doing that off and on, also when we had been looking for what had turned out to be the Diamond Royal’s soul.

Which, I suspect didn't mean her soul didn't belong in this realm, but rather whatever forces were attacking her was from off-world.

Such as Nera's Corruption.

A flash of memory darkened my senses, taking me back to when she had bled shadows onto Avalon's floor.

I had thought that she was dying.

And while she had been experiencing a sort of end, I should have known that dragons didn't experience the cycle of life and death like humans did on Earth.

Death wasn't the end, not really.

In many ways, it was the beginning of something new.

And Nera wanted to reform the world with her death, so that when she was reborn, she'd have all of the Diamond Royals under her thrall to begin again.

Not happening, Nera, I vowed.

Kai frowned and pocketed the compass as the last glimmers of orange and red magic slithered down the path.

"My compass only activates when there's a strong resonance.

I've never seen it turn these colors before.

" He glanced at me. His brilliant green eyes seemed to cut through the darkness, fierce with the power of a savior destined to bring light back to his realm.

Yes, maybe Kai was the hero I sensed that would rise to weed out the other kinds of Corruption in this world.

“It’s not Killian,” I assured him. Something, or someone, had made Killian send me that jolt of emotion.

Whatever was making Kai’s compass go haywire had to be what was keeping Killian captive. Because I knew one thing for certain, he was alive.

And if I could feel him, he could feel me. There isn’t much in all the realms that would keep Killian and I apart for long.

Meaning whatever it was... it was powerful, too.

Powerful enough to send a manticore after a Diamond Royal? I wondered, but didn’t voice my suspicions aloud.

We’d find out soon enough.

“Let’s hurry before the sun rises,” Kai said as he offered me a hand. “Can you keep up?”

There wasn’t much choice. I had to.

“Don’t worry about me. And, anyway, wouldn’t sunlight be a good thing?” I asked as I took his hand.

He smirked. “Normally, yes. However, I suspect we aren’t going to be welcome in the village. We need to slip in unnoticed.”

Great. Stealth was not my strong suit.

But I'd figure it out when we got there.

We listened to the eerie calm as we left the broken valley. The goblins had retreated, but I had the distinct feeling that we were still being watched.

Solstice remained secure around my neck, digging her tiny claws into my skin to stay in place while she soaked up my warmth.

It was hard on me to endure the drain of not only Violet and the new soul linked to me through my bracelet, but to heal Solstice as well.

My legs felt like someone had strapped rocks to them and every step was a challenge, but I kept going.

I've been through worse, I told myself, even if I couldn't exactly remember when I'd been through worse, right about now.

The compass guided us through the twisting path as the temperature dropped and a low fog crept across the craggy floor.

Strange fungi glowed along the dead trunks of crystalline trees, casting distorted shadows in every direction.

I don't like this, I thought as I bit my lip and noted how the landscape only grew stranger the further we ventured away from Fae Song Academy.

Kai paused and held out one hand as he tilted his head and listened.

I took the opportunity to drop to one knee and catch my breath.

"We're being watched," he told me.

“I know,” I whispered in return.

Kai gave me a raised brow. “Are you up for another fight?”

Biting my lip again, I shook my head. “Not unless we find Killian.” Something was draining me even faster now. I gripped my wrist as a burn radiated out from where my bracelet touched my skin.

Kai frowned down at it. “Can you take that thing off?”

I hadn’t actually tried, but as I palmed the clasp, I knew Violet had been wearing an identical bracelet.

Taking it off could hurt her, or worse. Until I knew more, I couldn’t risk it.

“I’m not taking it off,” I told Kai.

He frowned, but didn’t push me further. “Let’s keep moving, then. The sooner we reach the village, the better.”

I allowed Kai to drag me to my feet again and accepted his arm as I tried, and failed, to hide my stagger.

The mist thinned as we crested the last ridge, revealing the village.

Crystalline domes hunched between jagged spires of stone, their surfaces dulled with frost and time.

No lights framed the quiet village. No movement stirred it. We were met with and eerie stillness that weighed on my shoulders.

I palmed the bracelet again, trying to ignore the stemming throb the heated metal radiated through my skin.

“It’s getting worse,” I told Kai.

I didn’t specify what I meant by that, but he seemed to understand the bracelet had a correlation to what was wrong with this village. “Do you think Killian is here?” he asked me, not addressing my comment.

