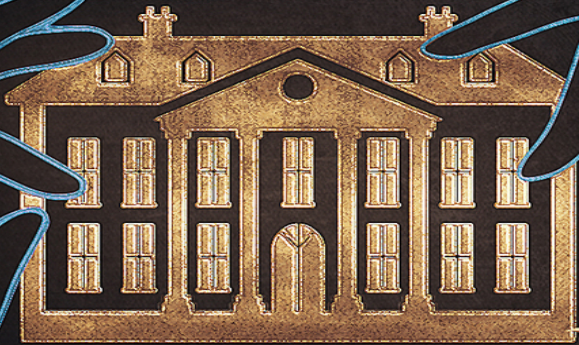


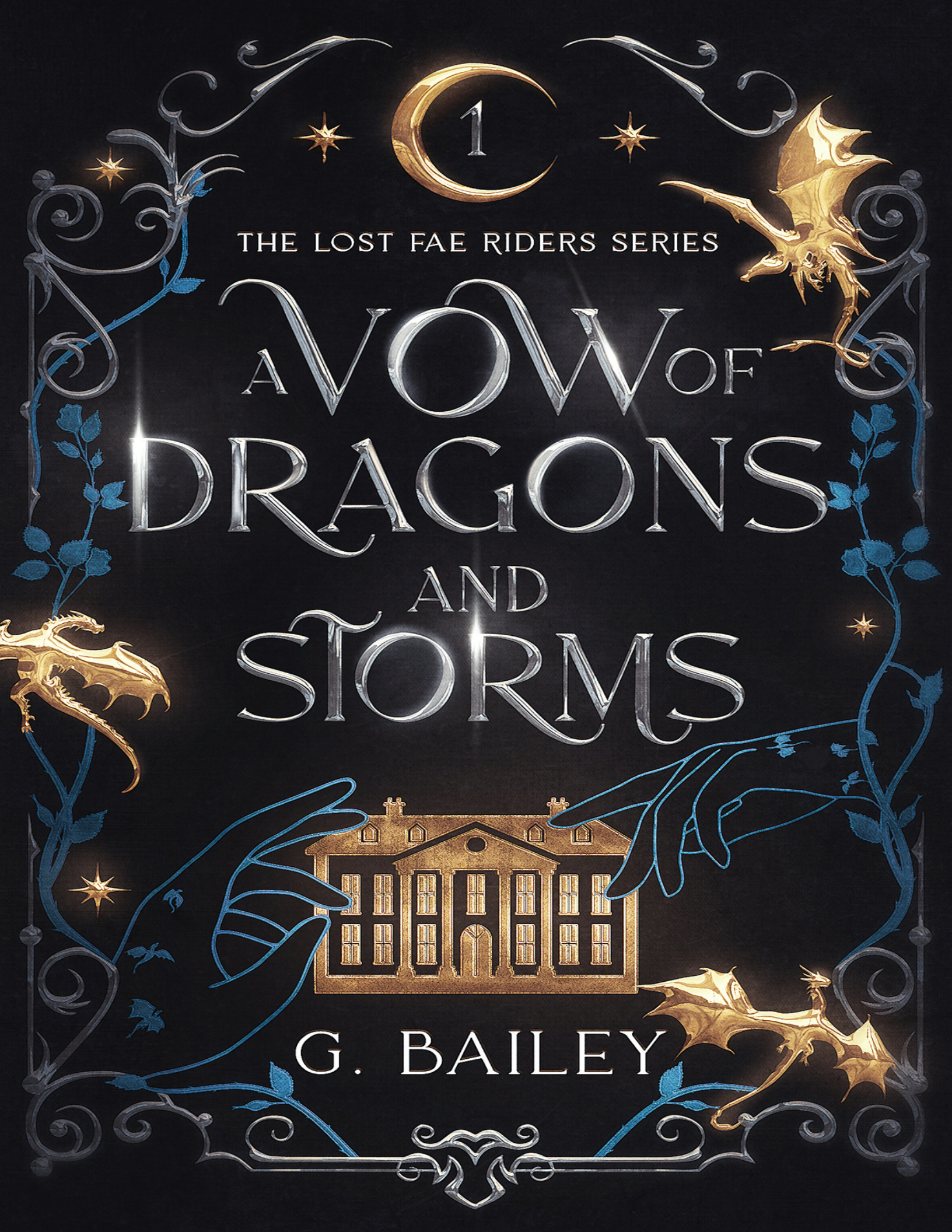
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THE LOST FAE RIDERS SERIES

A VOW OF  
DRAGONS  
AND  
STORMS



G. BAILEY





1

THE LOST FAE RIDERS SERIES

A VOW OF  
DRAGONS  
AND  
STORMS

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# *A Vow of Dragons and Storms*

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The Lost Fae Riders Series

Book 1

**G. Bailey**

A Vow of Dragons and Storms  
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# Quote



*For everyone who has chosen the wrong person to be their forever.  
The right person is waiting in the shadows; look for them.*

## Description



**Dragons don't exist anymore. Neither do their legendary fae riders...  
until I stumble into a mansion full of them.**

It turns out the last of the dragon rider fae have been locked in a trap, a mansion with no doors, no way to leave for five hundred years, and I'm the first fae to enter. The dragon fae riders know nothing of the world outside or the vampyres who have taken over in their absence, and most don't trust me.

Especially not Ziven—king of the forgotten Moon Dynasty.

The gorgeous but cruel king demands I enter the Decidere, a ritual for all fae over the age of twenty. It's a deadly trial in the dragons' caves below the mansion, and if you're weak, you're dead. Ziven marks me as a traitor, and he doesn't believe anything I say. He wants me to lose. The Sun Dynasty king takes me in, helps me and is kind. With his help, I might last a week.

With Ziven doing everything he can to end me, my ability to escape the mansion seeming impossible, and dragons literally burning the ground at my feet, I don't know how I'm going to live through this.

*You need to be brave. You need to be a warrior...or the dragons will know.*

My name is Story Dehana, and I escaped the vampyres, only to find myself trapped once again with a new enemy who might be worse.

***A Vow of Dragons and Storms* is the first book in The Lost Fae Riders Series. This is a full-length fantasy, dragon-rider romance with an enemy who might become a lover, found family, the best romance tropes, and a main character who loves reading almost as much as you.**



# Chapter One

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*Page One.  
To my reader—  
I was a dragon rider, and if you're  
reading this, I must be dead.*

**W**hen a female seeks revenge, society often labels her a monster. I'm the monster in the vampyre society, but they won't cage me ever again.

The wind and rain whips through my red and black locks of hair as I run, strands lashing my bruised cheek and cut lip every so often. They are nothing compared to the burning of my broken ribs from the rock I just fell over, but I use the pain to fuel myself. The damp moss on the surrounding trees is all I can smell as I run, my legs aching with every slam of my bare feet on the forest floor.

*Keep running.*

*Don't let them catch you.*

*You are never going to be a slave to them again, Story Dehana.*

Tears fill my eyes as it feels like he is right at my side, whispering encouragement in my ear. My best friend who always believed in me...but

he is gone now, and if they catch me, he died for *nothing*. Narrowly missing a tree, I turn to the left and stumble onto an old stone path, parts of which look like they have been well hidden under years' worth of plants and dead leaves. In uncovered parts, the soggy mud between the massive stones threatens to pull me in, but I can't stop. I won't.

An unnatural silence fills the air, and my heart races.

The vampyres have found me.

I stop, spinning around, breathing heavily as sweat drips down my neck. I have to hide until they pass. I pray to the deities for a safe haven, even if they have shunned me for as long as I can remember. My eyes frantically search for somewhere to hide, somewhere they wouldn't sense me. My heart leaps with hope when the moonlight shines down through the thick green trees, illuminating the spiralling towers of some kind of house.

If the house has thick enough walls, they might not be able to hear my heartbeat. If I could find a basement... I smile for the first time since entering this forest. Running here was never the plan, but it all went wrong. I might be able to hide from them in there, at least long enough for the vampyres to pass through this part of the Hydra Forest. I blow out one shaky breath before leaving the stone path and running straight towards the spiralling towers that climb higher than the trees themselves. That's saying something, as the trees around here are gigantic, taller than any building I've ever seen, taller than the vampyres' mighty castles.

Nearly tripping over several logs, I focus on the ground as I run until the forest floor changes to a marked stone pathway. The path leads up to massive metal gates, which are swung open, held in place by thick ivy that has grown over the gates and broken them in parts. At the bottom of the path is a mansion, sitting in the forest, like the deities themselves dropped it here for me. It's old, mostly derelict, and I bet it's close to falling down. Four towers mark the corners, with a triangular pointed roof in the middle. A colossal round stained glass window is in the middle of the building, but it's too dusty and covered in dirt for me to see what is pictured. There are hundreds of triangle windows around the dark stone building, and its massive front doors look slightly ajar. There's no light coming from inside,

just pitch darkness from what I can see. It's creepy, but I don't have a choice.

I don't know what this mansion is doing out here; I wasn't even aware there were buildings inside the Hydra Forest, and I would know, as I've looked over the maps in the weapons room a hundred times. It's meant to be empty, abandoned to the world. But right now, that mansion is going to be my salvation.

The unnerving silence fills the cold air, like a mist crawling through the forest floor that promises death. A silence that's only brought by the vampyres when they're hunting their prey. I need to move. If the birds, rabbits, foxes, and all creatures go silent, then death is not too far away. Death would be a mercy for what I will get if they manage to capture me. I sprint as fast as I possibly can down the path, which is remarkably solid considering that this place must be hundreds of years old. It doesn't look like a single soul has walked here in a long time.

Daring to glance behind me, I'm surprised to see the gates have slammed shut, locking me into this gigantic garden of the mansion. I frown at that for a second, but I don't have time to dwell on it, to think about how the gates even shut themselves, when I hear branches cracking in the forest. They are getting close. It's seconds before I'm standing in front of the massive oak doors that lead into the mansion. They're slightly open, a small enough gap for me to slide through, and I don't wait. With my heart racing, I grab the wood door and slowly inch myself through the gap, pushing with all my strength to get through. With a final tug, I fall out of the gap, inside the mansion, right onto hard, cold stone floors and my ribs scream in pain. The doors slam shut behind me, the bang echoing loudly.

My eyes shoot up as lights burn to life on the ceiling, magic held within crystals that form a chandelier that is bigger than me. The square room has beautiful mosaic walls, grey stone floors, and there are two other doors, both the same oak as the front.

This mansion is not derelict inside...and I don't think I'm alone. A statue of some kind sits between the doors on the other side, and it's a creature on all fours. It has massive wings spread out and a fierce mouth, baring rows of teeth. It's familiar...I just can't remember the name of the creature for a



moment until it hits me. Dragon. An extinct creature from the old times. I saw a painting of one in the forbidden books my tutor gave me, only briefly, and it stuck with me how terrifying they look. The dragons and their dragon fae riders are nothing but a whispered fairy tale that the lessborn fae tell their children so they don't run away into the forests.

How is that statue possible? Not only are dragons extinct, any mention of them is a death sentence. I crawl backwards until my back hits the door. I need to get out of here. I reach up, looking for a handle, finding none. I'm patting the door for some kind of way to get out when I hear a footstep behind me. I turn back to see a man standing in front of the statue, like he appeared out of thin air. The doors never made a sound. The stone wings of the statue spread out behind the stranger, making them almost look like they're his wings, like this beautiful man could take off into the skies. He looks surprised, absolutely shocked. That makes two of us.

He watches me with pure astonishment for a long time until it's just uncomfortable. Am I safer in here with this stranger or in the forest with the vampyres hunting me?

"Who are you?" His voice is thick, deeper and stranger than any accent I've ever heard before.

"I could say the same thing." My voice is breathless as I ascend to my feet, plastering my back to the door. "I think I've walked into the wrong place. I should get going now, but I can't find a handle. How do you open the door?"

The male's eyes widen a fraction. "You're not going anywhere. No one just walks into here. The dynasty royals will decide what to do with you."

"Royals?" I dare to ask, my skin paling. There can't be vampyre royals here. There can't. I've just escaped them. What if I ran into one of their traps? Why would they be out here in the forest in the middle of nowhere without guards? I can't breathe, I can't move, as the male walks to me. He doesn't move like any vampyre I've seen or look like them either. His skin is too warm, his hair too blond, too perfect. I do the best thing that I possibly can think of, I dart around him and run, heading straight towards the other doors. I barely get two steps before he's roughly grabbed me from

behind. Something hard slams into the back of my head just as my fingers graze the wing of the dragon.

## Chapter Two

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*Page Two.*

*Dragons are beautiful creatures that should be feared by everyone but the one fae they choose as their rider. I fought the stones for my dragon, and if you keep reading, maybe you will be one too.*

**“D**on’t worry. They’ll just do a test and then we’ll find out where you go. Okay?”

*My mother’s soft words do little to settle the nerves in the pit of my stomach, no matter how many times she repeats herself. Maybe she has convinced her own heart to stop beating as fast as mine. Her long red hair is braided down her back, like mine, but she doesn’t have the blackness that crawls up my locks and makes people stare. Will my hair make me stand out today? Will how pale and curvy I am? Will the fact I have tipped fae ears, even when most don’t anymore? My insecurities are like a never-ending song in my mind, repeating over and over, until I’ve forgotten the point of the sweet song that I had begun listening to. Until my thoughts are as real to me as the vibrant silver moon in the night sky each night.*



*I play with the end of my braid as we stand before the thin black doors that lead into the basement of the processing district. My mother kisses the top of my head. “Happy birth year, darling girl. I don’t think I got a moment to say that.” Happy birth year seems inappropriate, considering no part of today will be happy.*

*I’m fourteen this birth year, and for fae, it’s a cursed year. On every fae’s fourteenth birth year, you’re officially classed as an adult. At least the lessborn fae like me are. There are three places the lessborn fae are divided into, depending on the results of today’s test. The breeders—like where I live with my mother. I wince at the idea of returning there. My mum is classed as an unsuccessful breeder, being she only ever had me and no other children, despite many suitors. Every other family I know has five or six children, some as many as nine, and that is normal for female fae breeders. We were always outcasts because it’s just me and her, but I like that. I like that I get her attention all of the time. But it doesn’t mean I want to be there. What if I’m unsuccessful as a breeder? I don’t think I even want children, though I’m not sure it’s an option for me to want things, but being a breeder is the best option.*

*The second is a worker, sent to the mines to collect gold, silver or crystals for the vampyres until my back breaks or a rock crushes me. The third option...my mother won’t even speak about the third option, but I’ve heard it from the fae I grew up around. They whisper it around—the blood slaves. The blood slaves are rejects of society, the ones that don’t fit in with the workers in the mines because their bodies aren’t able or they’re not successfully able to be a breeder. Today’s check decides everything.*

*“Story Dehana, come forward.” I lift my hand, like she doesn’t know exactly who I am. There are four families here. The rest of the people my age are boys. The fae female waves her hand at us, her eyes drifting to my mother for a second, and she blinks in surprise. She is powerborn, like I’m told my father was before he died. The markings on her cheek tell me she is a healer, a flower wrapped around a star, and they match the many markings of power on her hands—all flowers, different ones, that move against her skin like they are alive. The powerborn fae get a choice in their careers, in their lives, but they rule nothing like the rest of us. Fae are slaves to the vampyres, no matter what you’re born as. “Come in, come in.”*

*My mother all but tugs me forward with her hand, leading me into the cold room. There's a metal bed in the middle, with a single white cushion, and the walls are blank. The woman shuts the door behind me. "Go lie down, Story. I will be right with you." Her voice is quiet as she addresses my mother. "It's good to see you, Ylene. You haven't aged a day."*

*"You're too kind, Blaire. How is your son?" my mother whispers back.*

*She touches her neck where another marking is. This one is a diamond, which marks the birth of a child. "Growing up fast. Too fast."*

*My mother looks at me, light shining in her dark forest green eyes that are exactly the same as mine. "I know the feeling, my old friend." She blinks a few times, straightening her back and smiling like she hasn't got a worry in the world. "Shall we?"*

*Blaire faces me and rubs her hands together as she closes the space between us. "I only need to take a drop of your blood, and then I'll be able to see where you're suitable for. Your blood holds all the answers of your body to me, and it will show me what your fate shall be."*

*"Okay." My voice shakes. I'm not brave, not like my mother. I'm not a warrior like my father was.*

*"This will all be over soon," Blaire gently tells me, tucking away her loose strands of brown hair. I'm not sure how my mother knows this powerborn fae, but I don't have time to question her. I sit down as Blaire comes over, a small needle and a glass tube in her hands. She pricks my finger, and I barely feel the pain before a small amount of my red blood trickles into the tube.*

*I can practically hear my heart racing in my ear, like a constant drum, as I stare at Blaire's back. Bright orange magic, a rare magic for powerborn fae, flashes in front of her, and she goes still. She seems to do it two—no, three—times before she looks over her shoulder. I've always been good at reading people's eyes, and her blue eyes are screaming a thousand words, and none of them good.*

*She clears her throat. "Ylene, can I speak to you outside?" She points to a door. "Just out there?" Sensing my gaze, Blaire looks at me. "There's*

*nothing to worry about...I just need to speak to your mother for a second.” Of course, when adults tell you there’s nothing to worry about, there’s always something to worry about. I sit up as my mother goes out the side door with her, and they leave it slightly cracked open. I can’t help myself as I run over, hiding just behind the door so I can hear them.*

*“Oh, Ylene, I’m so, so sorry,” Blaire is exclaiming.*

*My mother seems to pause before she asks a question that determines my entire future with barely a whisper. “What are you sorry about?”*

*“She’s not eligible for the breeders or the workers, and I’m just sorry. So sorry. Story has problems with her ovaries and uterus, a rare condition. We don’t even have a name for it, not anymore. I could sense it in her blood,” she begins to explain, and my stomach drops. “Her uterus is scarred, her ovaries full of cysts, even now before her monthlies have begun. It must be a birth defect of some kind; the offspring of mixing lessborn and powerborn fae like her...sometimes results in this. She will have difficult monthly cycles, intense, awful pain. She will be weak, and her body will betray her with pain every month and sometimes in between. She will need healers sometimes, and she cannot go to the workers like that. I can’t recommend her to either.”*

*I hear my mother move forward. “Yes, she can. Just lie for me, for her father! Please, send her to the breeders. I’ll just hide her symptoms. She won’t get pregnant, but it happens. It happens all the time. She’ll just be kept there. That’s how it is.” Her voice is spinning into desperation, more panicked, higher pitched by the second. My heart races as I listen to them deciding my fate.*

*“I can’t, Ylene. I wish I could. For him,” she answers, and I believe her, believe the soft tone. She liked my father. “I wish I could, but I cannot. They would just send others to check her, and then they’ll find what I did, and she’ll still go to the same fate. It would be cruel to attract that much attention her way. They might even kill her for breaking the law. They’d certainly kill both of us.”*

*“No...NO!” my mother shouts. “You’re not sending my daughter to be a blood slave for those—” Her voice skyrockets off the walls.*

*“Keep it down before someone hears you. The vampyres are always listening around here. I’m so sorry, there isn’t another option. I’m going to have to send her to be a blood slave,” Blaire firmly states, her voice cracking. “She’ll be okay. They’re gentle with their blood slaves when they’re young. When she gets older, she’ll make her own way.”*

*“And I will never see her again. They’ll keep her here in this godforsaken city until one vampyre takes it too far and kills her for her blood, like she is nothing more than an animal. That’s all we are to them: lessborn or powerborn, we are just blood,” my mother hisses with pure venom in her voice. “If her father was alive—”*

*“Well, he isn’t, and neither is my brother. They both died that day! We all live with the consequences of their deaths,” Blaire angrily snaps. I wish I knew more about my father, but my mother never speaks much of him. He was a warrior for the fae, and he died fighting for us all. My mother repeats that line anytime I ask her about him. She never tells me anything more, and right now, I wish she’d told me everything she knows so I might be prepared for what is coming.*

*Silence, thick and empty, echoes between them. Her voice is softer, kind, when she speaks next. “I’ll watch out for her myself. I vow it to the deities. I’ll make sure she gets a good vampyre master. I’ll pick someone to look after her, who won’t take it too far. Ever. Not all of them are like the king and royals, Ylene.”*

*My mother’s weeping fills the corridor, and I walk away, back to the bed. I lie back on it, looking up at the plain white ceiling, knowing my future is completely and utterly over. I lift my finger, seeing a drop of my blood run down my finger, down my wrist, like it’s marking me already. I’m going to be a blood slave, and after today, I’m never going to see my mother again.*

The room is spinning when I wake up, and I first see a dome made of pure glass and past that, a million stars burning across the night sky outside. The moon is shining down on me, the silver light so bright. Everything is hazy for a minute as I remember the mansion in the forest, the dragon statue, and the male who hit me over the head when I ran. The room is silent, but I can feel eyes on me. That deep sense that I’m really not alone. Now I’ve tasted freedom, I’m not sure I ever want to give it up and I think I might like being



alone. I don't care what I've walked into here; I'm leaving for the life I want the first chance I get. I lift my head, propping myself up on my elbows, and my mouth drops.

There are at least a thousand pairs of eyes on me, if not more. The glass room is circular, and it's an auditorium, with rows and rows of seats reaching up high. The seats are filled with people, and all of them are silently staring at me. They don't look like vampyres...they are fae. But not like any fae I've seen before. How hard was I hit on the head?

I touch the back of my head, feeling a hard lump and dried blood. "I am awfully sorry my cousin hit you. Please stand up if you can. You are in no danger here." A deep, soft male voice fills the quiet. Following the voice, I look up to see a male sitting on what looks like a throne. It's made of leaves cast in stone, withered and cracked in places but a throne, and on the back is a sun made of gold.

The male on it, he is as pretty as the vampyres, maybe even more. His curly, almost white hair is styled around his handsome features, and his gold eyes are like Nightwell lakes in winter when the rays of the sun light up the surface. His hands are covered in markings. I can't see what they are, but there is a gold sun on his left cheek. He watches me curiously as I stand up, my heart racing fast.

They're all looking at me, and I'm really, really not okay with the attention. I cross my arms tightly and glance around for a way to escape. The long-sleeved black top and the dark leggings that I have on, mostly torn from the forest, make me feel like I'm wearing absolutely nothing in front of them. There are so many of them, whatever these people are. I think they're fae, but they're strange. With all the books I've read, I can't believe I don't know what they are. "I should be leaving. Sorry to have bothered you."

Whispers burst out in the crowds, but the male simply chuckles and grins at me. "If you know how to leave, please do make us aware. We'd very much like to go with you."

I steel my back, looking at the male. "What does that mean? You just walk out."

Now the crowd laughs at me, and my cheeks burn. The male clicks his fingers, and they stop. I'm grateful for that. "I think we probably should start with who we are, and then you can tell us who you are. To start with, my name is King Daegan Caelestis Sunfallen, third of my name, born of the Dynasty of the Sun Dragon. Rider of Odemis. And you are?"

*King?* There is only one king, a vampyre, and it isn't this guy. I feel like my name is tiny when I say it. "Story Dehana."

"Story," he repeats my name, and he is still smiling. "What do you know of the old times? Say, your history of what happened five hundred years ago? Tell us a story, *Story*."

I clear my throat, rubbing my arms. Part of me wants to stay silent, but I end up rambling anyway. "History that far back is forbidden to people like me." When his eyebrows rise, I explain, my cheeks brightening. "I'm a lessborn fae, only twenty-two years old, who is—was—a blood slave. History isn't taught to us," I state the facts, and the bitterness leaking from my voice can't be helped. I love to read, but the vampyres lock away their massive libraries from the fae because books are power. Books hold the secrets of the world, the stories of great minds, and they are far more than wood bound together. The books we do have, they tell us nothing interesting but how to stay loyal to the vampyres, how to serve them, how to mine and be a breeder. I had a tutor when I was a child, who snuck me books I should never have had a chance to read. I was lucky, compared to others. That's where I saw the dragon, and I never could forget it. "The old times...do you mean before the vampyres' rule?"

His eyes flare. "Yes, what can you tell us about the time before the vampyres infested the world?"

*Infested?* "Not much. There used to be dragons and dragon rider fae according to some, but vampyres claim that they were never real. No one really knows much about it all, and it isn't a topic anyone would dare bring up with a vampyre without fear of losing their head. Why is this important to you?"

He tilts his head to the side, ignoring my question. "Carry on."

I dig my nails into my arm. “I only know that they went missing. Extinct, years ago, but I learnt that from a book I shouldn’t have read. It might not be true. They pretty much disappeared overnight, from what the tale said. Vampyres took control and they rule with no competition.”

“And the fae? Like you?” he asks. “Are you happy being ruled by vampyres?”

“The fae are obedient to them. That’s just how it is.” *No, we are not happy. Happy is a luxury that no fae is allowed.* It’s a cruel, endless world for us. If vampyres didn’t like our blood as much as they do, I bet they would have killed us all off a long time ago.

Daegan leans back in his throne. “My father was one of the five kings of the Dragon Rider Fae Dynasties. The Sun Dragon Dynasty, to be exact.”

Blood drains from my face. “Pardon?”

“We never went extinct...we’ve been here.” He spreads his hands out. “Welcome to our endless trap, the mansion that we can never leave. You’re the first person that’s ever come through the door in five hundred years, and you’re going to get us out, fae of our blood. You’re going to tell us how you did it.”

My heart races as I look around. Five hundred years...and I’m the first one in here? I’m so fucked. “How I got in? I just walked in. I was running—”

“From whom or what?” he interrupts me.

“Vampyres,” I whisper. I hate when people interrupt what I’m saying, but I’m too scared to say anything about it. They could kill me for speaking out; my vampyre master would have beaten me for it without a second thought.

“What would they want with you?” he asks, and I gather he doesn’t mean it as an insult, just curiosity. I’m a curiosity for all of them. Five hundred years, trapped in this mansion, as the world forgot about them? Kings? Rulers? How is it possible they were just forgotten? They became fairy tales, the people around me here, and dangerous ones at that. If the vampyres knew they were here... No, they can’t know. It might actually be safer for me in here, hidden with them, than out there.

I rub my arm. “I was their property. The vampyres.” I can’t tell them more, about exactly whose property I was, or they’d see me as an enemy. “I don’t have magic. I am a lessborn fae, and I haven’t got a clue how I walked in.”

Daegan picks up a chain hanging around his neck, twisting a sun-shaped amulet hanging from it through his fingers. He looks at a female sitting on a nearby bench. The light-haired woman, thin and beautiful, stands. “Is she telling the truth, Etena?”

“Yes,” Etena answers, brushing her long white hair over her shoulder. She walks down the benches and to me, only stopping when we are inches away, and she towers over me. I’m shaking slightly, and I barely notice until she touches my shoulder. Her blue eyes flicker to my hands, like she is looking for something. Eventually she looks up, her eyes running down the braid that pulls my hair from my face, the rest of my messy locks tumbling over my shoulders before she settles on meeting my eyes. “You must be terrified. I am sorry for that. Please excuse how rude we’ve been to you since you got here, but you must understand, we have been trapped inside here for a long, long time. Our entire race locked away for five hundred years, and you’re the first person to arrive. We simply want to know how and figure it all out. You’re hope to us, and new knowledge of the outside world we haven’t seen in so long. You could get us out, back to the world your forefathers once lived in.”

Whispers increase, spreading around the crowd like a breeze. I’m too speechless to say anything at all. I don’t like where this is going. They want a saviour and I’m just not that. “Perhaps some rest and food would be best. You look exhausted. Then we can discuss more. There must be a clue.” She looks back at Daegan.

He comes down the steps and offers me his arm. He smells like clean linen, the forest and cinnamon. “A beautiful lady should not walk alone. Please, let me escort you.”

“I don’t know you or trust you. Please, just let me go to see the door, and I can—”

“The door is gone. It was never there for anyone but you, and now that room is gone, too. The mansion wanted you here. The deities sent you to us,

and I will make sure our gift is kept safe,” he promises, still offering me his arm. I can’t trust him. Trust is something I will never give easily ever again, but he might be my best shot at being protected here until I can escape.

I smile tensely at him and nod once. I don’t have a choice and I want to get out of here, away from all the eyes watching me. I’m halfway across the room when I feel a heavy weight of someone’s eyes on me that pulls my gaze over my shoulder, to the back of the room. A group of these people are sitting alone, and there’s a male in the middle of them who draws all the attention. He’s huge, taking up two of the seats easily, his thick arms stretched across the back. His messy black hair is cut short, shaved on each side, but wild on top. Moon-shaped earrings line his one ear, and they glitter in the moonlight that is shining on him. What looks like an actual black crescent moon marking lies on his right cheek.

He must be the most beguiling male I’ve ever seen. It’s his eyes that near enough stop my legs from working. They’re like molten silver fire, and they are focused on me with such intensity that his gaze sends shivers down my spine. Even at the back of the room, his stare is almost too much to hold, and his lips tilt up in a bit of a smirk, almost like he’s sensing my reaction to him. His eyes might be beautiful, but they are cold, void of any warmth.

I can’t help but notice how nobody sits next to his group. Their clothes are similar to the fae outside, black with silver-lined edges, but old-fashioned compared to the clothes worn in the cities. The rest of the groups here are in brighter, mostly yellow or orange colours. There’s about twenty of them, sitting in a line up the steps, and not a single person goes anywhere near them. There are five or six empty seats separating the rest of the crowds from these people. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask Daegan who he is, but I don’t, pulling my eyes away from the stranger, knowing I shouldn’t stare long.

The second I look away, I sense something change in the room. It goes silent. Daegan pauses, and he turns back, anger written all over his face. When I follow his gaze, I find the man I saw a moment ago has stood. His arms are crossed, showing off dozens of dragon markings littered all over his hands and lower arms as his black shirt is rolled up. They are like Daegan’s, but he has many more. The man looks at Daegan with clear disdain, and his voice is like honey gliding over my skin when he speaks.

“The newcomer does not belong to you, Sun king. She is of age, and she will enter the Decidere.”

Ripples of shocked gasps echo around the room.

“What’s the Decidere?” I whisper to Daegan, but he hasn’t taken his eyes off the man. I don’t think I pronounced it right at all.

Daegan immediately defends me. “Ziven, she—”

“Enters the Decidere, or I will kill her myself. No fae belongs in our dynasties without earning their place.” His tone is final. No one argues with him, and I don’t blame them. He is terrifying and I’m a stranger. I don’t know what the Decidere is, but I can tell it’s not good. Ziven walks down the steps, purposely heading right towards me with his huge legs, and after the death threat, my own legs itch to run away. He’s so tall, at least seven feet. Daegan isn’t short by any means, but compared to Ziven, he seems it.

Ziven might kill me, and I haven’t done anything with the life my best friend died to get me. I’m not brave like he said I was, and I don’t even know how to be anything but a slave. Freedom, it is new and, so far, not all that amazing. I feel like a rat who escaped one trap only to run right into another, far worse one, and this time no one is going to protect me. My heart is in my throat as he walks right past me, followed by the twenty or so people he was with.

Only when they are gone does Daegan look down at me, and I feel like I can breathe. “I’m sorry. That was King Ziven Moonsilver of the Moon Dynasty, and he just demanded you enter a trial, one you arrived for right before it began. He never speaks in here, but he is another king, one of the few remaining, and I cannot refuse him without starting a war. He would like that.”

“What is the Decidere?” I dare to ask. I don’t care about their politics.

Daegan leads me to the door of the auditorium, and I’m glad for his arm as his words nearly destroy my ability to stand. “An ancient rite of passage for all fae over the age of twenty. Trials in the stones, which the dragons use to test your strength and choose if you will become a rider. Tomorrow, you



will enter the trial with the others, and only the stone dragons below can help or shatter you.”

## Chapter Three

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*Page Three.*

*We all have a calling, a longing we are born to that makes our hearts beat faster. If you're reading this, you were called to a dragon, and it is waiting for you. Make sure your enemies don't kill you first.*

**W**e leave the auditorium before I can process anything he just said. Trials? Dragons? Stones? My head is swarming with questions and fears as we head into a deserted corridor, full of paintings of cities I've never seen and dragons that should be impossible. I want to stop in front of each one and ask about them, but Daegan doesn't slow down, and I get the feeling we shouldn't linger here. Daegan seems to follow my every look, reading my every expression and reaction to the paintings. There are windows every so often, and each one looks out into the forest, revealing nothing but rows of thick, tall trees. This place is hidden from the world, and I don't know how I found it. Why am I here?

We come to a stop before guarded doors with a huge sun symbol on the wood. The guards are wearing thick golden armour, and helmets completely

cover their faces. They both bow to Daegan before opening the doors and letting us in.

Daegan's muscular shoulders drop a tad when the doors are shut behind us, and his pace does too. I end up just blurting out all of the questions swimming a storm up in my mind. "How do you even exist, Daegan? How is that possible to be trapped in here? Who trapped you? Where are your dragons? Are dragons even real? Will I be killed in the Decidere?"

Daegan waves ahead to a corridor that is also empty, but it's somehow warmer in here, not just the temperature but the yellow wallpaper, lush thick carpets, and soft furnishings that seem to invite you in. How big is this place? "I will answer every question you have, Story. Our dragons are real and alive. They are here, underground, below the mansion, and they cannot leave. Our dragons are just as trapped as we are. As for the Decidere, it is up to the deities and dragons if you die or not. Our people are proud to take the Decidere. It is an honour and there is a chance you will bond with a dragon. Even if you aren't seen as worthy of a dragon, the Decidere will help you grow as a person and find who you are. Who your soul is when it's pushed to the extreme. When you let us out into the world, we'll be going to war, with our dragons leading the way, burning the skies and vampyres to dust."

That thought is horrifying. "If your people have not left in five hundred years, how old are you, exactly? How many generations have lived in here? Do you even know what it's like outside?"

He laughs softly. "Story, I imagine we will have many talks over our meals in the months to come. All these questions...which do you want answered first, as each question holds a long answer."

My cheeks brighten under his stare. He is...nice. That's my first impression of the Sun Dynasty king, but I know not to trust the nice people. Usually, they are far worse than the ones who show you they are assholes to begin with. When I don't answer him, he links his hands together behind his back. "The vampyres, have they taken our cities?"

I frown. "I think they warped history, as I don't know any cities that were not built by the vampyres. They like to have us believe that we fae were

wild and untamed before they stepped in, that they helped us and we owe them for that. The vampyres rule with an iron fist, and no one escapes their laws if they are born fae.” He waits for my every word, and I don’t know what to make of it. “The vampyres have five grand cities. They’re basically run by the fae to benefit the vampyres. I was born in the breeding district, within the Nightwell city, which is the capital and the largest. It is south of here, actually. Just outside the forest by a few hundred miles.”

His voice is thick. “Please, carry on.”

“Well, when fae are born, they are usually born into the breeder communities, but there are exceptions born into the others—the blood slaves and the workers. Every fae baby is sent to the breeders’ nursery to be fed, brought up and adopted by other families if they don’t have parents or family in the breeders. ‘The lessborn fae’ are what they call us. Every lessborn fae is tested for powers when they are born, just to make sure they don’t belong with the powerborn fae. If you are powerborn, you’d be taken to the powerborn district nursery. For powerborn fae, they basically train to be what their family needs or what their power develops as. Healers, those who give warrior vampyres their powers, those who control the elements to help grow crops and those who can control the mind are used by the royals to find spies and more. I don’t know much more. I was never in that part very much.”

“I dislike that name ‘lessborn,’” he all but snarls at me, and he blinks, softening his voice. “No fae is less than incredible, including you.” No one has called me incredible before. I guess he really doesn’t know me. “You told me you were a blood slave. What does that mean?”

“Vampyres have their own system. The nobility—vampyres of exceptional skill, genius or battle skills—are given a fae to feed on as they see fit. The others go to places where the workers and breeders mass donate blood for them to drink. Vampyres only need a glassful a day to survive. I had two owners. One was kind and one was—” I nearly choke on the memories of him. “Not.”

Daegan watches me closely, a frown promptly pulling his lips down. Somehow, he doesn’t look less handsome frowning. He opens a wooden door, leading me into a well lit room. Four large lanterns hang from the

corners of the room, and it's pretty in here. A lot of things are gold, shaped like suns, and I'm getting the general vibe of this place. A massive, plush sun-shaped mat lies in the middle of the room, with a dark wooden desk on it. There's an oil lamp on the desk, plush yellow chairs, and couches around the edges of the room with small tables at their sides. There are several books piled up on the desk, and my fingers itch to rush over, to open them, and to know their secrets. My mother always said I was as nosy as the diamond cat-like creature that stalked the mice in our garden. I guess she was right.

Daegan closes the door behind me, and I hold in my flinch as it shuts. He waits until I take a seat on one of the chairs before he sits in the one opposite, crossing one leg over the other. "I'm sure you're curious about what is going to happen next. I have asked my second-in-command to call a meeting between our dynasties to speak about you. I will be on your side, and I plan to make sure you will be kept in my dynasty, safe for the remainder of the Decidere. But I need to know everything that led you to here so I can convince them I am asking you the right questions."

Rubbing my hands together, I tell him everything as I stare at my mud-soaked leggings. The mud is everywhere, all the way up to my waist, and it's now gone dry, cracking as I move. There's mud on my hands, my bare feet and there's even some splattered on my face and hair as I sit in front of a king who apparently rides a dragon. My mother would be horrified, but I can barely even remember what her voice sounds like now.

While I talk about running through the forest that I researched ahead of time, Daegan pours water into a teapot. He covers the pot with his hands, and I swear they glow for a second before he takes his hands away. He pours two cups from the pot and brings the steaming drinks over, handing me one. "It's camomile and lemon balm, it helps—"

"I know." It's hard to hold back my tears as I look at the drink. He was trying to be kind, not make me cry. "My best friend was the son of a healer, and his mother used to make me the same tea from her gardens on my bad days. It helped calm me."

Daegan sips on his tea as he leans on the desk. He doesn't ask about the bad days, and he likely thinks I mean from the vampyre who owned me. No,

bad days are where my body feels like it's being ripped apart once every six months due to my monthlies, whereas the days made bad by my owner were just another day. "And where is he? This friend of yours? Will he come after you? Will any family?"

"He's dead and no," I barely whisper. "I don't want to talk about him anymore." I can't. I won't tell this stranger about my mother either.

"I understand. My brother died not ten years ago, and I thought there would never be a day my voice wouldn't break when I spoke about him, but here we are," he confidently tells me, and I meet his gold eyes. "Understand, Story, it's not safe in here for you. You came here at an interesting time, right before the Decidere, which hasn't been done in years because of the wars between our dynasties. We are at peace now, have been for nine years, but it's in our nature to become explosive and violent creatures when caged."

Never cage a wolf, my mother once said, because once their mind has rotted, there are only teeth which promise death. "Explain it to me. Some of the way that you live. You're the Sun Dynasty king, and you said that Ziven was the Moon Dynasty king. Are there others?"

"There were five dynasties once, before the doom. The doom is the day our ancestors got trapped in here, and the dragons too," he explains as I drink the tea. I know I'm going to need more than tea to calm my beating heart and soothe the thunder in my veins. "Three kings ruled our many cities. Sun, Moon, and Dawn Dynasties. The Twilight Dynasty and Dusk Dynasty were killed off years ago in wars, years before the doom, and their people scattered between our own. In here, I rule. The Sun Dynasty is in charge and has been for years since Ziven left us alone after the last war. My older brother was happy to rule and taught me everything I needed to know before he died. We needed a ruler."

"And Dawn?" I ask, thoroughly interested in their politics now. If I'm stuck in here, which I'm getting the feeling I am as I haven't seen a door to leave yet, I need to learn as much as I can to keep myself safe.

"The Dawn Dynasty is here in small numbers, like the Moon Dynasty, but their ruler is not interested in ruling. He wants peace and, most importantly,



a way out of here. I'm sure he might finally lift his head out of his books to come and meet you when he hears."

I might join him with the books. "So, the dynasties are based on the day and night? Dawn, Sun, and Moon? Do you all share this mansion and live together?"

"Correct, but we live apart in some sense. Our power comes from our dynasty. Sunlight is my power," he answers, rising to his feet and coming to me. He takes my empty cup, putting them both back on the tray by the pot. "This mansion is far bigger than it looks, with over three thousand rooms. I rule everywhere except for the Moon Dynasty floor, the bottom floor of the mansion before the caves. I will ask that you don't go down there, but other than that rule, you're free to walk around. I will insist someone is with you for the beginning if I'm not around myself. You're new to us, and we were never good at trusting strangers."

"Then why are you helping me?"

He looks at the desk, at the book lying open. "I was reading a story when you arrived about a saviour of our people, and I felt the mansion shake right under my feet. I felt compelled to find you, and I'm trusting that feeling. I was meant to help you."

"Can I read it?" I question. He smiles, picking the book up and handing it to me. I run my finger across the leather binding before tightening my grip around my new book. It's been so long since I read a new book, not just re-read the same books on vampyres. "Are you sure you don't mind me borrowing it?"

"Don't tell me the ending, Story."

I smile back at him. He is charming, and he has given me a book. In any other circumstances, this would make us great friends. "You never answered my question about how old you are. I know some powerborn fae can live a lot longer than others. Hundreds of years, apparently."

"Yes, we can," he answers me, but still not at the same time. He barely looks like he's more than thirty years old, but appearances can be deceiving. "To grow old in here is a lucky circumstance. Unfortunately, there is

something in here that attacks us, kills us. A sickness that spreads from touch. Once you have it, it's impossible to survive. It took both my father and my mother. We haven't seen the sickness in eight years, so you're fine right now."

Another thing to worry about. Great. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"But you're here. It has to mean something," he repeats with hope burning in his voice like the sun, and I already don't like the pressure I feel from him. He thinks I'm a magic ticket out of here. He is going to lose it when he realises I'm a worthless blood slave fae who isn't fantastic at anything. The door's knocked twice and Daegan pulls his eyes from me to the door. "Come in, Etena."

She walks in, holding the door slightly ajar. "Her room is ready."

Daegan nods and offers me his hand to help me up. I take it and notice how warm he is to touch. "I think perhaps it's best if you rest and have a bath. Etena is my cousin, and she will show you the way. I am in the room opposite you. If you need anything, just knock."

I let go of his hand, noticing I've been clasping onto it for far too long. "Thank you for offering to protect me. You don't even know me. Where I come from, people don't help strangers."

Daegan inclines his head. "Rest well, Story."

Etena opens the door for me, and I walk out, waiting for her as she quietly speaks to Daegan out of earshot before she comes back, shutting the door behind her. The very tall woman places her hands on her hips, looking me over. "Did you run through a mud lake on your way here?"

"Just the forest, no lake," I answer, but she is already moving, walking down a pathway that arches into a circular room. There are three enormous fireplaces made of brick, in square-shaped blocks in the centre, with many, many benches, couches and lush rugs that have people sitting on them—fae-tipped ears and all—and they are laughing. The laughter slowly stops the further I follow Etena into the room, noticing the many, many heads turning to stare. Etena moves faster across the room until we are in another corridor, and the sound of chatter still follows us.

“Did Daegan explain you’re safe here?” she questions. “In this part of the mansion.”

“He told me,” I simply answer. I’m exhausted and done with conversation tonight. I need to process everything that just happened and figure out exactly how I’m going to get out of here before they throw me into the Decidere. I’m not built for trials or dragons or any kind of combat. I’ve never been trained to fight and, knowing me, I’d stab myself with a sword before learning how to swing it at an enemy. We head down the corridors, which are not so empty now, but anyone here steps aside, all giving me strange looks. I can’t imagine what it must be like to them—to never see someone new except a baby. Actually... “Where are the children? I haven’t seen any.”

She answers quickly. “Kept safely away during the Decidere. It isn’t for children to see.” Etena opens a door. This one is guarded like Daegan’s study, and the guards step aside for us to go through. “These are the royal bedrooms. Only you, Daegan, and I sleep here. If you see anyone else in here, run. Kill them if you have to. Daegan would kill them either way for entering his private rooms.”

I gulp. “Kill them?”

She turns to face me, crossing her slender arms. “Yes, kill them? Why do you look so pale at the idea?” I don’t answer her with the truth. I’ve never killed anyone, I don’t like blood, and I’m not brave. I’m not a fucking warrior. “You don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to, Story. I understand trauma very well, and looking in your eyes, I know you’ve been through a lot already. I have a soft spot for people like us.”

“Like us?” I frown.

“Survivors. One day, we will exchange our battle stories, cry over them, and bond like friends. Tonight is not the time while you’re tired and injured,” she answers, and bonding with anyone seems really unlikely for me when I want to get out of here, run away and pretend none of this happened. How does she know I’m injured? I’ve been hiding my pain since I got here, something I know I’m good at. “Telling you to trust me is pointless, isn’t it?”

I raise an eyebrow. “I don’t trust people. I don’t trust anyone.” Except one person and he is dead. He died to set me free. He died for nothing. My fingers tighten on the book to the point it creaks. I don’t mean to be hostile towards her, but today has pushed every inch of my soul to the breaking point. I’ve not even had a moment to grieve my best friend, my only friend in the world, and how he’s just gone. He’s gone and he won’t be coming back. I’m not sure how I’ll ever be able to process that. I only need to try to protect myself and not give up. I can’t go back to that dark place I was before my best friend promised to get me out. I gave up on life, I gave up on wanting to fight or live or breathe, and right now that feeling is crawling up my spine, readying to flood my mind with the darkness again. Without him, I know I won’t be able to climb out of that place.

Giving up isn’t an option. Not anymore, not since he died. Etena touches my shoulder, and I focus on the present, on her. “I left some clothes on your bed for you, and I ran a healing bath. We don’t get hot water in here, it’s lukewarm, but...it’s better than nothing. The water has tonics in it made by the Sun healers with dragon tears, and it heals everything.”

Dragon tears?

“Welcome to the Sun Dynasty, Story,” Etena says, bowing her head. “I believe you’re going to surprise us all, more than you already have.” Etena walks away, leaving through the doors we came in. This pathway has four doors, one I’m in front of, and the one opposite must be Daegan’s. The carpet is worn, like it’s been walked on dozens of times, and so is the carpet near the door next to mine, but the areas around the fourth door and mine look almost new.

I walk into the room and shut the door behind me, noticing a flimsy lock, and I click it shut. If these fae are as strong as the powerborn fae, that lock will do nothing to stop them getting in, but I feel better either way. The room is simple, yellow wallpaper like the hallways and wooden cladding panels, which line half the walls. An oil lantern burns on the bedside counter, and I see the bed has soft white sheets as I place the book on the counter. There’s a window, and I go straight over, looking for a handle, but there’s nothing. Just a dark-rimmed window with lines down it in a cross pattern, revealing nothing but dark trees as far as I can see. I touch the glass. “Why did you trap me in here? What do you want?”