The subtle warmth that was my connection to Killian was definitely there. That’s all that was keeping me going.

“Yes, he’s definitely here,” I said as I glanced at a shadow that didn’t seem to fit the spire it mirrored.

“It doesn’t feel like a rescue mission,” he murmured.

“More like a trap,” I agreed.

We stood at the edge of the village in silence as the fog curled around our legs. They settled into our footsteps as we slipped into the ruined streets.

It was too quiet.

Like the whole realm was holding its breath.

Waiting to scream.

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We only made it a few steps into the village when a shout made me freeze.

“Oy! Who’s there?” an old man barked.

I hadn’t imagined what an elderly faerie might look like, but a surprisingly energetic male bounded up to us with wings that resembled crumpled parchment.

His skin shimmered faintly under the mist, betraying a magical sheen as his long ears twitched.

Despite his hunched back and wild silver hair, there was a sharpness in his eyes that said he missed nothing.

Kai squeezed my hand before stepping ahead of me. His posture remained calm, but his body was coiled as if ready to spring into action. “Envoys from Fae Song Academy,” he called out evenly. “Emergency dispatch. We have clearance to enter under Academy protocol.”

That line slipped from his lips so smoothly that I almost believed him myself.

The old man squinted through the fog. I understood now that Kai had intended the darkness not just as a means to disguise our appearance, but to justify his story. I imagined any nighttime emergency protocol from the Academy would differ than it would in the daytime.

“Emergency, huh?” the elder faerie asked. “I didn’t hear any bells.”

Kai didn't miss a beat as he tapped his ear.

"Magic's flaring, citizen. It set off the alarms on our side, so here we are.

" He pointed in an arbitrary direction. "Something's corrupting the ley lines.

You know how these things go—Fae Song Academy doesn't wait for sunrise when the village could be at risk.

Ley lines?

Whatever that meant, it sounded important enough for the elder faerie to step back a pace.

Behind him, I caught flickers of movement. Shimmers of delicate wings fluttered as curious gazes peeked through barely lit windows. When I focused, I saw that the village wasn't asleep.

It was holding its breath.

"Our ley lines have been broken for a while, boy," the faerie countered, making the blood drain from my face. "Academy didn't care about us six months ago. Not sure why they'd care now."

We weren't going to get away with this, were we?

Kai frowned, but the faerie waved his hand in dismissal as he continued. "No matter. The Maestro told us to send any newcomers to the tower. This way."

Kai and I shared a look as the old man turned his back, the movement sending his crumpled wings folding awkwardly over his back.

“What now?” I whispered.

“Now,” Kai replied, his voice tight, “we find out what they’re hiding in plain sight.”

A grinding sound made Solstice hiss as the old man side-stepped, making room for a massive shape that emerged from a mist.

The lifelike statue that had to be at least seven feet tall shuffled in front of us, leaving me gaping.

Cracked stone assured me this wasn’t a living creature, but it had marblelike pulsing veins of violet light and crystalline shards jutted from its shoulders like a fashion statement.

It turned and looked directly at me with eyes that pulsed in time with a sensation I felt in my bones.

A strange tone sounded, one that didn’t sound like it belonged as it thrummed through the creature before it faded away.

“What is that,” I hissed at Kai.

“A golem,” he replied, sounding distraught, but he merely smiled at the faerie.

“Escort,” was all the elder faerie said before he patted the golem and then flitted out of sight.

Great.

The golem moved with slow, deliberate movements with power jolting through its stony limbs. I had been up against some terrifying beasts, but nothing literally made

of stone.

Its heavy footfalls echoed through the mist-shrouded path as the monstrosity led us uphill toward the looming tower made of bright crystal.

It was the only object in the village that wasn't dark, and it seemed to emanate with its own inner light, looking more ominous than peaceful, like a flickering candle at the top of a grave.

I started to follow, but a low, grinding rumble from behind made Solstice dig into my neck as she flexed around my shoulder to get a look.

Stomach dropping, I turned and spotted another golem breaking through the fog, blocking our exit.

"There's two?" I asked Kai.

His jaw flexed. "One to lead," he murmured, then glanced over his shoulder, "and one to make sure we don't change our minds."

"So, we're not just being escorted," I guessed.