I'm talking to a mansion wall. I've gone mad. Muttering to myself, I strip my mud-soaked clothes off before climbing into the simmering clear bath, soaking down into the warmth. The pain melts away almost instantly from my ribs, from every small nick and bruise I have on me. I sink fully into the water before rising back out, my swollen cut lip back to normal. My heart is beating fast as I look down at my stomach, my wrists, and legs...hoping the vampyre bite scars will be gone—they aren't. The silver scars look as horrible as usual, and not an inch of my skin on my stomach, lower arms or legs doesn't have a mark on them. He may have scarred me, but I'm free of him.

The bath doesn't last long before it's freezing cold, and I wash my hair with the lavender-scented soap that smells incredible. After climbing out, I glance at the clothes on the bed as I dry myself off. The gold silky top pulls across my chest, and strips of satin fall down my upper arms. Skin-tight black trousers and clean leather boots, along with new underwear that is all lace—I slide them on, admiring the delicate material and the fact it all perfectly fits. This is much better than a red dress. I haven't had a choice in what I wear in so long, and if I'm being honest with myself, I've only ever known how to dress for my station. Red, for a blood slave. It has made me really hate wearing red.

I find a brush on the side and brush my long hair until it's smooth and all the knots from the forest are gone. I braid the front part of my hair around my face until it falls to one side.

Once I have nothing left to do, I climb into the bed with the book, opening the first page. It's an odd book, no title page to be seen in the first few blank pages. The first page is noted and one sentence: "To my reader—I was a dragon rider, and if you're reading this, I must be dead." How strange. There is a name scribbled in the corner, but I can only make out the letter *B*, the rest is scrubbed away. The next pages are the same, one or two sentences about someone who was a dragon rider and something about stones. I like mysteries, and this book is that.

I close my eyes for just a second, my head dropping. I see his face, pure terror and horror written in his eyes. I see his blood pouring onto the stone. A sob echoes out of my throat first, right before I'm weeping and sliding down into the bedsheets. I don't know how long I cry, at least until it feels

like I can breathe again. Wiping my tears away with my hand, I pause as a floorboard creaks. I barely get to look up from under my blanket before I see a shadow standing over my bed, massive male arms reaching for me. On instinct, I kick the man straight in the balls, and his deep, shocked voice echoes. “FUCK!”

He steps back with a groan, and I rush off the bed, running for the door. A hand wraps around my ankle, and I fall face-first on the floorboards, slamming my nose into the ground. I cry out in pain only for a foul-smelling rag to be shoved over my mouth. I barely breathe in the air for a second before everything spins and the darkness becomes a very welcome old friend.

## Chapter Four

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*Page Four.*

*I was born to the Lightsun city, and I grew up in piles of gold, silver, and jewels sent by the Sun Dynasty for all royal fae children no matter which dynasty they were born, but my heart...it called to the dark. To the moon, and he was my ruin.*

**I** stand before a row of vampyres. Each of them looks nearly the same to me. Same grey or very pale skin, white cloaks, white hats, fangs flashing every time they talk—scientists. Vampyres, not very high up ones, but people trained for district selection day. Blaire told me they would only double-check what she had found out, make a detailed file on my health, age, and anything my new owner would want to know before I would be taken to the preference housing. Two dark-haired girls next to me are crying hysterically, and the other two boys are completely silent. I wonder what is wrong with their health, why they are here with me. They are all a similar age to me, but not from the breeders' camp I grew up in. I don't know how many camps there are, but my mother once mentioned there were many.



*I can't help the tears from rolling down my face when I think of my mother, of how she held me and said goodbye. How she looked broken and sad—and there wasn't anything either of us could do to fix it. My body is shaking from head to toe, but it's not cold in here, it's actually warmer than expected in winter. I keep my head up, my shoulders straight, just like my mother told me to do before she left me with Blaire. They both promised me that everything would be okay. That was three days ago, and now I'm going to be taken to a hellhole to be picked like a fruit hanging from a tree. For nothing more than a snack whenever he wants one. Or she. I am hoping for a woman. She might be kinder.*

*The door opens and all the scientists turn and look as a man walks in. He has curly locks of hair, very pale skin, and he is older. Vampyres age slowly and this man has grey-tinted red hair and a wrinkle on his forehead like he has been frowning too often. His skin is completely drained of any colour, a grey so light it could be white. His eyes are brown, unusual for a vampyre from what I've seen in the breeder communities, the few I've seen when they come round to do their checks. All of the guards never take off their helmets, but there are vampyres who come to visit fae women who are paid to see them without armour. I didn't need my mother to tell me why they visit. The horror in her voice was a story enough, and she always hid me when they came.*

*There's a pin clipped to this vampyre's cloak, and I don't recognise the symbol. It's a broken hammer, gold on red. The vampyre speaks to one scientist, nodding his head towards me. The scientist turns once and raises his hand to me, indicating for me to walk over. Sickness rises in my throat as I force my legs to move, and I stop next to them both. "You are coming with me, Story Dehana. Don't fight or I will have them inject you to sleep, and you will still come with me."*

*His voice is sharp, clipped, and every time he speaks, I see a hint of ruby red fangs. Why are his fangs red like that? I don't know how my legs manage to work as I follow him out of the room, down old stone corridors and out into the busy streets. There's a brown, highly decorated carriage waiting, two white horses tied to the front, and a fae driver sitting on the seat. I only see his fae ears tipping out of his brown hat and his brown clothes. He is a worker.*

*The vampyre opens the door for me, and I step in before plastering myself to the back of the carriage seat. He steps in after me, and the carriage takes off the second the door is shut. He looks down at his hand before reaching forward and touching the sides of the carriage. I smell magic as it whips through the air, washing over the carriage until there's almost a shimmery shine on the windows. Magic smells like ash, like something has burnt to a crisp and blown through the air. "We can speak freely now and no one will hear us, courtesy of my driver, a very talented fae who is not meant to have any powers. That will be kept between us, alright?"*

*Why is he telling me a secret? He doesn't know me. "O-okay?"*

*He picks up a pocket watch from his suit pocket, looking at the time before sliding it back. "Story, I don't expect you to trust me, but Blaire asked for a favour. Blaire, I owe her a great deal. She keeps a lot of secrets for me, which you will have to do as well, living in my house. I was told you can be trusted, just like your mother."*

*My voice is too high pitched as I manage to speak. "Did you know my father?"*

*His eyes flash with something, but he looks away from me. "No. My name is Professor Aleksander Wollke, and you are a blood slave to me now. I have no others. I have never needed to take one, and frankly, I find the whole idea cruel and unneeded. When I want to feed, I usually just get blood from the docks, but I won't be able to do that now. I will not feed from you directly, but it has to come across that I do. I have no intention of hurting you."*

*"Why?" I whisper. A vampyre that doesn't want to hurt a fae? My mother told me they didn't exist.*

*"Because it's cruel and you are a person. I have tools in my home ready, and they will make it easy for you to pierce your arm and drain blood into a glass for me. I will drink that, but if anyone asks, you are bitten when I want to feed, do you understand?"*

*I nod. "Yes."*

*“In my house, you’ll be safe, and blood slaves are relatively safe around the city when you go out. You’ll need to wear these and the colour red at all times.” He hands me two silver bracelets. They have his name written on them, and also a symbol.*

*The hammer symbol again. “What does this mean?”*

*He looks away from me. “I work in the palace.” My blood goes ice cold. “I make metal work for the royal soldiers, with the powerborn fae under my command. My estate is just outside the castle. It’s tiny, but it’s nothing for you to be concerned about living in. You’ll be able to enter the city with the carriage whenever you wish. I will not bring you into the castle, so you have nothing to fear from the royals.”*

*“Why should I trust you?” I ask after a long pause.*

*“Because your mother trusted Blaire, and Blaire loved your father,” he bluntly informs me. She loved him. “I will keep you safe.”*

*Little does the professor know, or I know at this time, that by picking me, he would never, ever be able to keep me safe.*

I wake up to the sound of light tapping, like rain pinging off a glass window. Lifting my head, I first see a massive black boot in front of me as I breathe in the smell of whatever is still on my skin. There is a foul taste in my mouth that reminds me of the man who kidnapped me from my room and shoved a cloth into my face. It’s an herbal scent, and my eyes are burning from it. I draw my eyes up his immense body to come face to face with King Ziven as he towers over me, his thick arms crossed, tight black shirt and heavy dark trousers. He was the man in my room. His black hair is just as messy as when we met, locks of it falling down his forehead as his silver eyes watch me. No mercy, no empathy. There is nothing but bitter hostility lingering in his weighted gaze. He leans down and before I can blink, there’s a silver dagger pressed directly to my throat, the tip cutting the skin just underneath my chin. “Give me a reason not to kill you.”

That should be an easy answer for most people. Most people would say their loved ones’ names, speak of the future they planned out or the dream they want to live. The problem is, I don’t exactly have a reason, other than

the very basic, the obvious answer. “I want to live, but I won’t beg. I promised myself that I’d never beg a king again.”

His eyes darken, the silver going impossibly grey. “What king could you know before me and Daegan? Has he had you begging already?”

I won’t tell him anything, but that slip of the tongue was a mistake. He can kill me if he wants, I can’t tell him more. “Killing me is not going to get you anything that you want.” He pushes the dagger into my neck, nipping my skin. I gasp. “Killing me will just leave you trapped in here.”

He smiles at my bluff, like he got exactly what he wanted. I don’t know why I just said that. “You do know exactly how you got in here, little liar?” He grabs the back of my neck and lifts me up to him. Somehow, he doesn’t hurt me more with the dagger as he leans down over me until our faces are inches apart. There’s nothing but fury written in his eyes. “You come in here on the night of the greatest storm I’ve ever seen and cause trouble, unrest through our people. I was going to let you live until you tried to blackmail me with your knowledge.”

“I-I wasn’t—”

“Don’t lie to me, Storm,” he sneers. “Knowledge like that is going to get you killed.”

His breath mixes with mine with how close he is holding me to his body, only an inch apart. He smells like stormy nights full of rain, a deep masculine oakmoss and lime scent and everything forbidden. He makes it hard to focus. “I told you all the truth. Etena would have known if I lied.”

“Etena can see when someone lies, but it does not mean she can’t lie to protect Daegan’s interests.” Ziven runs the dagger up my chin, up my cheek and back down. “It would be so easy to plunge this dagger into your heart and stop it all before it goes too far.”

“Stop what?” I breathe out. He lets me go. I finally feel like I can move as he takes a step back, blinking more than once, his long dark eyelashes fluttering. Now the dagger’s not on my throat, and his hand’s not burning into the back of my neck, everything feels a little less intense. He walks away from me and sits down on a chair, a single chair in the dark room we

are in. Oil lanterns burn on the walls, but they burn silver, casting a strange light upon both of us. He leans elbow on his knee and watches me like he is bored. We say nothing for a long time, and I wonder how long I've been in here. Will anyone come for me, or will he let me go? "Tell me a secret, Storm."

"My name is Story Dehana, and I am proud of my name. It is not *Storm*," I answer, lifting my head high even when all I want to do is bang the walls, beg for someone to save me from him. I'm shaking again and I hate how much he can see it. He must think I'm weak. "And I have no secrets that would interest you."

"We both know you're lying. I don't need the precious Etena to tell me that," he smirks. I glance at the moon mark on his cheek. How it moves slightly, like it's alive. The dragons on his hands and arms move too, flying slowly around. He follows my gaze, and I snap my eyes up. "Ask."

"What are those marks? What is your power?" I blurt out.

His eyes are nothing but amused. "You wouldn't want to know what my power is, and I said ask. I didn't say I wished to be your tutor, Storm."

*That nickname again.* "Can't be that great if you're trapped in here with the rest of them," I snap and instantly regret the words when his eyes bleed of all amusement, leaving pure anger. *Shut up, Story. For the love of the deities, don't wind this king up.* I lift my hands in the air. "Look, I'm sorry about hitting you in the balls, but you were kidnapping me, so I feel like that was your fault, too. I'm going to go, because apparently you demanded I go do some kind of crazy ass trial thing, and I don't want to do that, but I doubt I'm getting a choice."

"You're going to walk straight out the door, Storm?" He sits straighter. "Tell me how you did that. Did the king you knew tell you we were here and sent you to be a spy to kill us all?"

My mouth parts. "No! Deities above, no!" I shake my head. "And it's *Story*. I don't appreciate nicknames, and I'm not a spy."

"While you continue to lie to me, you will be called whatever I wish, Storm."

I snap my teeth together. “Fine, call me whatever you want. I’m no liar.”

He laughs, a cruel, taunting laugh. “Everyone is a liar. You’re going to tell me your secrets and exactly how you got in here, why you’re here, and if you take one step against us, I’ll make sure your death is painful. Your king will only get your ashes back.”

He’s insane. Completely insane.

“King Ziven, we don’t know each other, but I don’t want an enemy. I’m not here to—”

“More lies.” He waves a hand, cutting me off. “I was told about how you believe you have no powers. Lessborn? What a bullshit name.”

That might be the only thing we agree on. “I’m not powerborn—”

Suddenly light shines in from behind me, and I turn just in time to see a wall literally collapsing on itself, bright burning golden light shining in through it. Daegan steps in and the light is coming from his hands, pure sunlight. He looks me over, clearly checking for injuries, and walks straight to my side. His hand rests on my back, and it’s a possessive move that I see Ziven smirk at. I’m not sure I like it, because we barely know each other, but he might get me away from Ziven, so I don’t move. “Do you want to start a war, Ziven?”

“Are you suggesting we have a war? The last was fun,” Ziven answers, casually leaning back.

Daegan clenches his jaw. “*Fun* is not a word I would use for the deaths. Our peace treaty is simply paper, easily burnt in the light, and you know what that would mean.”

They both look at each other. Ziven yawns. “You’re not the only one that gets to keep her like a pretty doll you’ve picked up from a shop. I don’t see any sun marks on her hands, on her cheeks or neck. Therefore, she’s not yours. I did not break any part of our treaty. Have you even dared to ask her to be in your dynasty yet?”

“The treaty has no part about fae outside the dynasties,” Daegan responds. “She is coming with me, if she wants to.”

“I do,” I answer quickly.

Ziven only winks at me. “Go then. She’s not going to talk yet, but I’m sure the Decidere will loosen her tongue. If she survives the first day, then she spends half her week here, in my dynasty, so she can make a choice of her own. That’s my offer.”

It sounds like there is an “or else” missing at the end of his words. “I didn’t know I was up for discussion about where I lived here.”

Daegan glances at me, his voice softer. “There are old laws from the fae. Back before the doom, when a fae turned eighteen, they would spend six months in each dynasty so they might choose where they wanted to pledge to. Once pledged in blood to a dynasty, you cannot change.”

“And what if I don’t want to do that and just be me?” I question. “No dynasty.”

Ziven laughs at me, and my cheeks brighten. “We can go back to the previous topic of war. You’d be the first one I’d kill.”

*Deities above, he is a lunatic.* Daegan gives in pretty quickly to Ziven, most likely to protect me. “Fine, we’ll be leaving, and I agree to your terms. Her trial’s only an hour away now, as you’ve had her all night.”

“All night?” I gasp. “But—”

“Leave my dynasty,” Ziven interrupts me, and I bite down on my tongue before I snap at him, at this powerful king. Daegan leads me out, but before I get to the broken wall, Ziven’s voice echoes to me. “Your secrets will come out one way or the other, Storm. I look forward to breaking you.”

I look over my shoulder, watching him as I walk away, deciding right here and now that I hate him. Ziven is an asshole. We walk out over the broken pieces of brick and down a corridor, past several archways. I can’t help but look in through the open doors, spotting that everything here isn’t exactly golden like I’ve seen. There are dark wood floors, silver wallpaper, the silver couches lining the walls, and matching plush armchairs that face the enormous fireplaces.

We come to a guarded door that must be the way out of the Moon Dynasty, and instead of the gold-plated armoured guards Daegan has by his doors, the two female fae standing there are both dressed casually. I would guess they're twins, with their matching black hair and beautiful features. I couldn't tell them apart if I tried. They hold the door open, both impassive as we step through, and they shut it behind us. The corridor is all golden out here, from the carpets to the walls, and Daegan doesn't say anything until we've walked quite far. Only when we come out to a balcony on the second floor does he take his hand away from my back.

I can't hear him as I look at the massive statue in the middle of the mansion. It's huge, with wings spread out to make pathways on the top floor, and the fae walk across them. There are ten floors by my count, all with balconies and pathways around the dragon leaping for the ceiling, its nose touching the top of the ceiling where a crack is spread across it. Almost like this dragon was trying to escape and it got frozen in time. "I'm extremely sorry. I didn't think he'd have the balls to come in and take you."

He makes me laugh for only a second as I think about the fact I hit Ziven in the balls. I'm not sure if Daegan would find that funny. "It's not your fault. I'm not in your dynasty, and we've only known each other a day or so. You don't owe me anything."

"I promised you protection, Story," he bites out. His anger is directed at the Moon king, not me, but he frightens me for a second. "It's not as easy as you think to find you in that place, but I want you to know I was looking for you all night."

"Thank you for coming for me," I answer with a tense smile. I really hope he doesn't think I owe him anything. "You didn't have to do that."

He stands, looking at the dragon with me. "I did."

People walk past us as I touch the banister, the metal cold and soothing. "What would happen if there was a war between you two? I don't want to cause that."

"We don't get along. There's history—family history—between us," he hedges. "It means that we'll never be friends. Ziven took you to piss me off, to show that he can if he wants to. He knows I am interested in how you got



in here, and want to find a way out. Whereas Ziven? I'm not sure he ever wants to leave."

"Why wouldn't he want to leave?"

He looks at me like he wants to tell me more, but a bell rings softly. "I want to show you somewhere before I take you to the beginning of the Decidere. We've only got three quarters of an hour, I'm afraid."

I look down at my clothes. "Is what I'm wearing appropriate for this?"

"It's fine," Daegan answers as we walk away from the balcony and to a massive staircase that wraps tightly around the body of the dragon, all the way up to its wings. He takes me back to his apartments, to my room on the top floor, where I use the bathroom and quickly freshen up before he walks me down to what I think is the eighth floor. There are three massive archway doors, almost like small tunnels with lines drawn into the stone, and we head through one into one of the biggest rooms I've ever seen. Each tall wall is lined with books on shelves, and they are a rainbow of colours. My mouth pops open. There must be hundreds of thousands, if not more, books on at least twenty levels of this gigantic room. There are many tables around the floor with oil lanterns burning, but this entire library is empty.

Daegan clears his throat. "I got the feeling you like books. I'm not a huge reader, but my mother was, and she loved this place. You're free to come here whenever you want and read whatever you wish, but we insist on the books being put back once they've been taken out of here. We try to preserve this library; it is all the books we have left from our cities. The ten grand libraries of the dynasties...and these are all that is left of the stories of the world."

A single tear falls down my cheek, and I don't notice it until Daegan wipes it away, resting his hand on my cheek for a few moments. He shakes his head, stepping back. "Do you like it?"

"Like? I *love* it," I whisper in awe. "It's like a dream."

He smiles so brightly, and I realise that he is handsome. So, so handsome. "I thought it would give you a reason to survive for me. All the books that you can read if you survive today." He searches my eyes. "I know that you

feel probably like you're trapped in here with us, but there's something good about being trapped here. We can find the light for you." I wrap my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly and even surprising myself. He seems surprised too for a second, before he hugs me back just as tightly.

I'm blushing as I pull back. "Thank you."

He tucks a strand of my loose hair behind my ear, so casually, like he has done it a million times. "Give them a reason to write a story about you and survive the Decidere."

## Chapter Five

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*Page Five.*

*The stones are the traps.*

*Run to the unknown; it is your only hope.*

Drums echo from below, and the lower we climb down the staircase, the more they seem to vibrate the ground under my feet. I'm terrified. I thought the bravest thing I ever did was trying to escape with my best friend, but he got killed and I wasn't brave enough when it counted. My owner told me I was a coward, and he was right. I'm surprised my legs haven't stopped working yet.

Somehow, I keep descending the stairs with hundreds of other people. Many of them step aside once they see Daegan, while others don't seem to notice him, but their heads swing to look at me. They're so different from the fae that I've seen, but being stared at isn't something massively new to me. This time, they are curious, and there is a mixture of pity and desire on their faces that I am getting used to. There's something different about these fae, but I can't put my finger on what it is.

When we get down to the bottom level, which has no flooring, just stone, there's a drawn-out pathway right to the middle where there are at least a hundred people waiting in lines. Daegan leads me to the front, stopping me

in the space that's been left open between others waiting. Daegan rests his hands on my shoulders. "Good luck," he tells me, leaning in. "You can do this."

No, I really can't. I do not know who he thinks I am, but I am not the right person to do any of this. I'm not sure exactly what *this* even is. My heart's racing as I look at what is clearly a cavern entrance in front of me. There's a single door, with a massive stone dragon on the smooth front, two more stone dragon statues on either side. Everything is quiet as Daegan walks towards a small platform in front of the doors. Etena meets him and they talk quietly between each other. As more people gather, I glance to my left to see a long, dark-haired, very curvy woman staring at me with her bright blue eyes sparkling like she is going to burst if she doesn't say something. She's about the same age as me, and her cheeks go bright red when I smile at her. "Hi, Story."

"Hello," I whisper back.

She looks around before grinning at me, and her smile is contagious. "Everyone's talking about you. I didn't, I wasn't there because I work in the libraries and my ladder fell down. I was stuck five floors up until they came back, but my sister came rushing back to tell me all about you. I can't believe you're standing next to me!"

I like her. "Nice to meet you. I've just seen the library. It's amazing. What's your name?"

"Oh, I can't believe I didn't introduce myself. I'm Catherine." She bows her head, and I see a sun marking on her neck. I bow my head back, wondering if that's how people greet each other in here. Fae aren't allowed to greet or speak to each other in the vampyre cities, but in the breeding sections, we always clasp our arms. "It's really nice to meet you."

"Same," I tell her back.

Her voice dips so quiet that I can barely hear her. "Is it true that you're going to find a way to get us out of here?" It's on the tip of my tongue to say no, that I'm a random fool who ran into a creepy abandoned mansion to escape the vampyres hunting me and it was an accident. She likely knows that part of the story if her sister was in the auditorium. I open my lips to

say something and then close them again. “It’s okay, you probably shouldn’t tell me anyway. I’m a nobody librarian assistant, and you’re... well, the hope of our people.”

Hope of our people? Fuck, that sounds like a pressure-filled title I never asked for. What happens to me when they realise that I’m clueless and can’t even get myself out? “I think being an assistant librarian is a brilliant job. I’d love to do that.”

“Really?” she whispers, her eyes wide. “It’s not paid, but I love it too. They are always looking for new assistants. Maybe if we both survive this, I could ask for you?”

I nod, my heart leaping. Another reason to try to survive today—other than the fact I don’t want to die. Not yet. “Isn’t it amazing the Decidere is finally open? It’s been so many years. I’ve been hearing the call for ten years, like so many of us that signed up. Many are still waiting, of course, because not everyone’s allowed to enter.”

“Not everyone has to do this?” I sharply ask, not bothering to whisper this time. A rite of passage for fae, my ass.

She looks down at the ground. “No. It’s only us that want to, who feel a calling. I think they assumed you felt the calling too, turning up on the day you did. The auditorium was full of us, the fae who applied and were waiting, when King Daegan carried you in.”

*Daegan carried me in.* He also lied to me about this being a rite of passage and gave into what Ziven demanded. Catherine looks up and over my shoulder, quickly diverting her gaze at whatever she sees. I turn to see people parting, like a skipping stone being thrown across the water. Ziven walks in, as casual as always, when his eyes promise death to anyone that stands in his way. I don’t get why they are so clearly frightened of him, other than his obvious fuck-off demeanour. The Sun Dynasty clearly has more people than the Moon, so why are they feared?

He is followed by the rest of his people, all twenty of them. They gather behind him, and Ziven looks over his shoulder, and a man steps to his side. The man is immense like Ziven, but his arms are bigger, his head is completely shaved, and instead of hair, there is a moon marking on his

head. Ziven nods at him once, patting his shoulder, and then he purposely looks at me. They both do. The man leaves Ziven, and it looks like he's walking straight towards me as my heart races. Did Ziven tell this man to kill me before I enter the Decidere? I wouldn't put it past him. The man walks up right behind me, shoving the poor man who was there before out of the way with a grunt before taking his place in the line so he can loom over me like a shadow.

I quickly shoot my head forward, feeling eyes burning into the back of my head, and sweat trickles down my spine. Why do I feel like I'm being set up here? Daegan lets out a beam of light from his hand, and thousands of sparks fly around the room before shooting straight back into his hands. Pretty trick. The crowd goes silent.

“Welcome. It's been too long since we've allowed newcomers into the stone caves and opened the Decidere. Each one of you has been called to this, heard the dragons below, and proved your soul as strong.” I did none of that. “This is a special year for all of us.” His eyes rest on me for a second before looking around the crowd. “And I'm sure the deities are watching down on us, blessing our flights and battles. The dragons live below, and they are wild creatures. Never forget this. This is their home, their personal hunting grounds. They've set up traps of their own making, ways to test your strength. When you go in, there's a single passageway straight across to a series of stone pillars. If one of them calls to you, walk towards it, stand in front of it and touch the pillar when you're ready. The test will be revealed to you. If you pass, you will be let out of the stone and return to us with a mark on your hand from the stone. In our history, one only has survived fourteen days, and it is more common to survive four. If you come out of your pillar stone riding a dragon, it is yours. You will know.”

Whispers echo and Catherine flashes me an excited but nervous smile.

“It's important you do not go off the path. It's there for a reason. If none of the pillars call to you, walk out as quickly as you possibly can, back to the door. Run if you want to live. The Decidere door only opens on Sundays, so you will have a week between each Decidere to rest and train.” Daegan looks up at the dragon statue. “The ancient fae kings of our dynasties set up the Decidere many years ago with the dragons so our people would forever be blessed with riders. They built our great cities with endless caverns filled

with dragon pillars. Any time a fae turned twenty-one, they were taken down there to be tested, and our riders filled the skies. Of course, these times have gone and our cities with them, apparently.” Gasps echo and so many eyes fall on me. “But this does not mean that we will not find a way forward through the darkness and escape this prison. The more riders we have, the better chance we have when we finally are freed from this to take back our world. Freedom is close, my friends and family. Our dynasty will rule in fire and blood, and the vampyres will be destroyed!”

Cheers and shouts mix with the beat of the drums until it is echoing. The cheering doesn't stop as Daegan steps aside and we make a line to the door. I follow closely behind Catherine, and Ziven's man stays right at my back. I look over once more at Ziven, and he flashes me a cruel smirk before I face away. He hates me and I'm not a fan of him either, the psychopath. What is wrong with him? It's like he singled me out as his enemy before we even spoke.

My legs feel like they are full of lead as I walk through the open stone door and into a damp-smelling tunnel. My heart begins to race so fast that I hear it in my ears, hear it rattling my soul. What am I doing? I should run away. I should absolutely run away. I know I won't get very far, but I'm literally walking to my death by dragon.

The curious side of me wants to see a dragon, not just a statue or a drawing in a book. I'm not sure it's worth dying for, though. The tunnel leads to a dug-out hollow in the stone. There are big gaps on either side of a bridge to the other side, easily wide enough for five people to walk across. On the other side are pillars, rows and rows of tall rectangular pillars that must be over ten feet tall. There's nothing on them, they're just smooth stone that is slightly pushed into the ground. My eyes flicker round the edges of the cave before a roar echoes, so close and loud that cracks form in the walls and bits of rock tumble from the ceiling, crashing at my feet.

Jumping back, I see the stone door is shut behind us, and the roar echoes again, getting louder and causing more rocks to fall. People scream and scatter, and someone slams into my shoulder, shoving me to the ground. I lift my head to see rocks crushing people as they run for the pillars. I have to get to the pillars, *get up, Story*. I push off the ground, running straight to the bridge just as a dragon lands right on top of the side of the bridge,

roaring loudly and shaking everything. It's huge, absolutely massive, and made of pure crackled stone. I don't know what I was expecting, but not this. Massive stone wings spread out on either side of the dragon. All over its back is crusted-over stone, and a long lumpy tail has sharp rocks on its end. It roars as its black eyes finally drop and narrow. Red embers flicker off its forked tongue as it opens its mouth, and I feel frozen to my spot.

A stream of burning hot fire sprays out of its mouth, right into the bridge, and it instantly burns up three people before they can even scream. The horrid smell of burning flesh fills my nose as I suck in a breath, taking several steps back only to bump into someone. I turn around to find the man from the Moon Dynasty, Ziven's friend. He is calm, collected, as he grabs my upper arms in a tight grip, and I struggle to move at all. He leans into me, his deep voice nothing but cruel. "King Ziven expressed how he hoped you die from this."

"Wait—" He picks me up and throws me straight off the edge of the bridge, into the endless cold air.



## Chapter Six

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*Page Six.*

*Face the unknown with every inch of courage you have in your bones, in your blood and soul. The dragons can smell courage, and it is your best defence.*

*“I ’m sorry to bring you here, my dear Story.”*

*I tug my eyes from the looming castle in front of me, from the sheer, tall grey stone walls and the asymmetric crenellations that line the roof, and the six towers that look like they touch the clouds. As I smile softly at Aleksander, my words come out in puffs of fog. “It’s only one day.”*

*He’s kind enough to know bringing me here, even for one day, is a risk. The royal vampyres...I’ve heard whispers my entire life about their cruelty. They are immortal, the only vampyres that have that gift, and their immortality makes them bored. They kill for fun, and the castle? It’s their hunting grounds. The professor has always tried to hide me from, well, everything that could possibly hurt me, and this place was top on the list until today. I pull my cloak tighter around me, strips of red in my black hair flashing in*

*the beams of sunlight that escape the clouds. I keep my head low, just like he's told me to do anytime we are outside.*

*It's a celebration day for the vampyres...and a day of horror for the fae. They call it the hunt, a tradition they made up, and every vampyre is free to hunt any lessborn fae across the cities. I forgot about this day until Aleksander came rushing into my room this morning and asked me to come with him. "It won't be safe to leave you alone," he told me, and I believe him. The breeders never had to worry about the hunt, but news of it was always talked about. "I'm nervous," I whisper to him. "What if they check me and see I don't have any bite marks?"*

*"They won't. No one would dare, because that would be doubting me," he explains, his tone as soft as a cat's meow. "Except for the royals, but they won't be here this time of year. They'll be down in their castle in the south, where it's much warmer." I glance up at the cloudy skies, thick grey clouds threatening to throw snow down on us at any moment. Summer's long since passed here, and the air has been cold ever since, the smell of winter hanging in the breeze.*

*It was my seventeenth birth year only days ago. Aleksander brought me a white chocolate cake because he knew it was my favourite, showed me the new star maps he had learnt about, and he gave me a letter from my mother. It's a letter I treasure and read over and over again at any chance I get. Aleksander goes to the breeders for me, at significant risk to himself, to pass a letter from me to her and to get one back every year. She misses me as much as I miss her, and if I smell her letter long enough, I can almost imagine she is hugging me. I only get this gift once a year, and the letter has to be burnt, like the others, so it's not proof of Aleksander breaking the laws. It's risky, and I appreciate that he does it for me at all. He looks after me even when he has no obligation to do so. I'm always happy to give him my blood every week in a glass, even if it took a while to get used to watching him drink the blood. I threw up the first time I saw him drink. "Hurry your feet and stay close."*

*Aleksander already has slowed down for me, and I make sure to walk fast, even though we both know he could move much faster than my fae feet will allow. I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear as I follow him up the steps at the back entrance of the castle and into the servant quarters. Fae are*

running around and none of them stop. They're all wearing thin red gowns, their upper shoulders, neck, and arms all on show, and every single one of them has many, many bite marks marking them. There's not a trace of brown clothing in here to mark worker fae, which lets me know that they're free to be fed on whenever the royals and nobles choose. Several cast their eyes my way when we walk in, but they see Aleksander and avert their gaze.

Aleksander leads me through the kitchens, up through a passage, into a small room with a chair and desk that has seen better days. There is a massive window that occupies one wall, with a stone window seat to look out through the glass. I sit down and shiver, knowing it's going to be cold in here. Aleksander wouldn't realise that since he doesn't feel the cold, and I barely notice as he pulls out a new book from inside his cloak. It's going to be another book about weaponry, how to build something sharp, but I don't care. It's a new book! I smile at him, unable to hide my happiness. "Thank you so much, professor!"

He proudly hands me the book. The binding is black; the title is in the language of the old times, but my mother secretly taught me how to read it, just like she was taught as a child by her mother in secret. Some languages shouldn't be forgotten, she used to tell me, just because the speakers are long lost. "This one details how to make the handle of the blade and how to add certain gems into it."

"We can discuss it when you're back," I answer. He leans over, kissing me on top of the head. At some point, Aleksander has become like a father to me, a father that I never had growing up. He certainly treats me like a daughter. He's protective like one, too.

"It will be the highlight of a long day." He opens the door, looking back at me. "Stay in here. Don't talk to anyone. I'll get a fae I trust to bring you food around midday." I nod and he seems pleased with that. "I'll be back before nightfall. Have fun reading."

I barely get to whisper before the door shuts. "I will." He leaves quickly, shutting the door behind him, and I hear the click of a lock moments later. I curl up in the small chair after pulling it by the window for some light. Occasionally I lift my head to look out at the castle, across the massive city, and imagine the horror down there, how terrified the people must be. Will it

*always be like this for the fae? Will it ever stop? For hours I read the book, needing the escape, until it's finished, and I wish there was more. I've always been far too much of a fast reader for my own good. A six-hundred-page book is nothing, not even a proper task. I could read that in a day, even one as boring as this. I put it down on the desk before pulling myself onto the stone window seat for a better view across the city.*

*From here, I can see the dark trees of the forest on the other side of the city, the beautiful sea right behind it glistening in the midday sun. The mountains behind the castle cast a shadow over here, and there is nothing but trees below the hill of the castle. I scream as a man's face instantaneously appears at the window, and I fall backwards, straight off the ledge onto the floor, slamming my elbow on the ground. I wince in pain as I roll over, looking up at the man standing on the other side of the window, the wind blowing his silver locks of hair out of the braid at his neck. He is very handsome and very much a vampyre. His skin is almost silver, drained of all light, but his eyes are vividly blue. He looks no more than about twenty, well dressed in a silver shirt tucked into tight trousers.*

*He knocks the glass with his knuckle, and he points at the lock. I know I should run, but my door is locked, and I have nowhere to go. I'm certain this vampyre would chase me for the fun of it, and he could break the glass if he wanted. Shakily, I climb to my feet, rubbing my elbow as I walk over and unhook the metal lock. He steps to the side to pull the window open before he climbs in, sitting on the ledge of the window seat, the window swinging shut in the wind behind him. "Why are you hiding in a storage room, strange girl?"*

*"Why are you climbing a castle?" I ask right back, my heart thumping. He must hear it; he must know I'm scared. Some vampyres love fear, feed off it, drown in it.*

*He grins before he laughs, running his hand through his hair. "Touché. I'm Valerian, a noble visiting and very bored. Who are you?" He looks me up and down. "You smell incredible, and I have never seen you before."*

*I take several steps back, looking for anything to hide behind. He holds his hands up. "I won't hurt you today. I vow it to the deities."*

*The professor isn't a bad person, so maybe this stranger isn't all that bad too? Vampyres fear the gods just like we do, and I don't think he would risk their wrath just to hurt me. "My name is Story Dehana, and I'm waiting for my owner to come back. He wanted me somewhere safe."*

*"And out of sight. Smart vampyre," Valerian murmurs. "Name?"*

*I frown. Should I lie? Is there any point if he is a noble? He could find out easily enough. "I'm Professor Aleksander Wollke's blood slave. He brought me in because the city's not exactly safe today."*

*He leans back on the wall. "Oh, Aleksander never mentioned to us about his blood slave being as beautiful as you are." My cheeks burn as he looks me over. He's handsome, very handsome, and it's hard to look away from him. This man is perfect in every sense. He reminds me of a prince from a fairy tale. He watches me with a smile that shows his red fangs tipped with silver. Aleksander told me his fangs were dyed red as a symbol of nobility, but the silver Valerian has is new to me. It must mean something, and I will ask the professor about it if I get out of here alive. "Why don't I show you around the castle? I think you'd like it."*

*"I was told not to leave here, and breaking my owner's commands is punishable by death," I retort.*

*"Unless he directly told you not to leave from the window, you won't be breaking any laws." He pushes the window open. The icy wind blows right in, and I shiver. "I regularly walk around the edge of the castle, and I know the way to somewhere special."*

*"Why not just walk around inside the castle?" I question.*

*He shrugs a shoulder, his eyes flickering to my neck, and he gulps once. "It's a way of getting around with no one seeing you."*

*Clearing my throat, I tug my hood closer around my neck. "I don't like heights."*

*"I won't let you fall." He offers me his hand. "Come on, do something fun with a stranger who means you no harm on this tragic day. We only live once." A funny saying for a vampyre who will live a lot longer than any fae. I look at his waiting hand, at his beautiful, handsome face, hearing both the*

*professor and my mother's voice screaming in my head not to do it. You only live once. I take his hand, which is ice cold, and he helps me out through the window onto a ledge that's only two feet wide. My heart is in my throat as I look down at the harrowing hill below us that the castle is perched on. How easy it would be just to fall for those trees down below, for them to impale me before I even hit the ground.*

*Valerian takes my hand, and he links my fingers like we are lost lovers escaping a villain's castle. No one's ever held my hand like this. I can't help but blush at this absolutely gorgeous vampyre who wants to hold my hand at all. I should run away. My mother would tell me that this is the stupidest thing I've ever done in my life. She would probably be right. But I want to spend more time with him, with this stranger who told me he wouldn't hurt me.*

*Valerian helps me walk around the entire left side of the castle before we get to a courtyard garden on the same floor, enclosed by thick walls, and I don't see a door anywhere. When we get to the edge, he jumps down first before reaching back for me, his hands wrapping around my waist as he lifts me and puts me down right in front of him. I lift my head to look up at him as he lowers my hood.*

*"Do you like gardens? Your hair is as beautiful as some of the flowers here." He runs his fingers through my hair, his eyes darkening into a sea blue instead, reminding me that he is still a vampyre. He steps back, offering me his hand again. "Come, let me show you the exact flowers I mean." We walk through the gardens, which feel like they go on for miles, all hidden inside this courtyard. He shows me every kind of flower, picking various ones for me of all colours before we get to the flower he meant. "These are black lotus flowers, and these are special ones that somehow turned red in the centre. I've seen lotus flowers all around the world but never ones of these colours."*

*"They look like my hair," I admit. "How strange."*

*"Or a sign from the deities that we were meant to meet." He steps closer, cupping my cheek. Suddenly his lips are on mine, cold and gentle, a perfect first kiss. My first kiss was with a vampyre. I blink a few times as he pulls back, smiling brightly at me. "I hope that was okay."*

*“It was,” I breathe out. My entire body feels like it’s burning as hot as my cheeks, and I clench my hands around the flowers in my hands. Valerian lets me go, heading to the flowers. He rips the entire bunch out by the stem, and my mouth parts as he adds them to the bunch in my hands. He just destroyed those beautiful flowers. I don’t say anything as Valerian leads me back to the wall, out of the courtyard and across the ledge until we are back in the room. He sits on the edge, looking in at me, holding the flower bunch I gave back to him. I can’t keep them, and he knows it.*

*“How will I ever see you again?” he asks.*

*“You won’t. This can just be a tale you tell your friends about,” I whisper.*

*He shakes his head. “I don’t have friends, but I want to see you again. We have a connection.”*

*“I know we do, but I am a blood slave for someone else and happy,” I truthfully tell him. As happy as a slave will ever get to be. “Forget me, please.”*

*“Never.” He smiles at me. “We will see each other again, Story.” My heart leaps as he jumps out the window and disappears into the thick of the trees below, the flowers falling with the snow now dropping from the sky. I didn’t know it then, but meeting Valerian was about to change my entire life—for the worse.*

I cough as I wake up, tasting cold, stale water in my mouth that is as bitter as my haunting dreams of the past. I don’t want to remember my past any more than I want to do the Decidere. Waves wash over my legs and threaten to pull me back with every lap. I look down at the pebbled beach as I pull myself up, wincing at the pain of leaning on the pebbles until I’m sitting. Dragon roars shake the walls as I cough out the water in my lungs and try to breathe. The corner beach is filled up with dozens of red pebbles that almost look like crystals under me, millions of them that glitter in the moonlight as it dances around from above. I glance up and realise that I must have fallen into some kind of lake, and I shouldn’t be alive. Not the first time I’ve survived something I shouldn’t have. Ziven’s man tried to kill me and likely hoped there were rocks down here.

“Fucking assholes, the both of them,” I whisper. I rise to my feet, my clothes sticking uncomfortably to me, and come face to face with rows and rows of pillars. They look the same as the ones above, but there’s so many more down here. Thousands of them stretching far into the thick darkness, so far that I can’t even see most of them from here, just outlines. Light shines from above, reflecting off the water, but it’s still so much darker than above. Touch a pillar. Daegan’s warning comes back to me. I can’t just leave here, and at least if I find a pillar, it’s one step closer to getting out of here. I need to touch one of the pillars and take the trial.

I can’t stop shivering from the cold as I walk to the first row of pillars, wondering how I’m meant to feel a calling to one of them. The best way is to move. I can’t just stand here, waiting for a dragon to come down and eat me. I look at the pillars just as I swear I see a red light shining in the far distance. My feet are moving before my brain has even caught up with the idea of following the light. Rushing through the space between the pillars, I’m very careful not to touch a single one, feeling in my bones that it would be a terrible mistake. The dragon roars echo below, above, and around me so loudly that I’m not even sure where they came from or how close they are.

My hands shake as I continue to walk until I get to where the glow is coming from. Deep within the lines of pillars is one pillar taller than the others, and on it is a glowing red dragon symbol. The dragon is curled round what looks like a gem, a ruby maybe, and the ruby is half of a sun and half of a crescent moon put together. All of the dragon is red, a long spiralling tail that’s wrapped so many times to make a circle, and it’s glowing a beautiful, vibrant red. My heart is racing like a drum as I lift my hand, and the second I touch the red stone, everything fades. I’m suddenly not standing in the pillars, and the floor under my feet seems to morph into red mist until I’m in a small grey cavern room.

On the floor at my feet is a giant puzzle that reminds me of a game I played with the professor years ago. Deep grooves like snakes twist around the stone, and there are five giant holes at my feet. I glance down at one of them to see there’s nothing but empty darkness below. At the edge of the room are spheres. Each one is a crystal sphere, all beautiful shades of red, orange, black, silver and gold. In the game I played with the professor, I had



to choose a ball to start with and get to the prize in the middle before the other players. It was a race, but this seems pointless as I'm playing alone and I don't see a prize. The professor always used chocolate drops as the prize. I quickly notice there's as many spheres as there are holes in the middle, all spread around me. Could it be as easy as that?

The ground shakes, nearly knocking me over, and the walls crack before my eyes, hundreds of slim fractures on every wall of the cavern. From the cracks, silver lava begins to spit out, burning and sizzling as it drips down onto the ground. It's going to burn me alive. I have to play the game and get all the spheres to the holes before being burnt.

I run to the nearest sphere, getting behind it, and begin to push. It's huge, nearly as big as me, and so heavy. I follow the track all the way around the bends, the twists, and it feels like forever before I manage to get it towards a hole and push it in. It simply falls into the darkness below, and there's no sound, no bang as it hits anywhere, just nothing. I glance at the next one and run to it, knowing I can't waste time. They must be the key to getting out of here.

Lava spits at me as I get to the sphere, struggling to slide behind it. A tiny drop of embers lashes at my ankle, and I wince, knowing that's going to burn. I know it's adrenaline or something like it pumping through me that's making me not feel the pain right away. Pain is something I've gotten used to over the years, and I know I can absolutely push through it to survive. I've done it before, and I can definitely do it again. With a grunt, I push behind the sphere, this one black, and I keep pushing it until it eventually goes down the hole.

By the time I look back this time, breathless and sweaty, the lava has started to spread on the floor around the spheres, getting into some of the holes. Deities help me! It's harder this time to get to the next one, and the one after that. But I keep going until sweat is covering me from head to toe, both from the heat of the lava and from the sheer exhaustion of doing this. My bones are aching, every inch of me is aching, until I get to the final one. I feel I can't breathe as I realise that the steam, the lava, is burning everything around the final sphere. I will have to step into it to get behind the sphere.

I can't do that. I can't do this. I just can't. I fall to my knees, sobbing as I cover my face. "Get up!" I tell myself, but it doesn't work. I can't move, I can't breathe. I hear my best friend's voice, like he's shouting in my ear that he didn't die for nothing and I need to stand. I need to get up off the ground, because dying here would just mean that the Moon king, the asshole, was right, and he gets what he wants. He tried to kill me, and he didn't deserve to get his wish. This isn't another trap that is going to end with me dying. No. Just no.

I stand up and run over, stepping right into the lava as I jump behind the sphere. A scream echoes out of my throat from the pain, and it completely takes my breath away as I try to rise. Silver lava spreads closer, not waiting for me to manage to stand through the dizziness, and I scream as it burns into my thigh just before I quickly stand on my good foot. Now the room is nearly full of lava, and there are only certain spots I can manage to put my good foot into as I push the final, much lighter sphere towards the remaining hole. When it finally falls through, I stand in the middle, looking around, feeling relieved only for that relief to drop into dread as I realise that nothing has happened. All of that was for nothing! It didn't work.

The lava doesn't stop. If anything, it's gushing out faster and travelling towards some of the holes, blistering hot lava pouring through them into the unknown. There's only one left that the lava hasn't touched. The lava's inching towards it, and I know there is one way out I haven't considered. My choice is simple—stay here and burn or jump to fall into the unknown and a chance of living. I don't want to burn, and falling is my worst fear. Blowing out a breath, my stomach is turning. I don't want to fall either, because I hate heights. Fresh tears fall down my cheeks and disappear before they touch the ground in the heat.

"I can do this. I've got to do this," I repeat as I climb on my knees, crawl over to the hole, and push my legs on the edge. The wave of lava comes close to me, like a promise of death if I don't jump. I look up and I pray to the deities to save me before I jump through the hole. I scream as I fall into nothing, a place so dark I can't see anything else. I rapidly fall through the air, right before I slam straight into a pool of water. I gasp in the water, coughing on it as I swim up to the top and the silver light. When I open my eyes, I recognise I'm in the pool again, in front of the pillars.

Lifting my hand up into the moonlight, I see there's a dragon mark right on the back of my left hand. A beautiful dragon. The black dragon mark is moving slowly on its own, spinning round, almost like it's happy. I did it. I survived the Decidere. The first night, that is. I glance up to see shadows of people coming out of the pillars above. I'm not the only one. The moonlight shines down, illuminating everything, including steps in the cave wall that lead all the way up to the top, back to the bridge above. Dragon's roar around me as I swim straight for the steps.