"We're being delivered," Kai said.

I eyed the pulsing, purple magic thrumming through both golems. With our path blocked and nowhere else to go, I shuffled to keep up with the one in the lead.

"Those veins," I said, eyeing the glow. "That's not normal magic around here, is it?" Something about it felt off and wrong.

"No," Kai confirmed. "It feels almost like... Wrath. But that doesn't make sense."

Pondering that, we walked in silence for a few steps, the broken crystal dust crunching under our feet.

“You mentioned something about ley lines. What does that mean?” Maybe that had some sort of connection to what was going on in this village, especially if it was some sort of protection mechanism.

Kai nodded as if he approved my train of thought.

“I just learned about this in one of my history classes. The Council of Songkeepers introduced the ley lines many years ago, right around when Wrath started infecting the land. It’s a way to funnel unfettered magic to the villages and empower the local Maestro, and therefore the people. ”

I hadn’t yet heard about a council, but it made sense there would be some type of ruling body over this realm. Although, it wasn’t a comfort that Kai had only just learned about it, a “So if the ley lines are broken...” I began.

Kai’s face took on a grim expression. “Then it’s possible everything is corrupted by Wrath here—including the Maestro.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” I whispered as I edged closer to him and eyed the dark village. Now it made sense why everything felt so off. “Your compass turned red, is that why? It sensed the corrupted Maestro?”

Kai shook his head. “A village infected by Wrath should not have been hidden this long. That villager told us the ley lines have been broken for six months.”

“And it’s not that far from the Academy,” I ventured, glancing back the way we had come. I couldn’t see the spires from here, but we had been traveling on foot. While we’d been walking most of the night, it hadn’t been far enough to require a portal.

“What’s going on here?”

“I don’t know,” Kai said as he readjusted his flute in his vest pocket, ready to use it at a moment’s notice. “But we’re going to find out.”

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The crystal tower had no door. The shimmering vertical wall of crystal was completely flawless and reflected the massive golem standing before it.

Then, as I watched, it reflected my surprised face after the golem had walked straight through it.

I blinked. “Did it just...?”

“Looks like it,” Kai replied as the second golem began walking again, forcing us to move toward the tower.

“I guess we’re just... going through,” I said as I squeezed my eyes shut. I kept my feet moving, taking comfort in Solstice squeezing around my neck as a resonance hummed through my entire body as if I had stepped into the belly of a harp.

When I opened my eyes again, all I saw were brilliant crystals and colors. I had expected a room, but I was inside the prism. Panic seized my lungs as I struggled to breathe, but then the floor shifted out from under me and my stomach dropped as the crystal sucked me in.

No, not in.

Upward.

I drew in a deep breath as I arrived in a vast, circular chamber high above the village. There were no windows, but I could see through the glassy walls as if we were trapped inside a multi-faceted gem.

The room continued to materialize, or maybe my body was still climbing, until furniture appeared.

Then a figure in the center wrapped in crystal chains.

His head was bowed, leaving white hair to drape over his forehead. A glowing blue tattoo burned on his right arm as a small, azure dragon wound about his neck, weakly glancing up to keen at me.

Solstice strained against my neck, immediately recognizing who we had found.

“Killian!” I screamed as Solstice cried for Topaz. She tried to grow. I felt her push of magic into her limbs, but something suppressed her and made her cry.

Killian’s head snapped up and our eyes met. Terror burned in his whitewashed eyes that I loved so much.

That’s when our bond pulsed with a hard thump to my chest, sending me to the floor. Kai made a strained sound behind me, but I couldn’t turn around to see what had happened.

“Viv,” Killian rasped. “You shouldn’t be here. She used me to get to you. You need to?—”

A second shimmer of light rippled across the chamber and a woman with broken shards for skin stepped forward.

Silky rainbow-like wings that broke the light fluttered softly behind her. Her eyes glowed with a pale, unnatural swirl of color that seemed to draw the light inward, as if her body drank in all the brilliance around it, leaving shadowy footprints in her wake.

It reminded me of the village and the darkness that spread out everywhere—except for this very tower.

“So predictable,” she said with a sickly-sweet tone.

One that I would recognize anywhere.

“Nera?” I hissed.

I didn’t know how, but this was the Avalon Queen I had vanquished. And she had come back to haunt me.