Straight towards my freedom and the Moon king, who I fucking hate.

## Chapter Seven

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*Page Seven.*

*I have been engaged to the Dawn Dynasty prince since I was a baby, uniting our strange outcast dynasties once and for all. Yet, I spend my days with the sun and my nights with the moon.*

There's no one around when I finally come to the stone door, soaked to the bone and dripping water in a line behind me. The door slides open with a slam of stone on stone, and I step out into the brighter light, blinding me for a second. The cheering crowds even make the dragon roars sound small, and my instinct to run heightens to a buzzing in my ears. My clothes make noise with every step, but I can feel that all of my burns are gone—healed. I'm not sure if the water healed me or I was healed when I won, or if none of it was real.

Daegan walks towards me, clapping loudly, and he has a massive friendly smile on his face. Go to him, Story. Don't be reckless. I can barely see him or listen to my own thoughts through the burning fury in my heart singing in my ears. I search for another person—my enemy. Anger fuels me like an

illegal herb, only heightening when I find him. He is smug as he pats the back of the man who threw me off the side of a bridge. Almost like he can sense my eyes on him, he turns his head and meets my eyes. There is no surprise that I lived, remorse that he tried to kill me, or anything but humour as he smirks at me.

I storm right up to Ziven, who crosses his arms when I get closer, towering over me like a mountain. “You fucking monster!” I screech at him, slamming my hand into his shoulder. Several of his people step forward to defend their king, but he holds his hand up, and they stop. “You tried to kill me before I got a chance in there! It was a cowardly move!”

He huffs a laugh. “I didn’t try to do anything. I was out here. Maybe you’re going mad, Storm?”

I place my hands on my hips. That stupid nickname again. “You sent someone to kill me, you fucking asshole!”

He steps right up to me, his eyes flashing with silver fire. “Keep calling me an asshole and see what happens to little brats who run their mouths at kings, Storm.”

My heart is racing as I realise I’ve just insulted a king, a very powerful king who could easily kill me, and I just decided I wanted to live. I shake my head, stepping away. “Cowards aren’t worth my time.” I don’t look at his reaction before I turn my back on him and run.

I am done with royals and their stupid games that I’ve played for years. I don’t want to do it anymore. I don’t want to deal with anyone right now. Where I’m running doesn’t matter, but my feet take off, and the sound of Ziven’s laughter haunts me like a ghost. I hear Daegan shouting after me, begging me to stop, and I hear many people shouting my name, but I just ignore them as I run to the steps. I just run and run, tears blurring my vision, and I can barely see through them.

When I finally stop, I notice that I’m in the library, at the door. Stepping to the side, I place my back on the wall, sliding down, burying my face in my knees before I start to cry in sobs. “Fucking coward,” I whisper to myself. I ran from him and called him the coward? I’m such a hypocrite. Everything I’ve held back—my friend dying, escaping the prison of my life, and being

trapped in here, a deadly test and nearly being killed—seems to hit me at the same time, and I can't breathe through my sobs. I must look like a complete coward to them, and a crazy person for shouting insults at Ziven. He is going to kill me, and at this point, I might deserve it.

“Most people run from the king, and you should really try to be kinder to yourself,” a soft voice echoes. I look up to see a slim man smiling at me. Was I talking out loud? He's a strange-looking man with a bit of a crooked face, curly light blond hair, red at the tips, almost like how my hair turns into black at the ends, and high ears pointing out of his soft locks. This fae has got kind brown eyes though, and there isn't an inch of judgment in them. He sits on the floor, cross-legged with his sunset orange cloak splayed around him, smiling casually at me like we are friends. I look around, expecting people to be staring, but they aren't. There are several fae here, but they seem to be minding their own business, pushing carts or carrying books. But not this stranger.

He sat with me on the floor, in a strange suit under a thick orange cloak. He is wearing a vest that has painted books all over it, so many titles written in gold. Why is this man sitting with me, the crying mess? “King Ziven terrifies most people, and you just stood up to him in front of everybody. You should be extremely proud of yourself for not only surviving the first day of the Decidere without any training to do so, while everyone else here has trained their entire lives for it, but you also stood up to him when he was clearly in the wrong. Not many have survived doing either of those.”

I harshly wipe my tears from my cheeks. “I keep hearing that word *survive*. Does it really matter if you survive if you're completely and utterly broken?”

“I think surviving is all the broken can do until they learn to thrive.” I like that answer and the man who is sweetly smiling at me. “Which I suspect you will if you give yourself half a chance.”

Chance? I don't think I've ever paused to give myself one. I don't think I've ever stopped at all.

“Besides all this,” he continues, “I should tell you my name. Introductions are always important, and it's been a very long time since I've had the

chance to meet someone new. My name is Mazzis. I am king of what is left of the Dawn Dynasty, though I don't like the title *king*, nor do I use it or ever wear a crown. There are few of my people left these days, and we are a neutral dynasty of friends. We are survivors, like everyone here."

"I still can't believe this place exists," I whisper. "Or that I just saw a dragon. A real, alive dragon!" I shake my head. "If my mother knew about this place, about the dragons and people here, she would tell me you are a chance for a better world. She told me she has always dreamed of a world where I was born free."

"Free." When he smiles, he reveals a crooked tooth that has a crack in it, and it's been filled with gold. "I hope to meet your mother one day, when freedom is no longer a dream. I am not a rider, and I cannot help you much with the Decidere. I am the only one of my family who didn't feel a call to the dragons, and I am no fighter. I run the library, and my calling was always to the pages of a book. My parents were horrified by that." He laughs to himself, picking at a bit of dirt on the ground. "No one actually has any claim to the books in here. They belong to the entire race of the fae, to the people poor or rich, powerful or not, as all books should be. I run the day-to-day of here in the library, and I would give my life to protect these books." He leans back. "I'm afraid I know you, Story, as everyone else does here. Catherine came in here not an hour and a half ago, raving about you, telling me all about how you'd love to be a librarian here before she mentioned she had successfully done the first day of the Decidere. I'd be honoured to offer you a job in the day. Come when you wish, there are always things to be organised, dusting to be done, books to be sorted. I cannot offer you gold—"

"A book or two to read. Not to keep, but to read. That's all the payment I could ever want," I interrupt. "And thank you so much."

He huffs a laugh as he climbs to his feet. "Working here is usually a punishment. You need not thank me. Not many offer to do this job, which is quite alright. The other jobs, like harvesting food, cleaning the drinking water under the heat, training for the army and learning the ancient ways of our powers, are paid and more interesting jobs to most. Whereas I can offer you nothing. If you change your mind, that is quite—"

“You offer me a lot. Books...well, they were controlled where I grew up, and they were nearly all the same. I think they were written by the same vampyre, and they are only about the same controlled subjects,” I explain. “These books are old, not new, and I can’t wait to try to read every single one.”

He frowns. “Awful. The vampyres have taken much from us, but I believe the books might be one of the worst.” I take his offered hand. When I’m standing, he gives me an orange silk tissue from his suit pocket. I smile as I wipe my eyes and nose until they are dry. “We will discuss more about the books outside this mansion when you’ve had a less eventful day. I believe someone’s waiting for you.”

Daegan. I don’t need to look to know he is waiting there. I can almost sense it and I’m not sure I like that. “Thank you. Can I come tomorrow?”

“Yes, sweet Story. Now go and rest. You deserve it after winning, and congratulations. I’m very glad I’m the first one to say that to you. Keep the tissue.”

“Thank you.” I watch him walk away into the library to the books that are apparently his home. Daegan doesn’t come to me; he simply waits at the end of the arched tunnel for me to walk to him. He is smiling so brightly that I can’t help but smile back.

“Congratulations.” He opens his arms. I don’t know at what point we got used to hugging, but he pulls me straight to him when I step close, and I find myself not caring too much as I hug him back. He smells like crisp sunlight and cinnamon cakes he must have eaten earlier...safe. He will keep me safe but I can’t trust him completely. “I’m sorry about Ziven. I didn’t know he’d be sending one of his own in this year, or I would have warned you to keep away. He didn’t place any of his people’s names in the selection, but he has never followed the rules set out. Are you okay?”

“I survived,” I mutter as we begin to walk back to his apartment area. “I think he might have done me a favour. By pushing me down there, I found more pillars, and it wasn’t a rush. I was out of the way of the dragon that came up and burnt people.”



“You were lucky, and he was trying to kill you. He didn’t do you any favours,” Daegan all but snarls, and I pause as a shiver snakes down my spine. He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, he can be—”

“Frustrating?” I arch an eyebrow at him. “I’ve known him a day and I would label him that, among many other things.”

“Yes, I heard.” He grins at me. “Hearing you call him out for his behaviour was the best thing I’ve seen in years.” We both laugh together, even if I feel like I’ve poked a bear. “But really, are you alright? Do you need a healing bath?”

“I’m healed,” I explain. “Do you know what happens in there, because—”

“We don’t talk about our own personal trials within there. The dragons, they decide the trials based on what they see in our souls, what they deem we need to become the strongest version of ourselves, and they take offence if you talk about it,” he quickly tells me. “I forget you don’t know this.”

“Your dragon...erm—”

“Odemis. I became a rider after five Sundays, five in the Decidere. The trials were some of the hardest days of my entire existence, and I am lucky to have Odemis. I would take you to meet him, but only riders are allowed in the deepest caves where the dragons fly and breed. Some of them can be seen from one place, and it was where I was going to take you so you weren’t so shocked at the sight of a dragon for the first time.”

He opens a door for me, and I slide through. It smells delicious in here, and I glance at the massive rows of tables in the room we have entered as my stomach begins to pang with hunger. Daegan leads me to a small table at the side, and there are plates of food in the middle. Meats, cheeses, milk in bottles, steamed vegetables and white cakes with frosting curled on the top. How do they get all of this? Daegan must read my expression. “On the top floors of the mansion, there are massive greenhouses, and below there are stables full of goats, cows, and chickens. They were here when we were trapped, and it keeps us all well fed. I will show you around when you’ve rested.”

“Lucky,” I murmur. “How did you get trapped in here? I mean, what is the story?”

He frowns at the food. “You might be the key to getting us out, but none of us knows how we got trapped in here. It was our ancestors, and the story of it all got warped over the five hundred years we have been in here. I couldn’t tell you what is true and what isn’t.”

I use a spoon to scoop some food onto my plate, my stomach hurting from not eating. “That’s a shame.” When he hasn’t spoken in a while, I change the subject. “I don’t think I want to go down there again after seeing a dragon today. I’m pretty sure I’m still absolutely fucking terrified of them, and the idea of riding on the back of one of them makes me want to pass out.”

His lips twitch. “I’m pretty sure I’m still absolutely fucking terrified of them, and every rider is and should be.” He eats a chunk of cheese, washing it down with milk. “They are terrifying, wild creatures, but they consider riders as their own, their family, and they will die for you. I would die to protect Odemis.” He looks up at one of the dragon statues that are in the corners of the room. “Being a dragon rider makes you feel like you’re a deity, powerful and protected.”

I’ve never felt or been those things. I can’t imagine what that would even be like. “I wasn’t expecting them to look like they are made of stone and crusted over like that. I don’t know why I expect them to be like creatures, blood creatures.” The books I read...they were never covered in stone like that. In the picture I saw, they were, well, it was a drawing, but they looked smooth on the outside.

“We all change in five hundred years, change to survive,” he begins, leaning back. “Talking of change, Ziven will take you to his apartments tomorrow evening for three nights. He vowed to our leaders in the meeting you’d not be killed or seriously harmed, but watch your back. He is not your friend.”

No, he is my enemy, and I’ve learnt to always watch my back around dangerous men.

## Chapter Eight

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*Page Eight.*

*My father said I cannot keep my friendships now I've turned twenty-two and now a rider, because it is an insult to my fiancé. But the calling of the entwined mates is burning me pure like sunlight and moonlight combined.*

The slamming of a door sharply wakes me up in my bed, and the smell of smoke chokes my first breath. I wince at the bright light coming from the corridor, from my open door, as I listen for any sounds outside. All I hear is silence as smoke rolls across the ceiling of my room like a fog. I jump when a pained scream echoes from outside my door, a male scream that sounds like it's coming from downstairs. More screams, pleads and shouts echo below as I shake in my bed, gripping the sheets tightly, begging for this to be a nightmare and I'll wake up soon. This isn't a nightmare, it's too real.

Fear crawls up my throat, choking me as I climb out of bed, and I embrace the tiles' coldness on my bare feet. Grabbing my red cloak, I pull it over my shoulders, tying the string at the front of my chest as I quietly tiptoe out of

*the door, into the small corridor that leads to the stairs down to the main bedroom areas. I know exactly where to step on the wooden steps so they don't creak, but it's pointless if vampyres are attacking—they could hear me anywhere in such a silent house.*

*When I get to the bottom of the steps, I can smell more than smoke. Blood. The thick metallic smell floods my senses, and I gulp, looking at the shiny red blood splattered all over Aleksander's double doors. There's a trail of blood all the way through the half-opened, almost broken doors, and it's silent. No more screams, no more pleas fill the house, and I know, when they find me, I'm dead too. I don't know who is brave enough to attack Aleksander, but he is strong and old. He wouldn't go down easily. My heart is still in my throat as I step into the room, nudging the doors open with my hand, and one falls off the hinges, slamming onto the tiles.*

*I scream. Aleksander is on the bed, covered in blood...well, his torn-up body is. His head is on the floor at my feet, his mouth open like he was shouting something. A warning to me perhaps. Horror floods me as I lift my bare foot, sticky with his blood, and I throw up right onto the floor next to his head. I stumble backwards as more sickness rises up my throat, only to slam into something. Fast, I turn around, my heart pounding in my chest like a drum as I see Valerian standing behind me. It's been a week since I met him at the castle, and now, he doesn't look so perfect. He's covered in blood; it is dripping from his hair and eyebrows like paint. His eyes are glowing silver, and he's smiling like he won something.*

*“Story, I told you we'd see each other again. I'm sorry it took so long.” He places his hand on my shoulder, and I can't stop shaking. It was him. He did all of this. Alone. He has killed everyone in the house, including the professor. Aleksander is dead. “I already had a favourite blood slave, and she wasn't happy about not being my favourite anymore. I didn't want you getting jealous, so I killed them all. It's safe for you at the castle now. I rarely live there, but my father wants me to stay there for a few years to oversee the city. You're moving in with me!”*

*I can't move as he runs his other hand through my hair. My heart is pounding as he looks down at me, and pure hunger flashes in his eyes. Before I can even blink, he aggressively yanks me to him, and his teeth sink straight into my neck. I scream in pain as he bites me like an animal, nasty*

and rough, and my knees go completely weak from the pain and shock. I can't fight him, can't do anything as he keeps me in his grip, like a rock wrapped around me as he feeds from me, grunts and groans escaping his lips at every drop of my blood he takes. When I'm starting to feel woozy, he finally pulls back, blinking a few times like he's in a haze. "You taste better than any fae I've ever drunk from," he whispers, licking his lips. Possessive fury flashes across his eyes. "You're my blood slave now. Mine. If anyone dares touch you, I will paint the walls with their blood. My name is Prince Emyr Valerian Vampirion."

Prince? His name roars through me, Prince Emyr, heir to the throne. He is known as the Prince of Cruelty and Blood, and I'm now his. My neck is burning and sore as I look at the vampyre who I kissed in the garden, who was not just some young vampyre but one of the oldest vampyres alive. I can't talk. I don't know how I'm still breathing. "We'll go back to the castle, and you'll be my favourite blood slave. I'll keep you alive and safe. I promise you that." He kisses me, my own blood mixing against my lips, and I can't do anything as silent tears fall down my cheeks. If I fight him, he is going to kill me. Maybe death would be a better fate. I'm too terrified to do anything but stare at him. "I think I fell in love with you when we first met. I never felt anything like it before, and now you're mine. The deities have been kind to us."

Kind? They have been awful. I barely even notice as he picks me up and carries me out of the house like a prize, a prize he paid for in the professor's blood. He is dead, gone, and it's all my fault. I watch from over Valerian's shoulder as the house burns in the night, red flames dancing high enough they look like they reach the sky. I don't want to be here anymore; I don't want anything anymore. I'm in a complete haze as he throws me into the carriage. It feels like only five minutes later that he's picking me up again. My feet stumble as he puts me down and starts walking me through the empty, quiet castle full of paintings on the walls, past the vampyre guards, working fae in brown uniforms, and statues of knights with red armour that glitters in the light of the oil lanterns on the walls.

He opens a guarded door for me, and I walk in, knowing he will make me go in either way. The room is beautiful, lush with red fabrics, and smells like feminine perfume. He said he killed the last favourite blood slave, and

*this must be her room. My blood is still pouring down from my neck, down his lips too, as he looks at me with nothing but desire and hunger. “I want us to be different, Story. We can be friends and I will care for you.”*

*Friends? Does he even know the meaning? The prince looks over his shoulder, clicking his fingers. A guard walks in and bows low before rising. Shiny red armour does little to hide his thick body, fae ears sticking out of his brown hair under a red helmet. “This is Kyrell. He knows to look after you.” He lowers his voice. “I may have drunk too much from her, and she is my new favourite. Get some healing herbs, clean her up, and then bring her to me when you’re done. We have a long night.”*

*The prince leans into me, breathing me in. The first words I say are nothing more than a ghost of a whisper. “You promised not to hurt me.”*

*“For one day.” He turns on me with anger flashing in the depths of his pupils. Did he expect me to be happy? Maybe another fae would be happy to be his favourite blood slave, but I’m not. “I like you scared, your eyes bright and beautiful. Your heart is so loud, as it pumps your delicious blood so fast.” The prince reaches out, touching my neck, pushing down on the bite mark until I cry out, and even then, he doesn’t let up. “Pain is good, Story. Pain can be pleasure and I’ll teach you this. My beautiful one.” He lowers his hand and I gasp, nearly falling over as he walks away, shutting the doors behind him, and I flinch. I fall to my knees, sobbing into my hands, and I feel like I don’t stop for years until I realise the guard is still here and has taken off his helmet.*

*I look up through my messy hair to see the guard softly smiling at me, but his eyes are full of pity. He looks familiar, his blue eyes... I think I’ve seen him before. “You know my mum, Blaire. We have the same eyes,” he tells me, like he can read my thoughts. Maybe he can. I know some fae can do that. “I know of you, Story. I’ve seen a picture of you. She...” He pauses. “It’s not what she wanted for you.”*

*“Tell my mother I’m sorry...if you can. Please, just tell her that and I love her and it’s all my fault—not hers,” I whisper. The prince will probably kill me tonight, if not by accident, just for fun. I know I won’t live long, and a part of me wishes I was strong enough to jump out of the window behind Kyrell.*

*He continues smiling softly at me. He's about my age, I think. "May I touch your neck? My power is like my mother's, but rare because I can heal by taking the injury as my own without hurting myself. My mother can see injuries, read your blood, and then she makes a cure. When my power came out, I was chosen to serve the royal family. Emyr took a liking to me. One of the reasons I'm close with the prince, as he keeps me to heal his blood slaves." I nod. He touches my neck, and the pain is just gone, and seconds later, I feel it healed. "I'll make you a drink to help with the blood loss. I'll make you stronger, enough to survive whatever he wants for the rest of the night, and then we can talk more tomorrow."*

*"Kill me," I ask of him. I know it's not fair to ask him to risk his own life to end mine, but I don't want to live. I don't want to die at the prince's hand. He doesn't deserve to have my final moments after he killed the professor. I gasp. "Please."*

*He looks back at me with sadness, still making some kind of strange smelling tea. "No, and don't ask me that again. The answer will always be no. I believe in life, in our paths and destiny. Story"—he shakes his head—"I'm sorry this happened to you. I'm sorry for everything that probably will continue to happen to you. But don't give up hope. I'll be your best friend in here, and I'll try to keep you safe while you follow the path the deities set for you."*

*"I don't have any friends left alive." I look at the moon in the sky outside the window. How many blood slaves has the prince had stare at the moon from this window and wish for death?*

*After a while, Kyrell comes back to me, kneeling in front of me. He hands me the warm tea. "Once we give up, they have won. Live, Story. Come on, live for the people who can't anymore."*

*He sounds like the professor. But he's dead. He's dead because of me, because I kissed a boy for the first time, and he turned out to be a prince of nightmares.*

*I'm glad when I wake up, when I touch my neck and feel only scars and not fresh blood. Scars last forever, just like the nightmares that live with them. There's not many on my neck. I think he didn't bite me too much there,*

didn't want me looking too mauled. As ruined as I felt on the inside, it didn't show too much on my outside at the beginning. That night...I decided I didn't care if I died or not, and I hate that feeling. Hopelessness is haunting, and my soul will never forget how I gave up on myself. I'm fixing it, Kyrell fixed me, and he never gave up on me. He fought for me, picked me up when I was drowning, and screamed at me to fight for my life. He believed I was meant for more than life as a blood slave.

I rub my face and look at the sunlight beam shining through the window onto the floor by the bed, dust dotted throughout. Stepping out of the bed, into the light, I walk to the window and push at every inch of it, searching for a breeze coming through, for anything, but it's perfectly sealed. Frustrated, I slam my hands against the glass, but it feels impenetrable. There's one thing I haven't tried. Searching around the room, I find a yellow crystal sphere decoration on a shelf by the door, and I throw it straight at the glass. It doesn't shatter. The heavy sphere simply drops to the floor with a thud, almost like the window itself just caught it.

Of course it wouldn't be that simple to get out of here, and even if I did—would the vampyres be waiting for me? Prince Emyr wouldn't give up that easily, not with what he had planned. I get myself changed, similar clothes to before, a light gold top, tassels falling down my arms, and I tuck the top into tight dark brown trousers. When I'm done, I look at myself in the mirror. Gold and brown aren't my colours, but neither is red. If I could choose my own clothes, what colour would I pick? When I was a child, I wore white like all fae children, and I always ended up with brown mud stains or dropped food all over them, much to my mother's annoyance.

Deities above, I miss her. No one would have been able to get word to her about me, and she likely doesn't even know I'm missing—that I escaped. She would cheer if she found out, but she won't.

After leaving my room, I follow the pathway and the smell of food back into the massive dining hall where we had dinner last night. Daegan is already here, and so are hundreds of people, who are talking and laughing together at the many, many tables, and all of them are wearing various shades of yellow, brown, gold, or light orange. Daegan puts his hand up to signal me over, and I walk towards him, where he sits, not on his own this time, but at a table with at least three or four others at it. I recognise Etena



seated on the left of Daegan, but I don't know the others—their backs are to me. Daegan stands when I'm close, pulling a chair out for me, and I sit down on his right. "Good morning, Story. I got you a plate. Help yourself," Daegan begins, waving at the trays of food in the middle of the table. "I didn't want to wake you. I thought you might be tired after yesterday."

I'm about to say thank you when a male speaks first. "Congratulations on winning the first Decidere! There were only forty-two who came out with you." I look at the man, who I know. Sort of. He winces, running a hand through his blond locks. "I'm sorry that, when we met, I hit you on the head."

The man from the reception room. "I remember you."

"Foster." He inclines his head and points to the man sitting on his left. "And this is my brother, Cove. We are Daegan's cousins by distant marriage, but not blood. Etena is the same. Makes us lucky, we don't have to worry about the boring ruling part of being the king."