She hadn’t been reborn already, had she?

“You’re dead,” I said, assuring myself of what I distinctly remembered. “I ended you.”

She gave me a toothy smile. “You ended a version of me,” she replied as she splayed open her palms. “I’m a dragon, sweet child. I cannot be ended .”

“You know her?” Kai whispered, but Nera wasn’t done talking.

“I’m more than one life,” she said as she approached Killian, making me stiffen.

She drew her pinky down his jawline as the chains forced him to look up at her.

The crystal tower itself seemed to be alive and it bent everything to her will.

“I’m more than one song. And the Wrath here... it’s been so very welcoming.”

Behind her, two pedestals appeared in a shimmer of rainbow.

She wanted me to see all the treasures she had collected. Not just my fated mate and his dragon, but the innocents I was trying to protect.

Two eggs.

One pink, and another that glowed with deep orange and red hues.

The same colors that Kai's compass indicated , I realized, but my thoughts were instantly cut off by a stab of pain.

My bracelet flared with heat that had me whimpering, because this was a third soul.

One under Nera's influence, and it was about to awaken.

“Three queens,” Nera whispered, stepping closer as she eyed my bracelet. “Three voices inside one vessel. Let's see if you can carry their tune... before they break you.”

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Three rhythms pulsed inside my bracelet, each throb matching the beat inside my chest until they sped up with a tempo that my heart couldn't keep up with.

Not good, I thought as I panted onto the floor. Nera was talking to me again, Killian was making threats, and Kai was struggling as two dragons added to the symphony of noise, but I could barely discern it all above the beats .

Ba-bump.

Ba-bump.

Ba-bump.

They stirred inside of me, too much for one body.

“You won't win,” I said, forcing my face up to glare at the possessed Maestro.

Because Nera was inside of this faerie, somehow. And I would find a way to push her out.

“You think corrupting everything around you makes you strong,” I spat.

“How little you understand me,” she sighed.

“I don't want to be strong, I have to be.

The only way I can fix the wrongs that have been done are to have the control that I

need to be a queen.

” She leaned in, her eyes sparkling with manic logic.

“If I have to burn everything down because it’s broken beyond repair, then that’s what I’ll do, Vivienne.

And you can help me in my quest, or you can get out of my way . ”

She sliced her hand through the air and the red egg pulsed.

The heat in my bracelet exploded, forcing me to cry out as the third soul surged its power up my arm and directly into my mind.

It wasn’t subtle like Violet had been.

It didn’t ask.

It demanded.

Fire licked at the edges of my vision. The weight of memories that weren’t my own pressed in on my psyche.

Blood,

Shattered glass.

Limbs and wings twisted with Wrath.

A scream built behind my teeth, but I clamped it down.

“Vivi!” Killian shouted. “Don’t let her in!”

I'm trying, I thought back, but I knew it was only resistance. I couldn't keep this up.

I gasped as I clutched my wrist and light poured from the bracelet.

The chamber vibrated as if in tune with the mayhem.

The pedestals gave and cracked.

Nera's smirk flickered.

And then...

A tone.

Clear. High. Beautiful.

And one I had heard before—when we'd first encountered the golem.

But now it was unmistakable.

It rang through the crystal walls like the first note of a symphony. A harmony—one that didn't come from the bracelet, the tower, or even from me...

It came from below.

From the ley lines.

Nera stumbled back a step as her hand recoiled. The red egg dimmed for a moment as the third soul seemed to hesitate.

It was enough.

The pressure in my chest released and I collapsed to my knees as I gulped in cold air.

Kai was at my side in an instant, as if he had just been released from a hold. “That wasn’t you,” he whispered. “That note... it wasn’t from any of us.”

I didn’t answer, because I was staring at the pink egg.

It was glowing brighter.

Responding

The second Queen was waking.

And she was choosing one of us in this room.

My eyes flashed up to Kai’s.

Are you ready for this?

Nera hissed as if she knew what was happening. “No!”

She stepped toward the pedestal, but the floor between us shattered in a prism of light. A web of glowing crystal formed between her and the eggs, cutting her off.

She couldn’t cross.

She wasn’t in control like she wanted anymore.

At least, not fully.

Someone had intervened.

And I had a feeling I knew who.

See who is Vivi's new ally in Dragonrider Academy: Episode 12 !