"Erm, hello? I'm your girlfriend and you could introduce me!" the woman to the right of Foster exclaims and looks at me with a bright smile. Her dirty blonde hair is tightly braided in two, and her eyes are a muddy brown. "I'm Twila. Nice to meet you." She looks at Daegan for a minute too long and with a look of longing she doesn't hide well, then back to me. "If you need anything, you can ask me. I work in the greenhouse in the day, and you are always welcome."

"Thanks for the offer." They are all still looking at me, like they expect a speech. "Sorry if I interrupted whatever you were talking about. Please carry on, pretend I'm not here."

Twila shakes her head. "Oh, we were just saying that Calix has come over and tried to talk to Etena again this morning in training."

Daegan looks at Etena, who is more interested in ripping at her toast and shoving bits into her mouth. "I told him to stay away."

Foster huffs. "He's never going to stay away. They are entwined mates."

Etena drops her toast. "Even if I don't remember him or want anything to do with him. The deities can be twisted."

“What are entwined mates?” I ask, remembering that word from the book. The writer talked about being entwined with the sun and moon.

They all look at me like I’ve grown wings and taken off into the sky. Daegan sighs with sympathy. “Let me guess, you don’t know what entwined mates are because the vampyres made sure you forgot?”

“I’ve never heard of it,” I confirm, picking at some eggs, toast, and bacon.

Etena sharply snaps, “By the fae, the vampyres really kept everything from you out there when you lot rolled over to be their slaves.”

Rolled over? More like were threatened, hunted, and killed into submission. I bite down on my tongue.

“Etena,” Daegan coolly warns her.

She rolls her eyes towards me. “Entwined mates are two people who are linked together when they’re born, by the deities, and a mated pair is extremely powerful. You boost each other’s gifts. The deities choose the people, and they are linked for certain reasons known to the gods alone. It could be for true love, or it could be a deep friendship or to be enemies destined to end each other’s lives. Mates aren’t always good picks, but their magic will always complement each other’s. Most choose to be lovers, but not always. Males always know—they can sense their entwined, smell her scent. For us—there are no clues, nothing but pure instinct.”

I frown. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Well, he’s mine. We are entwined, and we were in a romantic relationship. But when I went into the Decidere, I was badly injured, and I lost my memories. All my memories of him are gone,” she explains, and I feel like I’ve just stepped into a battlefield. “He’s one of Ziven’s people, his right-hand man. The deities picked wrong, and I don’t know why I ever would have gone with someone from the Moon Dynasty. I’m praying there is a second option out there for me like—”

Daegan sticks his fork into a tomato as he quickly interrupts her. “The deities have been wrong before, and they are now.”

It feels kind of wrong for Daegan to say that the deities were wrong. No one questions the deities—where I come from at least. But then I've never heard of entwined mates or dynasties at all. We are clueless of our history, and I can't help but wonder what the fae outside would make of all this. Two people entwined together by deities, and together they are more powerful. I feel like that is important enough that people would care, would want to know more. The vampyres are more powerful than us, and if they regularly feed from a powerborn fae, they can use their powers, even against other fae. Maybe it's best they don't know we can become more powerful.

The rest of breakfast is filled with talking about the weather outside, how the goats have started breeding for the spring season, and other uninteresting chatter. I take it all in as I eat, enjoying the normalness. Daegan sits back as Etena takes his plate and walks off. "How about a tour before I take you to the library and lose you in the books?"

I can't help the smile I give him when I think of spending the entire day surrounded by books. He offers me his hand after standing. "You've only seen a small part of the mansion, and I would love to be the one to show you more."

I go to pick up my plate, but he stops me. "It's okay, someone will—"

"I can clean my own plate. I'm thankful for the free food, but I don't want anyone to have to clean up after me." I pick up the plate and find Etena and other fae queuing to clean their plates in massive sinks at the back of the room. Etena looks at me in surprise as I stop a few people behind her and wait. It only takes a few minutes before I get to the sink, clean my plate, knife, and fork, and leave it to dry on the racks.

Daegan is speaking to someone when I walk back to him, and the man walks away when I'm close. He doesn't say anything, but I swear he is disappointed for a second before he takes my hand and links our fingers. He takes me down the familiar entrance to his apartments and out into the middle of the mansion, in front of the dragon statue. "I won't bother taking you around all the living quarters. They're basically running up and around the library on this side. Ziven's apartments are the level below here, before the Decidere entrance on the ground floor." We walk up the dragon stairs,

past people who are talking in groups, and several of their heads turn our way. Many just simply bow to Daegan, but most stare openly at me.

“How long before they all stop staring?” I whisper when we’re more alone on the staircase, past the floor with the library, and I can’t help but to look over at it.

“Unless someone else comes in here after you, I think it might be a while.” He playfully squeezes my hand. “And spending time with me will just make them stare more.”

I sigh. “Well, in that case, we can’t be friends.”

He laughs with me, and it takes me by surprise how comfortable it is to be his friend. I’ve known him all of a few days, and he makes me feel safe, which isn’t something I’ve felt since I became friends with Kyrell. I blink back tears at the thought of Kyrell, wondering what he would think of Daegan, and we stop in front of massive black metal gates. He opens a gate for me, leading me inside. “This is where we keep the animals we nurture for food.” I don’t need him to tell me this place is full of livestock, because I can smell them. There are pens of them that stretch on and on, and there are thousands, if not more, of different animals kept in here. Chickens, goats, cows, sheep, and horses in paddocks that lie all the way back for what seems like miles. Beams of sun come in from a strange light system of mirrors so it shines sunlight directly onto the fields of grass that line the sides of the pathway. “We use our magic to grow the grass meadows for the animals.”

“What are your powers, exactly?” I question.

“Sunlight fuels our natural abilities when aligned to my dynasty. My power is pure light. I can control it and use it however I wish. Others have strength, speed, healing, telepathy, and I could go on and on,” he explains. “We need sunlight from outside to power us.”

Ziven must need moonlight then. Daegan shows me around, introducing me to countless people who are here working, caring for and looking after the animals. He stops and takes me back after a while, explaining that at the back are built-up areas where food is stored, and basically that’s it for this floor. “This way. I think you’ll enjoy this more.”

We go up the dragon to the next floor, which has dozens of stained red glass doors. Daegan holds a door open for me, and I step into an extremely humid room. A huge greenhouse, but like none I've ever seen before. The entire room is glass, spread all the way across, looking over the forest. It's filled with plants, vegetables, fruit trees and so many fields with wheat growing at the back. Sunlight shines down on us, bright and stunning, making Daegan's hair look like it's glowing. "It's beautiful in here."

"Many of us come in here just to feel what it's like to be outside. It's the closest we get. Yes, we're surrounded by glass, but you can feel the sunlight. You can watch the birds fly across the forest." He looks out at that forest and at the open sky. "I know you haven't been trapped in here long, but come here if you feel it weighing down on you. It's one of the highest paid jobs if you wanted to do something else other than the library."

"I could try to do both to get some money to pay you back—"

He stops me. "Don't worry about that. You're a special case and quite traumatised from what I can tell from your past. It is an honour to care for you, and you owe me nothing. I will look after you."

I smile once at him, but something lurks in my chest that I'd like to be able to pay my own way. He is looking after me. That's not a bad thing.

A woman with long blonde hair comes rushing over, stopping and bowing her head low. She's wearing a long yellow cloak and a matching dress underneath that are a contrast to the white of her hair. "My king, may I speak freely about a very important matter?"

"Healer Sunny, speak," Daegan answers, and she lifts her head.

"This morning, three fae were found sick. There were clear signs of the Chilgrave sickness. It seems to be spreading again," she softly begins, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "They've been isolated, along with their families, in their rooms with immune healers. I'm sorry, but one has passed."

Daegan tightens his hand in mine. "Thank you for reporting this quickly, and make sure the news is kept quiet. Find Etena. I will walk my friend to

her job, and then I will come straight to the healing quarters. I can pray with you.”

“Thank you, your majesty.” Healer Sunny bows her head and then nods her head to me before running away.

I don’t say anything until we are outside the greenhouse. “I’m sorry your people are sick. Will they be alright?”

He leans into me by the staircase while we wait for a group to pass. “The Chilgrave sickness does not have a good survival rate. It’s dangerous and my cousin died from it not long ago. Many of us have died from it. It’s highly contagious, so we’ll have to watch their families and pray that they survive or that they’re naturally immune. Some people are. Some people have had it once, and they’ve become immune to it, while others just don’t. Was it outside in your world? A rash that spreads across the body, a fever then comes, and then death?”

I shake my head. “No, I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

There’s still a big group on the stairs going down, and Daegan leads me the other way, up to the next floor. I hear grunts first, then the clash of metal right before we come up to the next floor. This floor has the tops of the dragon’s wings on it, a pathway to the other side, and on the other is a training room of sorts with mats, walls of weapons, and sections where some are running, others are in combat, and mostly everyone looks muscular and fit. Hundreds of people are fighting, practicing, or training, and I recognise a lot of them from the Decidere. “Can I train in there? I might need to be stronger—”

“No, no, no,” Daegan answers with a small laugh, leading me across the bridge. “It wouldn’t be safe or fair to you. They have all trained since childhood, and you’d just get hurt. You’re small and don’t seem like a fighter. You won’t need to learn any of that. I’ll be at your side for any fighting.”

I frown, but I don’t say anything when he might be right. I don’t know how to fight, and I’m clumsy. Daegan must be right. We walk in complete silence down steps on the other side that lead to a side door to the library entrance. I spot Catherine in the middle of the room, and she grins brightly

when she sees me wave at her, putting down the books in her hands. “Thank you for the tour.”

He lifts our joint hands and kisses my knuckles softly. “It was my pleasure, Story. You can ask me for anything, anytime.” He looks over my shoulder. “I think you made a fast friend there.”

“I think so too,” I answer, unlinking our hands.

He glances at a table full of books to my right. “Have you read any more of that book I gave you?”

I think of the book. “It’s less of a book and more of a diary, but yes. It doesn’t even have a title, and it’s really cryptic.”

“Keep reading,” he suggests, looking into my eyes. “It’s a romance at its heart but a story worth reading even for the unromantic. I never got to the end.”

“Why not?” I question.

“Because you came, Story,” he answers. “On Friday, when you’re back, I thought you’d like to go on a date with me. Just me and you, alone.”

A date? Flashes of dates with the prince burst through my mind. They were never dates because I didn’t want to willingly go, and no one else would dare have asked me. Live, Kyrell made me promise. Living means trying new things, making fresh memories to wipe away the ones which will forever haunt me. “I’d love to. See you soon.”

I have a date with a handsome fae, and a job in a library...some might say these are my dreams come true.

## Chapter Nine

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*Page Nine.*

*I confided in my friend that I have two entwined mates calling to me. She said it was impossible and I should ignore the calling of the others. That Dawn was my fate and the only mate for me.*

*But I don't want to forget the moon. He is my everything, but he only sees me as his friend.*

I spend hours in the library with Catherine, who I think is absolutely amazing. For the first few hours, she shows me the layout of the library floors and hands me a paper map she drew for me to study. After she gifted me an old cart just like hers, we wander through the library, categorising books and finding new ones for people that have asked for them. The library is busy, and it doesn't take long to get lost in the work, and I enjoy every second of it. As the hours pass, I find myself completely and utterly lost in the shelves, and I know it will take hours before I will be able to make my way around here alone without getting lost in the shelves. I barely



even notice it's getting dark outside until the lights change in the library, switching from orange flames to a softer, blue light as the librarians change the oils. Catherine parks her cart next to mine. "Do you want me to walk you back to the rooms?"

I glance at the exit, seeing two men standing in one of the tunnels, speaking in hushed tones. Ziven is waiting there for me, and he's not alone. Mazzis is talking to him, and seeing how close they stand—I would bet they are even friends. "I'm spending three nights with...in the Moon Dynasty because King Ziven wanted that."

Her eyes widen. "Oh, I'm sorry. Maybe you should ask Mazzis to make a similar request and shorten the time you have to spend there." She shivers, lowering her voice. "They aren't good people, and he is the worst of them."

"Don't worry about me," I softly respond, my eyes fixed on Ziven and Mazzis as they talk. Ziven towers over most of the fae I've seen here, and Mazzis is no exception to this. He looks small next to Ziven, and I must look like a bug anytime I'm near him. Ziven is in all black again, thick leather trousers and a thin shirt that is stretched across his body, leaving nothing to the imagination. He has a dark, styled coat with a high collar on, and it falls to his knees. Small silver moons are knitted into the hem, and they almost seem to glow as I watch. He smiles at whatever Mazzis has said, and despite the fact he is a giant prick, I notice how he has a really good smile. It lifts his high cheekbones, reveals his dimpled cheeks, and makes his eyes brighter. The smile is gone in a second and the scowl is back—his natural state. "Mazzis doesn't seem like he likes arguments, and he's been so kind to me, letting me come here to work. I don't want to ask anything or stir trouble up for him. Not for this. Ziven has promised I won't be seriously hurt or killed. What's the worst he could do to me with those rules in place?"

She lifts her eyes to mine. "I never thought rules applied much to them." She frowns. "Don't die. I haven't had a friend before. I mean, I have my family, but they have to be friends with me because we are related, and you don't. Most people ignore me, and you don't...so don't die."

I grin at her. "Okay, I don't intend on dying, and I like having a friend, too."

“See you in here tomorrow?” she asks, nervously picking at her nails.

“Tomorrow.” The promise hangs between us, and I like that she clearly cares about me. She might be the first female friend I’ve ever had. I’ve always found easier friendships with men, but that wasn’t by choice, just who I was surrounded by. As a child, the fae female children stayed away from me because of my mother being an outcast.

Ziven and Mazzis stop talking immediately when I get near, and Ziven straightens up, instantly on guard around me. Mazzis steps up to me, offering me two books, both bound in thick, shiny leather, and one is red, the other orange. “I thought I could choose the books for you as payment.” He touches the red book. “This one is a brief history of the dynasties. It’s not a long or overly detailed account of our history. It was written for children, but it’s good for beginners. I thought you might enjoy it before we dive into more complicated books.” He taps the orange one. “This one is a personal favourite of mine. It’s about one of the very first dragon riders that roamed over a thousand years ago. It was a famous king, and the book is written by his long-time lover.”

“Wow.” I clutch the books. “Thank you. I’m looking forward to reading them.” I grin at him, the smile dropping off my lips when I catch a glimpse of Ziven glaring at me.

Mazzis carries on, unaware or uncaring about the glaring king at his side. “Well, see what you can get read tonight, and I’ll give you two more tomorrow, regardless. You can return all the books at the end of the week or keep them longer. It depends how quick a reader you are.”

“I’m a fast reader,” I proudly answer. “I’ll get through both of these tonight.” I risk looking directly at Ziven. “Unless I’ve got other plans?”

“No,” Ziven all but snips before walking out.

Mazzis looks between Ziven’s back and my worried face, clearing his throat. “Have a good evening, Story.” I quickly mumble goodbye to Mazzis before running after Ziven, who’s completely left the library at this point. I vaguely know the way back to his apartments anyway, but I don’t feel like trying to get in without him there next to me. They’ll probably kill me for a miscommunication. I end up jogging to his side, and I struggle to keep up

with his massive strides as he walks like a man set on one path. He doesn't slow down or wait for anyone—I bet he has never had to. I don't know what to say to him anyway—small talk with Ziven isn't going to work. I'd end up just calling him an asshole again, and I feel like I'm one more word away from being burnt in the moonlight by him. It feels awkward between us and I'm definitely not trying to come up with conversation either.

We turn around the corner towards his apartments once we get on his floor, and he stops in front of the doors. They were guarded by the strange twins last time, but it's quiet, empty here now. He touches the door with his palm, and silver light flashes bright. He pushes the door open, and he holds it for me. “Wow, so you do know how to be a gentleman?”

“If enemies touch the door, it burns them into nothing but dust,” he deadpans, letting the door swing towards me for a second before pushing it back. He smirks at the shock on my face. “I made a vow, and I bet the others would accuse me of killing you, even if the door did it.”

Asshole. I swear he doesn't know how to be anything else. I square my shoulders as I slide through the open door, careful not to touch it. He steps through next, shutting it behind him. I'm about to ask Ziven what his grand plan is now he has me here, just as a little girl slams straight into me. We both fall backwards onto the floor, my books falling from my hands, but I catch her before she lands harshly on her head. Her elbow goes straight to my stomach, and I wince. The blonde girl blinks at me through gold eyes, her long shiny hair falling like snow around us. There's a moon marking on her cheek, and she grins at me, making the moon move up her skin. She looks like Daegan and Ziven, but I'm not sure how that is possible. I thought all the children were kept away while the Decidere is on, so how and why is she here? Maybe what Catherine said about the Moon Dynasty not following the rules is true.

That fact makes my stomach sink.

“What are you doing, Henrietta!” Ziven shouts, picking her up off me with one swoop of his arm. Her little black dress drains the light from her tanned skin and the colour of her hair. “I told you that you're not allowed out of your apartment rooms for a few days unless you're with Ruelle.” He sets her down in front of him.

Henrietta glares at him like he is her problem. “Well, it was boring, and I didn’t want to.” She looks at me as I climb to my feet and grab my books. “You informed us all that she was coming, and I wanted to meet her. We never meet anyone new! You keep me locked in here all day, and it’s boring!”

“I do not keep you locked—” Ziven pauses when he sees the same thing I do, an old lady with a walking stick walking to us with impressive speed. She doesn’t let up or slow at all.

“Henrietta Rumeysa Moonsilver, how dare you run off like that!” she shouts, her voice echoing to us. Henrietta wasn’t remotely worried about Ziven, and she apparently doesn’t care about this scary old lady either. I need whatever she is drinking to make her that brave. Ziven sighs. “Hettie, now you’re in trouble.”

The woman’s stick, silver and crooked at the top to make a handle for her, clacks on the tiles until she gets to us. She sighs. “By the dragons and deities, you will give me a heart attack long before I am due to die, child.” She pats Henrietta’s shoulder. “Why did you leave like that? We were halfway through our lessons on mathematics.”

“You weren’t quick enough to chase me, and I knew it.” She blows out a breath with her words, and somehow, she looks cute even as she insults this woman. “And Marcus was kissing his girlfriend. He didn’t see me leave.”

“I’ll deal with your guard later,” Ziven promises with a growl. “But you need to apologise to Ruelle for being rude and running off.”

She huffs, staring down Ziven and this woman. “No.”

The woman laughs. “Leave her, Ziven.” She cups Henrietta’s cheek. “You are a cheeky one. Of all the children I’ve brought up, I definitely think you’re by far the cheekiest with the words that come out of your mouth. They do not come from me.”

Henrietta looks at Ziven with a grin, and he smirks for a second, but when he sees me looking, he drops it into a classic frown. “They definitely come from you, Ruelle.” She whacks Ziven in the leg with her walking stick, and he winces.

Ruelle turns her silver eyes on me, the same shade as her short bob of fine hair. A black cloak covers her from her neck to her hidden feet, tied with a belt around her waist to pull all the material in, and the belt has a silver dragon clip in the centre. She stares at me for long enough that I look between Ziven and Henrietta for help, but neither of them says a word. “You must be the new one.” She looks me up and down. “What did they say your name was again?”

“Story Dehana. It’s lovely to meet you.”

“No, it’s not.” Her stick taps on the floor as she comes closer to me. “Let me guess, you don’t wish to be here. I’m sure Ziven has been delightful to you, as he is with all of the people he doesn’t trust. The list is long, so do not concern yourself with being added to it.”

I blink, nervously looking at Ziven. His arms are crossed tight, and his eyes dare me to answer her. Thankfully, she laughs. “Don’t answer that. It will only make him grumpier. He’s like that with everyone. This is my granddaughter, Henrietta.”

“I’m sorry I knocked you over,” Henrietta exclaims, messing with her hair. “And I like to be called Hettie.”

I’ve always had a soft spot for children, likely because I know I won’t be able to have any of my own due to my body. “Don’t worry about it, Hettie. I’m glad I stopped you running into a door.”

She laughs. “The door would open for me. It opens for anyone from this dynasty.”

“Tell the newcomer all our secrets, why don’t you, sweetheart?” Ziven murmurs, turning her to Ruelle. “Take her back.”

“Of course,” Ruelle answers, bowing her head at him. Ziven grabs my upper arm, dragging me away down the corridor.

“Bye, it’s nice to meet you both!” I shout over my shoulder.

“Don’t talk to them.” Ziven’s snarl echoes in my ear, his cold hand pressing deep into my arm, but he doesn’t really hurt me. He drags me down the corridor, straight into a small room, pushing me in first and shutting the

door behind us both. He leans against the closed door. “You weren’t meant to meet her, and that’s a problem.”

“Why not?” I ask.

He tilts his head to the side. “You are always asking so many fucking questions, Storm. All you need to know is that you don’t talk about her to anybody in the Sun Dynasty. Especially not Daegan. Do you understand?”

I don’t dare ask why when he looks like he wants to kill me. Still, I can’t help some of the million questions in my head blurting out. “Honestly, I thought she was from the Sun Dynasty. She doesn’t look like she fits in here. Do you really keep her trapped?”

“Assuming shit will get you killed.”

I narrow my eyes. “I didn’t assume anything. She literally just said—”

“You are a spy, and you are a traitor to your own race by coming here to betray us for whatever fake vampyre king you serve,” he begins, moving towards me. Not this again. He seriously can’t believe that, can he? He only stops when we are inches from each other, and he leans down, his face so close to mine that our breath mixes. “And you are nothing. If you even think of touching Hettie, of hurting her, I will rip you apart so slowly that death would be worth begging for.”

I wince as his insult hits home. I’ve heard it before, and it might be true. I am nothing, I am no one, compared to the rest of the world. I don’t have anyone to call me anything more, but I would never, ever hurt a child. “What have I done to make you hate me so much? You tried to kill me and now this threat? You’re locking me in here, aren’t you? You bargained to have this time here with me. Why? Why bother if you think I’m going to die soon in the Decidere that you set me up into?”

His eyes darken like silver moons. “I do not answer to you.”

“No, I guess you answer to no one, and you never have, King Ziven.”

He leans into me. “Especially not a wild beast that came running in here in a storm with nothing but lies on her tongue. You said you assumed this place would hide you from the vampyres, but that doesn’t make sense.

Don't they hear heartbeats a mile away? What made you think you could hide in a house from them? Even your tale doesn't make any sense, Storm."

My mouth dries. "I was panicking, I wasn't thinking straight. I just..."

"Just what?" he pushes. I just saw my best friend die in front of me to save my life. I ran away from a life that was nothing but torture and pain. From a prince and royal family who had plans for me, plans that would have been more awful than any of this. I clamp my mouth shut. He didn't answer me either, and I'm not telling him the hardest parts of my life when he will call me a liar anyway. "Fine, then we don't talk about it, and you are an enemy of the Moon Dynasty. While you're living here, I have to look after you because of the old laws. I will find out your secrets, Storm, because you're a lying little spy."

He walks out, slamming the door shut behind him. I rush over to grab the door—only to find it's locked. Slamming my hands against the door, I scream. "You're a bloody arsehole king, and I hope you can hear me! And for your information, I would never hurt a child!"

His echoing laugh suggests that he did hear me, but I hear his footsteps as he leaves me here. I know he isn't coming back anytime soon, even before I see the plate of food and drinks left out for me on the wooden window seat. There's a big double bed with thick black sheets and two cabinets on either side of it. A dresser lies in the shadowy corner, and after opening all the drawers, I find it's mostly empty except for some black clothes. A tight top, tight leggings, underwear, and socks. It's, funny enough, all in my size. I find a door to a small bathroom by the cabinet, and that room is made of all stone, but there's a toilet and a shower. I'm locked in a room with two books. Screw him. It's not that bad. At least I have company. I lift the first book and start reading about the dynasties.

"The dynasties were born into existence over one thousand years ago in the names of the deities. Each dynasty was powerful at the beginning, holding a section of the world as their own, and their dragons never strayed from their own lands or seas." Lands that I've never even heard of are listed, although they've probably been renamed by the vampyres.

“The Moon Dynasty, flush with forests and bathed in moonlight, was the biggest land formation, and they held the most dragons. The Sun Dynasty to the south, lands rich in sand, pyramids and towers, were the only ones to truly rival the lands.” I think the land I was brought up in, Nightwell, was once the Moon Dynasty.

“The Twilight Dynasty ruled to the north with the biggest dragons and with the most magic of them all, but their people were few. The Dawn Dynasty in the east rivalled the Moon Dynasty with the amount of people they had, but they lacked the dragons, making them far weaker compared to the Moon, Sun, Dusk and Twilight Dynasties. This bred the way for the wars.”

For five chapters, it describes the brutal wars. There were three great wars, apparently, according to this book, one of which wiped out the Dusk Dynasty. The drawings on here sketch massive dragons fighting, of the sunlight, moonlight, fires and storms and the horror of it all until it was decided that there would be peace for the sake of the people they had left and the dragons that survived. Marriages were arranged, alliances were bred on vows, and there was peace. The Twilight had only a few people left. Dawn didn't have many either, but the Sun and Moon Dynasties had fared better in the wars—they were the greatest threats.

“It was agreed that when a female heir and male heir were born to the Moon and Sun, they would be married to unite the two powerful kingdoms once and for all.” It makes sense to me that they would try to unite their people. But no female was ever born to the Sun or Moon, or even the Dawn or Twilight Dynasties. Many believed they were cursed for their part in the wars like the Dusk Dynasty. For four hundred years, it was only male heirs born to all the dynasties. This kept a very tender peace between the dynasties until—”

I rub my face as I yawn, putting the book down and pulling the silk string to mark my page, which is about halfway. I can read more tomorrow. I lie back and it takes seconds before I drift off, dreaming of horrible wars and dragons burning everything like the books said. I feel like I've barely closed my eyes before I wake up with a startle as my door slams open. A woman rushes in, her black clothes and dark armour matching the colour of her pulled back, short hair. It's still dark outside, and the only light is coming from the corridor outside and the oil lantern shining behind this stranger.



She glares at me, crossing her muscular but slender arms. Her barking shout nearly makes me fall from the bed. “The king is waiting for you. Get up and come with me. Now!”

## Chapter Ten

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*Page Ten.*

*My dragon is upset with me. She can join the moon and sun. They both believe I'm making a mistake following my father's orders...am I? To anyone reading this, if you had to choose between your family and your heart, who would you choose?*

After the shock wears off, the woman is still barking at me to hurry up and get showered. I quickly shower before throwing clothes on, my wet hair dripping down my back. The tight black clothes seem to stick to every inch of my body, but they match everyone in this dynasty. The second I'm done, she is ushering me down the corridor, and I stay well behind her. My dripping wet hair must have annoyed her, and she swiftly turns, handing me a small band. "Tie your hair back. It's no good sticking to your neck and getting in your face during training."

"Wait, training?" I ask, but she doesn't answer me or even seem to hear me. Training? Why would Ziven want me to be trained to defend myself? It doesn't make any sense. Tying my hair back, I follow the woman out the

doors. I wish I knew her name, but I doubt she will happily give me it. We go up the dragon stairs, round and round, and it's pretty empty. The sun is still hiding, and I wonder what time it is.

When we get to the training place, it's pretty empty too except for people from the Moon Dynasty, a black wave of them on the mats, already training hard. All of them seem to be here, or at least I count a good fifteen. Ziven is waiting in the middle of the room, his thick arms holding a sword that looks bigger than me. There is a man at his side, and I've seen him before around Ziven outside the Decidere. He has long dark hair that is perfectly straight and falls to his slender shoulders. He smiles at me. Which is more of a smile than I've got off anyone out of this dynasty before. The woman bows low when we stop in front of Ziven and the man. "Thank you, Sterling."

"My king, you can ask anything of me," she all but purrs, lifting her head. I raise an eyebrow at her tone, and she glares at me before walking away. Ziven stares at me and I stare right back at his stupidly handsome face. Why is he pretty and yet he has a heart of stone? The deities didn't do anyone fair when they made him.

The man at his side looks between us, rubbing the back of his neck. Ziven hands him the sword. "I'll, er...go."

The second the man is gone, I narrow my eyes at Ziven. "Training?"

He watches me for a moment. "You train or you don't eat. Nothing is for free in this world. If you don't know that by now, then you're pretty useless."

I clear my throat. Training with him? That sounds like a perfectly good way to accidentally get killed by one of his thick arms or giant feet. "Daegan said it wasn't a good idea if I trained because everyone here has trained since they were kids and that I would be..."

He laughs so loud it interrupts me. "Of course he would say that. Do you want to be a pretty princess that dies because she's got no idea how to look after herself? Or you can train with me."

I would almost suspect he is trying to make me stronger, but that makes no sense. "Why do you want to train me?"

“Because I said so. I don’t need to give you a reason.” He nods to the track just as two fae run past so fast I barely spot them. My knees already feel weak. “Seeing as you’re here, and not running away again, I assume you don’t want to follow perfect Daegan’s polished advice.”

I narrow my eyes on him. “That’s not fair. Daegan is my friend, and he is protecting me.”

He smirks. “Sure. Believe that. We’ll start with running.” He takes several backward steps towards the track. “Come on, Storm, or are you too scared to train with me?”

Straightening my shoulders, I walk to his side. He isn’t showing me up. Part of me wants to train and learn how to protect myself... I’ve never been given that chance before. I might be terrified of Ziven using this as an excuse to make sure I end up dead, but so far, he seems to be hell-bent on the law that forces me to be in his dynasty for half the week. Even if it’s pretty terrifying to train with people that have been trained since they were kids and I’ve never had a chance. “I warn you, I’m pretty clumsy.”

“Then fall. No one’s going to pick you up,” he coolly responds. “Come.” He starts running off. A slow jog, even by his standards. I quickly run to try to catch up with him. Within five minutes, sweat is pouring down the back of my neck. Within ten minutes, he picks up speed, and I’m breathing heavily, barely surviving as pain stabs at my stomach, my body threatening to give up even if my mind is not having that. We haven’t even run twice around the entire track, and I’m struggling. He looks over his shoulder at me, shaking his head once in disappointment, but he doesn’t slow down. When we get to the end of the track, I barely manage to stand up, panting and trying to make sure I’m not sick. I’m very glad I didn’t eat breakfast before coming here. Ziven stands in front of me. I stare at his dragons almost dancing around his thick forearms. “Get on the mat.”

“What?” I heave.

Ziven glowers. “That was a warm-up. Get your pretty ass on the mat, Storm.”

Several people are watching, several of them smiling, and some of them are not. Those ones look like they would prefer it if I wasn’t here. That makes

two of us. I wince at my sore body as I follow Ziven onto the nearby mat. He peels off his top and I gape. Shiny, thick muscles cover his chest, rippling down into his trousers. There is a fine amount of hair on his chest, dipping to the thick V shape of his stomach. There are so many dragon markings that begin at his hands all the way up to his muscles, and I quickly lose count after ten. He must have done the Decidere a lot...maybe he is the one who did it fourteen times? There is a scar, almost like scales, across his left shoulder, and I pull my eyes away even as my cheeks burn up and my body feels like it's on fire. "Eyes up, Storm. How have you trained before? What self-defence moves do you know?"

He thinks I know how to fight. "I don't know what part of *slave* you didn't understand, king." I'm unable to hold the sarcasm back. "But the vampyres don't train slaves to defend themselves. We aren't allowed to even touch a weapon. To defend yourself is just asking to be painfully killed. I didn't get to defend myself from shit, and I don't know how."

He cocks his head to the side. "Fae are good at playing the sheep when they can be the wolf." Am I the sheep and he the wolf? He moves into a defence position. "Stand like I do."

I know there is no point telling him no. I mimic his stance, or I try to. He shakes his head, coming to me. Ziven pats my leg to the left, and he pushes up my spine to straighten me, but I can't think of anything but how my skin burns where he touched me. "When someone comes at you, you move. You're fast."

"No fae is as fast as vampyres, so what is the point?"

Ziven searches my eyes, and whatever he sees only makes him mad. "I don't want to talk about the vampyres' bullshit. I'm not training a vampyre, am I?" He shakes his head, looking forward. He moves to stand in front of me. "Most people, when they attack you, they go for delicate places." He touches my throat with his finger, and my heart leaps. "I usually go for here, but you?" He touches my stomach, and the throbbing of my blood only gets worse. "Here would be better, as you are likely shorter than your enemy." Yes, my enemy is currently towering over me. "These places, if you hit there, you'll knock them down. But it also means if you are hit there, you are going down unless you know how to block."

I nod, my mouth dry. I'm thankful when he finally steps away from me. "Hit me. We both know you want to."

A bubble of laughter nearly falls out of my lips. Did he just make a joke? "I-I can't."

"Yes, you can," he answers, somewhat patiently. "Go for my stomach. Like I just told you. Knees if you're feeling brave. Hit me. We certainly know you are aware of how to hit me in the balls. Don't do that again though."

That is a fond memory of mine. Knowing what an asshole he is, I wish I kicked harder. Ziven smirks. "Unless you're hiding the fact that you're extremely well trained and you know exactly how to take me down. Like a spy would do."

I glare at him. He's really not dropping this idea that I'm a spy sent here to kill him. He must be completely delusional. I step up to him, feeling nervous, and go to punch him straight in the stomach. He grabs my hand, twists my arm, and I go flying, flying straight onto my back. I wince as the air is completely taken out of my lungs and pain lances down my spine. Ziven stands over me, and he doesn't offer me a hand to help me up. "Again, and faster this time. Anyone could have stopped you. You are fae, do not hold back."

He makes being fae sound like it's a good, powerful thing. Not a weak, terrible way to be born, like the vampyres teach.

My eyes widen. "You've got to be joking. That hurt."

"And you can have a healing bath afterwards," he snarls. "I'm not Daegan and I'm not treating you like a fucking baby. Get up, do it again. You are in my dynasty, and so far, you are making me look bad. Get up, learn, or tell me the truth about who you are."

I have told him the truth—well, most of it. I'm not a spy and maybe he might believe me when this day is over and I'm still shit at fighting. I get up and attack him, again and again and again. He knocks me over countless times. I lose track of how many times he has me on my back until he finally seems to give up and everything in me hurts. "Training's over. Come for breakfast."

I watch him walk out of the room, away from the mat where I'm still lying on the floor. A hand is shoved into the air above me, and I take it, needing some help to stand. It's the man from earlier, and he offers me a towel. "I think you did really well today." I take the towel and wipe the sweat from my head. "Ziven is one of the best trainers, even if his methods are harsh. He trained with me as kids, and I never once beat him. I'm his second-in-command." He shows me where to put the towel, in a basket with piles of others. "It's good to meet you, Story. I'm Calix."

"Nice to meet you too, Calix." I wonder if this is the right hand man that Etena was talking about, her entwined. I vaguely remember his name mentioned. He's very good looking, slightly shorter than Ziven and Daegan, I'd bet, and he's thinner. Not less muscled, but slender.

He watches me, and I watch him right back as we leave the training room. Bursts of orange sunlight are shining through the trees, the beams flashing across the dragon's stone wings through the glass window. "Breakfast will make you feel better." I'm not sure anything is going to make my bones stop hurting unless it's one of those baths. He is trying to be nice, so I don't say that.

We wind our way down the steps, and it's not empty anymore. People stop and stare at me open-mouthed after jumping out of the way of Ziven. I try to ignore them, focusing on where I'm walking so I don't pass out on the floor. They lead me into a dining hall in the Moon Dynasty apartments, and only then does Calix leave my side. It's nothing like the Sun Dynasty dining hall. There's one long table, and it's far cozier in here. Plush silver rugs line the wooden floor, dark couches are pressed into the corner, and rows of bookcases filled with ornaments and a few books line the walls. There's a big roaring fireplace in the middle, and it feels more like a family dining room than a public place. Ziven's sitting at the top of the table when I get the guts to look for a seat. There is a seat empty next to Ruelle, and I walk over. "Am I alright to sit here?"

She pulls the back of the seat, and the chair slides out. "Sit down. Sit down." I take the seat, pulling the chair in and wincing. "I'm sure you've been beaten up enough this morning." Everything hurts in me as I sit down in the chair, and I don't know how my muscles are ever going to recover. No one waits before digging into the food, and I watch from the corner of

my eye as Ziven makes sure Hettie has a plate full of food before he takes any for himself. The food is similar to Daegan's, and I take two eggs, a piece of toast and a slice of melon. I eat in silence, but everyone else talks openly, and laughter fills the air. The moment breakfast is over, Ziven stands, and they all look at him. I feel completely like an intruder. Even Hettie doesn't look at me. "Time to return to your room until lunch, Storm."

Great, he really plans to lock me away in there. I follow him out of the room. This time, he just opens the door to my room, lets me go in before he slams it shut behind me. So, this is how my day is going to be. Trapped inside this room. Not that being alone is something I'm not used to. There were days when I was alone in the castle, weeks even, when he was away with his family. Those were the only times I felt like living was worth it back then. I glance at the windows, the sun quickly rising over the treetops as a memory comes flashing into my mind. I'm forced back into the past like it's here permanently to haunt me, like something I can't escape even when I did.

*"This dress looks beautiful on you." Prince Emyr strokes my bare back, over the hundreds of bite mark scars, some fresh and new, others now healed into silver scars. The bites are the one thing Kyrell can't heal. Something about the bite is permanent, and fae magic doesn't fully work on it. I used to care about my body, about my soul, and want to live, but that is gone. I feel empty, broken, and I don't care anymore. He runs his hands down my arms, down the millions of bruises. He doesn't bite my arms; he likes them smooth and scar free.*

*The shiny red dress is too tight, pushing my breasts up, and the lace is wrapped tightly around my ribs. The skirt flows down to the ground, and it's ridiculously expensive. I know a fae made it, likely poured their heart and soul into this dress, and I should appreciate it, but I can't when it's another dress to wear in a prison of gold. He likes to dress me in silks, especially when there are bite marks all over my stomach, from how he's spent the last three nights feasting on me like I was food after he came back from his trip. Three weeks...and for a moment, I felt safe. How delusional I was. He hasn't done anything more to me yet, not yet, but the way his hands roam freely across my body, I know it's not long. He'll want more soon, that much*



*is obvious, and it will just be another part of me he takes. Like my blood, my freedom, and no doubt my life in the end.*

*I've asked Kyrell to kill me seven times, and he always says no. If it was because he didn't want to be killed for hurting me, I'd understand, but that isn't his reasoning. He fully believes I'm meant to live through this and there will be a different ending for me.*

*Prince Emyr clips a diamond necklace around my neck, the heavy jewels tugging at me. "What is tonight?"*

*He looks pleased and surprised. I don't speak to him unless I'm screaming for him to stop. "Tonight is a special party to celebrate my father gifting me Nightwell city. In a year, he will come to see my progress." He looks away. "But that is boring vampyre business. I told everyone at court about you, and my friends want to meet you tonight. Don't fear them, but they're not allowed to touch or taste you. You solely belong to me." He puts his hand on my back, a possessive gesture, and escorts me from the room. I can't move. I feel frozen in a nightmare as we walk down the corridors and I take everything in. I barely left his room or mine in months, other than to use the bathroom and clean up. To wash the blood off me, to let Kyrell heal me and give me more tea to keep me stabilised. God knows I can't keep the food down these days without throwing it up, and I'm thinner. Too thin, according to Kyrell.*

*Prince Emyr leads me straight down corridors into a massive ballroom that is busy, alive even if everyone here is cold-blooded. There are vampyres here, loads of them, and blood slaves line the walls in red dresses, waiting to be drunk from. I expect to go and stand with them, but instead the whole room stops, pauses as Prince Emyr leads me through the middle of the ballroom. They move out of the way, making a pathway to the other side, to a small red throne. They all bow, their eyes leeching over me like I'm their new dessert flavour, and I hate it. It feels like spiders crawling across my skin, wishing they could bite.*

*To my shock, Prince Emyr pulls me onto his lap, clicks his fingers, and they go back to talking in groups or dancing to the music played by the orchestra on the right. Their silk gowns, all reds and golds, flash in the low lights of the fires hanging from the chandeliers above. It's beautiful and horrible all*

at the same time. A couple come up, bowing low, their eyes dancing across me. “Congratulations on finding a new favourite. You had the same one since you were a child. I thought you’d never get bored with her.”

“Well, she wasn’t half as tasty as this one.” He kisses my bare shoulder, and I gulp. “She was kept secret from all of us. She has delicious blood, and she is exquisite to look at. Born for a prince.” They are both staring at me with hunger. “Look at her like that again and I will rip out your fangs.” They both immediately drop their gaze. “She’s mine. She will not be touched.”

That statement doesn’t need to be shared, they heard, and it’s clear because, for the next hour, people come over, and he introduces me one after the other. They don’t dare look at me too long. Eventually, he takes me to the dance floor and dances around with me. When he is bored with that, he bites my wrist once, showing everybody my blood like a trophy. They cheer for him, and I feel like I’m in a haze, like none of it’s real, even though it is. I can’t escape.

He wanders around with me before he leaves me sitting on the throne to go off with some of his male friends. I don’t move for so long I wonder if I’m frozen, until I lick my dry lips. I need a drink. I spot a table of drinks nearby, and I barely get a few yards away before a man steps into my path. A vampyre, tall, dark hair and red fangs shining through as he speaks. “It’s lovely to meet you, Story Dehana. You look very familiar. Have I seen you before?”

“No,” I coldly answer. “I was just getting a drink—”

“Please allow me. Let me get a drink with you, and we can—”

I jump as Emyr’s arm wraps tightly around my waist, his fingertips digging into my stomach where the bites are, and I wince as he makes them open for more blood to flow into the dress. I barely hold in my cry. “She can get a drink from her room. She is tired now.”

“Of course, your highness.” The vampyre bows his head, watching us as Prince Emyr escorts me out of the busy ballroom, down the corridors, back to my room. I barely step through the door before he grabs me around the throat and throws me in the air. I slam into the mirror on the wall, shards of glass raining down, cutting into my arm. I scream as I fall, crying as he

*walks over to me and kicks me hard in the stomach. Time stops as he hits me again and again, and I feel all my ribs crack before he grabs me by the chin, lifting me up into the air. “You don’t talk to another male vampyre, stupid whore. You are mine to feed on, to fuck when you’re a little older, and you will love me. Do you understand me?”*

*I sob, wheezing out every word. “Y-yes. I’m sorry.”*

*“Good. Good. I will feel better when you turn nineteen and we can fully be together. You will want me more when pleasure is involved.” He softly strokes my hair even as I cry. “You belong to me. Get cleaned up and wait for me in my room. It’s about time I show you how I like my females to behave. I will bring one back.”*

*He leaves the door open as everything spins and pain threatens to make me pass out. I barely see Kyrell shutting the door behind him before running over to me, dropping his helmet with a clank. He takes my hand, and instantly the pain ebbs away. “I’m so sorry, Story. Fuck, stay awake.”*

*“Don’t heal me,” I plead, but it’s too late. The pain is nearly gone, and he looks so pale. Even the stars can’t make this night bright. It is all dark and it will never stop.*

*“I can’t. I wish I could...but I will always heal you.”*

I blink out of the memory, the horror of that night and how it was just the beginning. As for the rest of that night—I wish I could forget it. There’s a rustle behind me, and I swing to look where it came from. On the brick wall is a massive, empty picture frame. I noticed it when I came in here, and I saw a few of them in the corridors outside. The picture’s empty, just a wooden frame on the brick. The bricks slide across, clicking as each one disappears. Henrietta appears on the other side, holding a lantern, and she is in a pink nightdress. “Hello, can I come in?”

“Is that a secret door?” I mutter. “And yes, but—”

“Ziven doesn’t know I can use the frames to move about, or that I’m missing from my room, or he never would have put you in this room,” she answers with a grin. “But don’t worry, because only people from the royal Moon Dynasty line can use them. It’s part of our magic.”

She really is a cheeky child. “I don’t think you should be in here speaking to me. Ziven thinks I’m a spy.”

“You’re not,” she confidently replies, walking in and sitting on the end of the bed. “And you look sad. You didn’t even get to try the cakes. They bring them out after Ziven leaves because Ziven never eats the cakes, and he thinks they are bad for your teeth. He can be boring.” She offers me a small cupcake covered in yellow frosting. “It’s actually chocolate cake with yellow lemon frosting on top. The cook makes them for me because she knows they’re my favourite. Everyone else says they’re disgusting, but I really like them.”

I smile at her. She is sweet. “I love chocolate cake, but I’ve never tried it with lemon before.”

As I take the cake from her, she looks down at her feet. “I’m sorry you have to spend all your days in here. I know it’s not nice not being able to leave.”

“Does he really keep you trapped in here?” I question, concerned for her. There is being trapped in a magic mansion, and there is being trapped in a room. One is not okay. Well, neither of them is, but she can at least explore this place.

Hettie grins. “I was just annoying him. No, he lets me go outside with my guards. After what happened to my mother, his sister, he doesn’t want me to get hurt. He’s already lost everyone else.”

My heart clenches. “Oh, so you’re his niece. I’m sorry you lost your mother. Is your father alive?”

“I’m not allowed to talk about it all,” she quickly answers, like she just remembered I’m not in their dynasty and Ziven has likely told her I’m terrible or something close to it. Her features, so much about her doesn’t look a thing like Ziven. I can see a little bit of Ziven when she frowns though. Hettie looks like she belongs in the Sun Dynasty, and she reminds me of Daegan. With how much Ziven didn’t want me to talk about Hettie with Daegan, could he be her father? Is that why they hate each other? “Don’t cry.” She touches my hand. I barely even notice the tear on my cheek, and it’s from earlier, held in place.

“It’s not being here that made me cry, it’s just memories of the past,” I softly tell her. She nods, and I bite into the cupcake to change the subject. It’s strange to have the sweetness of the chocolate and the tang of the lemon together, but it’s actually really nice. I eat it all before grinning at her. “That’s probably the nicest cupcake I’ve ever had.”

“Really?” Her eyes widen. “I knew I liked you! Uncle Ziven was wrong about you, and he will figure that out soon. I can’t stay long. Grandmother is going to notice I’m missing and get really mad.”

It’s cute that our similar taste in cupcakes seems to decide if I’m a good person or not. “I didn’t think she was Ziven’s mother,” I enquire. I just didn’t get that vibe from them.

She wrinkles her nose. “No, she isn’t, but we call her that because she acts like one to us all. She is the oldest person alive in here. The dragons are older, but they can’t bake cookies and teach you how to fight with a sword... Don’t tell her I said that she’s old.”

I barely hold in my laugh. “I won’t.”

Hettie goes to the frame, and the bricks move for her, opening the door. “By the way, the shower is the same as the bath. The water in this mansion heals us from most things. Just in case Ziven forgets to tell you.”

She disappears behind the bricks, and I head straight for the shower as quickly as my sore body will take me.

## Chapter Eleven

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*Page Eleven.*

*Would he even notice if I ran away to the sea and prayed for the deities to hide me from the world?*

*My people need me, but I need him.*

“**T**ell me about your week.”

I glance at the handsome Sun king at my side, who is kind and sweet, and we are on a date...and yet something doesn't feel right. I push the feeling down. It's just nerves. *I'm on a date! Kyrell, you'd be so proud of me.* “Come on, you've been quiet since you got back. Did Ziven take out your tongue?”

I look at Daegan and stick my tongue out at him, making him laugh. “No, it was... I'm just exhausted.”

“You're training?” he questions, raising an eyebrow. “I have people around here. They watch everything and tell me. Did you ask to be trained by him?”

“No, it's a part of...well, if I don't train, I don't eat there, so...” I mutter.

“That’s unacceptable. I will—”

“Don’t, it’s fine. I actually feel stronger, especially with the Decidere tomorrow. He doesn’t hurt me.” *Much*. “I don’t like conflict and arguments, and I know Ziven will make one if you try to tell him what to do. He definitely would make my training harder if you did.”

He doesn’t look like he’s going to drop it. “I’m the king—”

“Daegan, please,” I softly ask, touching his arm. He is nicely dressed this evening, a brown shirt with suns hand-stitched into his collar and tight dark trousers. The sun marking on his cheek seems to glow in the night’s darkness. His soft white-blond hair is pushed away from his face, and I wonder what it would be like to run my fingers through it.

Daegan sighs, slowly sliding his hand down my arm and linking our fingers. This close, he smells like nothing but vanilla. “I still believe you shouldn’t have to train, but I will leave it if you wish.”

My shoulders drop in relief, and for a moment, I feel bad. He was trying to protect me, and that isn’t a bad thing. He continues walking me up the staircase and towards the level with the greenhouse. It’s quiet, nothing but the sounds of pattering rain above on the glass as he leads me inside and the heat wraps around me. I breathe in the thick smell of the crops, the dampness of the water poured into the soil, and the sweet scent of the flowers.

Daegan touches my back, his hand feeling so close to my skin through the thin, yellow crop top I’m wearing. My tight leggings are from the Moon Dynasty, but I prefer them over the trousers from the Sun Dynasty. “I made sure it was empty for us. I want to show you my favourite part of the greenhouse, and there aren’t many places to take you for a date in this mansion.”

I smile at him. I’m happy to be back here, especially when it’s this quiet. We go through the thick vegetation, across the fields of hay and wheat, towards the fruit trees at the back. Right at the back of the greenhouse, there’s a small white table laid with silver trays and two benches on either side. “I love this view.” I can hear how much he likes it from his tone. “You can see the waterfall in the distance.” He points at it to show me, and just

off in the corner, through the thick trees that surround every inch, I can see the waterfall of pure green, sparkling water. It pours down into a river whose stream disappears through the trees. It really is a beautiful place.

The thick fruit trees hang above us, filled with apples, and I try not to wince as I glance at the plates. “I know you probably brought food, but I’m not really hungry. Catherine surprised me with a massive lunch that her parents made for us. I think they like hearing she has a friend, and I couldn’t say no.” I clear my throat, wondering if he is going to get angry at me. Refusing anything is new to me, and a part of me will always fear a man’s reaction. “After training this morning and working in the library, I’m tired and full.”

“Then we don’t eat.” He leans into me. “I’m not hungry either.” He moves one of the benches, picking it up with one hand like it weighs nothing, and carries it to a tree near the glass. He pats the wooden bench. “Come and sit with me. Tell me more about what it’s like in his dynasty.”

I sit down at his side. “It’s almost like you want me to be a spy for you and tell you everything that happens there.”

He answers quickly and a little sharp. “I don’t. If you don’t want to tell me anything, that’s fine. I have more than enough spies everywhere in this place. Truthfully, I wanted to make sure you were well looked after, like he promised. I feel protective of you, and that’s new for me. I’ve never felt protective like this with any female...and I’m fumbling it all.”

Resting my hand on his, I tell him, “You’re not. Thank you for being protective of me. Truthfully, I feel like I’ve known you far longer than I actually have. It’s easy to be with you, and that’s strange for me. I grew up never trusting men or strangers.” He looks sad and I try to change the subject, answering him. “They’re different. They’re like a family. The Moon Dynasty wasn’t what I expected. Honestly, he kept me in a room most of the time I was there. I spent my time reading books that I’d been given at the library, so it was nice. The first one I read was about the dynasties and how they came to be, oh, and about the wars. I still need to go back to that book. I left it because I started reading a book on the romance of the first dragon rider.”

He grins. “A classic, even I’ve read that one.”



I shake my head, a classic? I'm not sure I would call it that. "It was a brilliant book with a terrible ending. She loved him, the dragon rider, so much, but I wouldn't call it a romance. She killed him in the end, killing herself too. I admire that she made the choice to kill him when he went mad and started slaughtering their people, but she didn't have to die. She could have brought her son up and told him about the good things along with the bad. It looks like because she died, she didn't get that chance, and the notes at the end tell of how her son became a tyrant too. He made sure anyone who spoke of the deaths caused by the first dragon rider was silenced. It's just a bit unromantic in the end."

"You think sacrifice is unromantic?" He searches my eyes like the answer is important.

I turn to watch the forest, the trees that have lived longer than all of us. I've always wondered if books are how trees talk, how they pass on their tales. "Yes, if you end up dead."

"Hmm. I think sacrificing your life can be the most romantic thing you can do for someone you love." We will have to agree to disagree on that one. Daegan changes the subject so easily that I think he has been trained in the art of conversation among other kingly duties. "What other books have you read?"

I tell him about the others that Mazzis gave me this week. A classic. A fantasy book, a book on gardening and vegetation, which he was adamant about me learning, and another one on categorising the library. It's helping me learn the library system, and I'm kind of getting my head around where all the different sections are now and where to retrieve books for the orders that come in. Otherwise, I end up running all over the place, still getting lost and having to ask Catherine to help me. She doesn't seem to mind, but I would like to be able to do it on my own. He smiles at me when I'm done. "It suits you, working there. You seem happier since you got here."

Life as anything but a slave is going to be happy for me. It cost me the world to be free, and I won't give it up. Giving up would be an insult to Kyrell's memory, and I won't do that to his ghost. I don't want to admit that some part of me has liked the isolation of the library, the quietness in my room in the Moon Dynasty. For so many years, being alone was always

shadowed by the worry of when he would want me, when he would bite me, and if he would break any of my bones if he didn't like the way I smiled or the way I braided my hair that day. Being here, it reminds me of when I was younger and felt safe with my mother, and nothing hurt me.

I have to admit I've begun to like training with Ziven, how my body already feels stronger, how in only three days, I'm running faster. I feel like my body was itching to do more, to run faster, and I didn't really see him much outside of the training. He spends a good hour of the lesson flipping me over in the air and making me land on my back, just to prove that I'm really useless at attacking him. Apparently, I'm holding back...what, I don't know. We've worked on more core strength training now, and I do feel stronger for it. "What about the book I gave you? I noticed that you left it behind in the library cart."

I blink in surprise. How did he notice that? "Well, I did think about taking it back with me to the Moon Dynasty, but it was a gift from you, and I think Ziven is bitter enough to rip it apart if he saw it. Catherine said I could leave things in my cart, so I did. I've been reading bits of it here and there on my lunch. It's getting a bit sad now. I feel like this woman had an arranged marriage to a Dawn Dynasty prince, and she didn't love him."

"Yeah, that's right. I didn't read further than page twelve," he explains.

"But she had a relationship with the sun and moon. I think she means the princes or kings of the Sun and Moon Dynasty, if I had to guess." I sigh. "But she is so cryptic about them, I'm not sure. The more I read, it's like a puzzle. I hope it has a good ending."

"Maybe that's true, but I don't think she had a relationship with both of them. Maybe just one of them," he replies rather quickly.

"I don't know, but she just feels like she's trapped and sad. I imagine it's what an arranged marriage would be like." I smile at him, climbing to my feet and walking to the glass. "Romance in books is always like a fairy tale, like the tales my mother used to tell me of how she met and fell in love with my father. He was powerborn, and she is lessborn. It's not allowed, but she said it was love at first sight for my father. He was a warrior, apparently, and he was assigned to her district. My mother hadn't borne any children by

the age of twenty-eight, which is seen as being defective, and they were going to send her to the workers. He made sure she could stay, and he lied for her. They fell in love, and I was her thirtieth birth year gift.”

“They were entwined mates, perhaps,” Daegan suggests, stopping at my side. He watches the forest with me. “That’s how it is for entwined mates. They are drawn to each other, but for males, it is love at first sight. They can’t touch anyone else, even think of anyone else, until their mate accepts or rejects the bond.”

“Maybe,” I whisper. It would make sense why they risked so much to be together.

He leans into me, tucking my braid behind my ear. “Story.” My name is softly spoken, and I turn to look at him just as he kisses me. I freeze as his lips softly brush mine before I can even register that he is kissing me. His lips are soft, gentle, as he weaves his hand into my hair, but he never pushes the kiss too far. He waits for me to react, to kiss him back, and I do after a second. He even tastes like sunlight and peppermint. There’s never anything more than a sweet kiss before he breaks away. “I’m sorry if I surprised you. I’ve just wanted to kiss you since I met you, Story. There’s something about you, I just...” He pauses. “I like you. That’s what I wanted to say. I make speeches all day long, and you make me stumble on my words.” My lips tilt up as I press my fingers to them. “I seem to want to talk to you for hours. There’s no one else like that in my life.”

I’m a bit speechless. “I wasn’t expecting that.” The kiss, it felt, I don’t know how it felt. He’s the second person that’s ever kissed me in my life. The first one, I ended up craving in the end and hating myself for it. But this was a kiss, a kiss that I could have rejected, a kiss that I could have said no to, and it was gentle and sweet. It’s not something I’ve ever experienced before. “It’s okay, I like you too.”

He smiles so brightly that I almost feel warm, like sunlight glowing over me. Daegan takes my hand, linking our fingers, and he walks me back down to our rooms. Before I go in, he goes to kiss me again, only a gentle brush. “We have plenty of time together, after tomorrow, and when the Decidere is done. You’ll need all the rest for tomorrow you can get, so I will leave you here. I’m sure it will be your last one; not many make it past this

point and they turn back. You will know when you can't go further. Thank you for a wonderful night, Story.”

“Thank you, Daegan. See you tomorrow.” He walks into his room as I go to mine, leaning on the door when it is closed. As I glance at my bed, the moonlight is shining through the window and onto my bed. Onto the book he gave me. It's not in my cart anymore. Daegan must have had someone bring it back for me and leave it here. I pick the book up, lying back on the bed and looking at the moon outside. My first kiss, I felt like a silly teenager who didn't know what I was doing, and my second kiss...it felt like I could finally be safe.

But not even Daegan can protect me from the dragons and the Decidere tomorrow.

## Chapter Twelve

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*Page Twelve.*

*When I'm flying through the air, it doesn't matter if it's the night or the day...I am free. For a moment in time, I don't belong to anyone but my dragon, and it makes the Decidere worth every tortured second.*

**“H**appy birth year, little Tory!” Kyrell shouts, coming into the room, shutting the door behind him. His helmet is tucked under his one arm, and in the other is a small chocolate cake with a single candle on top, the fire flickering brightly in the darkness. It's noon, and I haven't done anything but crawl back into my bed to rot after the maids changed me.

I climb off my bed, trying to match his smile as I blow it out. It's not his fault. None of this is his fault—it's mine. The smoke drifts up in the air between us, but it does nothing to dim the smile on Kyrell's face. “You shouldn't have got me a cake. And little? I might be shorter than you, but not by much.”

A lot, actually. Being short doesn't mean little though.

*“Well, you rarely celebrate your birth year. You’re twenty years old. That’s amazing and you should celebrate it.” I frown at him, and he winces. “Maybe not all of today can be a celebration, though. I will bring you wine and snacks when it’s over. This year won’t be like the last one.”*

*Or the one before that. The prince always takes care to plan a party for my birth year, and it’s always a horror show.*

*I brush my hands down the silky red dress that I’m wearing as it falls from my shoulders all the way to the floor. The king is coming here today, the first time in all the years I’ve been here, and finally my birth year might not be as terrible as it usually is. I can’t help the sour tang in the back of my throat that lingers every time I see a birth year cake and it reminds me of my mother. It’s been so many years since I’ve seen or heard from her...and I dare not say her name in this castle. If the prince knew she was alive...I shiver. He would bring her here and use her to make me obey him without beating me. Not that I fight him very much anymore.*

*There are still things he hasn’t made me do and one line I never want to cross. I will never, ever kill someone. Several of the nobles regularly visit to have fun with the prince, but the king and queen don’t travel much. I’ve met one of the princesses and wished I hadn’t. The queen isn’t coming on this trip, and I’m thankful for that, with the rumours I’ve heard. Kyrell lowers his voice. “I heard the king’s coming to visit to see the renovations to the city he’s made. Noble Lewin whispered it to me last night.”*

*At least one of us gets to fall in love and spend their nights in the arms of someone they choose. Kyrell met a high up noble called Lewin at one of the balls, and he has been regularly visiting him for two years now. Kyrell told me he loves him, and I can’t imagine how it’s possible to ever love a vampyre. It’s the only thing we don’t agree on.*

*The prince never tells me about things that happen outside the castle, and I don’t dare ask. Today I have a task from the prince that doesn’t involve being trapped in these few rooms for his enjoyment. I have to keep the king’s favourite busy and amused. I get to meet someone new. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, because once, that would have been exciting, but now I feel nothing. “Interesting. Do you know what renovations are going on in the city?”*

*He shakes his head. "I'm going to ask around though." He stops whispering. "Are you looking forward to meeting the king's favourite? You two will have things in common."*

*"I have to amuse her and show her around," I mutter. "How exactly do I do that? There's nothing in this castle to keep anybody amused."*

*He laughs. "I'm sure she's nice and you'll figure it out. Surprisingly to you, most people like you when they meet you, little Tory. You're nice, you know."*

*"Am I?" I frown.*

*He never says anything but the truth. "Yes, when you're not struggling to find a reason to live. You're fighting and I'm proud of you. You're still here and that is amazing." I wince. Struggling is a light word for the many attempts that I've made to leave this place, this world. The times where the darkness truly crept up on me and made it feel like I was drowning in the thin air. Like the walls were caving in and there was nothing left for me in this world, no light and nothing worth it. He is proud of me. For what, not jumping from the window and dying?*

*The prince comes into the room many moments later, kissing me deeply and possessively, but I feel nothing but the cold of his touch. He is excited, practically shaking with it. "My father's just arrived. I will send his favourite up here to you. Her name is Avaluna." He kisses my cheek. "Be nice and I will reward you."*

*I shiver as he walks off, Kyrell leaving the doors open as he follows him out, and I nervously wait. It feels like hours later before a fae woman walks in. She has long black hair, and she is absolutely beautiful—stunning even. She's shorter than me and she instantly reminds me of the pixies from the tales that my mum used to tell me sometimes. Tiny, pretty little creatures that lived in the trees of the forest and caused mayhem when they got bored. She's slender but curvy in her red dress, and there's a spark in her blue eyes. She immediately lowers her head, her silky hair falling over her slender shoulders. "It's a pleasure to meet you, favourite Story Dehana."*

*I bow my head back to her. "Same. I'm afraid I'm not sure exactly what we should do today. I was told to keep you amused in the castle, but unless you*

*like grey stone walls and paintings of castles that are on the walls of the castle, there really isn't much here."*

*She laughs and smiles so big her cheeks crease with the movement. "Your company would be more than I need. Perhaps gardens?" She walks to my window, looking over the thick forest that spreads to the city in the distance. "I like visiting all of the gardens of the places we travel. It's strange to me how certain flowers, trees and plants grow so differently in the cities, but they share the same name. Are there any here?"*

*I think of the garden where I met Emyr. "Yes, but there's a bit of a peculiar way to get into it."*

*Her eyes flash with interest. "How?"*

*I find myself smiling at this stranger, liking her already. Maybe because she is someone new, maybe because her life mirrors mine. I walk her downstairs, through the kitchen, and people move aside, many of them bowing their heads. I quickly learn the fae workers do not talk to the blood slaves here, and no matter how many times I've tried to speak to them, they never say a word. If I didn't have Kyrell, I would talk to no one but the prince. Fear flashes in their eyes enough that I stopped trying to ask them questions, begging them to say a word.*

*I lead her into the small room at the back of the kitchen, flashes of memories of Emyr ripping across my mind. Opening the window, I step out onto the ledge. The wind is warm as it blows my cloak around my legs, and Avaluna looks at me in horror. "I didn't come here to jump out of a window with you, crazy woman."*

*"I'm not asking you to jump out a window with me. Come on, I'll show you the gardens." I might be mad for this, knowing if she falls that I might as well jump with her. She nervously looks at me, but she takes my hand and climbs out of the window with me. We walk round the edge, and I jump down into the garden. It's as beautiful as the first time I came here, and I haven't come back since. I should have done. She follows right after me, her big eyes widening as she takes in the garden. "Wow, this place is beautiful. You were right, Story. How many other secrets do you have?"*

*"None. I'm trapped here." My answer echoes between us, my voice hollow.*



*She sighs. "You've given up, haven't you? I've met so many blood slaves that share that look in your eyes, the numbness, the feeling that life isn't worth fighting for. Isn't there some part of this life you like?" Maybe she is insane. "I mean, trust me, being trapped in the protection of the royals is better than out there. Where I came from...this life is better."*

*She isn't convincing me. "Where exactly is that?"*

*"The Valin lands of the south," she tells me. "It's where I get this beautiful tan from. The king spends most of his time there, but I go with him on all of his travels. He doesn't like me out of his sight."*

*The sunlight shines into her hair, and it flashes red, shimmering against the black. "It's bad there. I mean, we have districts with breeding, workers, and the blood slaves like here, but it's worse. So much worse. Being fae...it's a curse there."*

*I clear my throat. Being a fae is a curse for anyone born this way in this world. "What's wrong with you that you came to be a blood slave?"*

*She blinks at my blunt question, and for a moment I remember that was rude. "Nothing. I was born into the workers, but my parents died when I was really young. I was taken to the orphanages of the workers and..." She pauses. "When I was ten, the king came. I don't know why he came, what he was looking for exactly, but he took one look at me, clicked his fingers, and I was taken to the palace. He saved me, treated me well, and I will be forever thankful. I didn't see him again till I was fifteen, and then he made it very clear that I was his favourite, and that was the end of that. He used to have several favourites, but he has never taken another after me. We get along so well; I might even call it love."*

*Saved her? Love? How bad could it have been for her to truly believe he saved her for this life? I can't get the words out of my mouth for a second. "How old are you now?"*

*"Twenty. Now tell me your life tale so we might be even and call each other friends," she asks. I tell her my story, how similar to mine hers is, but a bit different. "Is your mother still alive?"*

*“My mother still lives, but I’ve not been able to speak to her since I was fourteen.” Immediately I regret the words out of my mouth. This isn’t a friend of mine, this isn’t Kyrell. She could tell the prince and all the years I’ve spent protecting her would be for nothing. The last letter I had, I still see those words written across the paper again and again, wishing that I could know more of them. Wishing I could read them one more time, and now I might have just killed her.*

*“You are brave, Story Dehana, and I will keep your secret. I have a secret for you in return to show we are friends. I have a sister and I make sure the king never sees her in the castle,” she whispers and my heart pounds. I don’t have a choice but to trust her. “I don’t know if we will ever see each other again, but I am glad to have met you. I’m sure when I get older, my king will get bored with me and find someone else. The favourite before me, she only lived till she was twenty-eight, according to some of the workers in the castles. I won’t live that long if the queen ever gets that annoyed with me. I’ve made a plan so my sister will be safe, and that’s all that matters in the end. Keeping our family safe.” I smile tightly at her even as she casually talks about dying. It wouldn’t just be death; it would be brutally murdered by a vampyre king. Killed by the man she claims loves her.*

*I touch the bark of the tree nearest me. “At least the prince doesn’t have a fiancée or princess to get jealous of me.”*

*“He’s had many options, you know,” she tells me. Something I didn’t know. “I mean, I’ve seen them, but he rejects every single one. He has no interest in any of them. Much to his father’s annoyance.”*

*We both stop by a bunch of yellow flowers. The petals are square, and in the centre of each flower is a green diamond-shaped dot. “I’m surprised by that. The way he speaks of his father, I thought he would do anything he asked.”*

*She laughs. “He usually does. He is the heir, the only male heir that matters to the king, and he wants him to finally settle down, to have many children, to find a female vampyre worthy.”*

*I watch her, how happy she seems to be. “Are you really happy with your life? Is this all you want?”*

*She turns on me, touching her arm, which is covered in bite marks. They litter her skin, from her neck down, so many visible compared to me. “You’ve never left this city, Story. Dying as a blood slave to the king is an honour and a good life compared to the majority of the fae. Working until your bones all break or your heart gives in, or being on your back in the breeding communities until childbirth eventually takes you...how is that better?” She shakes her head at me. “I love the king, and he is kind to me when he can be.”*

*Love? That’s an odd word for her to say when she is speaking about the vampyre who bites, feeds, and uses her until someone new catches his attention. I know I haven’t seen the world and how bad it might be out there, but this isn’t a life to be honoured and wanted. I show her the rest of the gardens before we sit down in the grass, looking at the sparkling sun above. I keep my voice quiet so nobody can hear us. “Do you know why the king is here?”*

*“He never talks about this city, and he talks a lot, all the time, but never really mentions what he’s here for,” she admits, biting on her lip. “But one evening, the queen came to his rooms. I hid with the workers, like I always do when she is near, and I overheard them argue about this city. I only heard that there’s something here, particularly in this land, that they’re looking for. A weapon. She said it would change everything and it wasn’t worth the risk. The king disagreed and told her to get out.”*

*“What weapon? Did they say what it was?” I question.*

*She shakes her head. “No, he had other fae in his room, and he killed them all for overhearing. He only kept me alive and told me to forget what I heard.”*

*But she didn’t, and she told me. The prince kills his blood slaves regularly in front of me, too. It’s not something that’s new, but every single time, I wish I could save them—I never can. He only keeps me alive, too. “Why would they need a weapon? There’s nothing in this world that could stop them.”*

*She looks me dead in the eye, and for a moment, she looks defiant. “Isn’t that the perfect question? Keep asking, keep questioning. For us, it is the*

*only way we can help our people. It will help you too. It might make you want to live.”*

The memory fades away as I get down the steps in front of the pathway towards the Decidere. I never did see her again. I don't know if she's the king's favourite anymore, but I hope so. She was the closest thing to an actual female friend that I ever had before Catherine. I find Catherine in the crowd, after leaving Daegan, and stand at her side. There are considerably fewer of us here for the second test, and I try not to think about what happened to the others. I turn around when someone touches my shoulder, surprised to see Calix there. He grins at me, and at his side are the twin guards from the Moon Dynasty. “Good luck today. I hope we will ride our dragons through the ground tunnels when this is over.”

One of the twins elbows him. “Introduce us, or we just look like we're guarding you.”

I smile as Calix winks at me. “Maybe I need protection from—”

“Calix,” one of them terrifyingly hisses.

Calix rightfully looks concerned and turns to me. “This is Estrid and Astrid, twins and guards of the Moon Dynasty.”

“That's our brother over there.” She points at the guy that pushed me over the bridge.

I narrow my eyes at his back. “I can't say we're friends.”

Astrid winces, while the other one smiles. Calix just shakes his head at them both. “They were coming over here to wish you good luck, and somehow they managed to freak you out. That sums up the twins.” His eyes drift over my shoulder, and I follow them just for a second to see him staring at Etena. She's at Daegan's side, and they're talking quietly between each other. She looks over like she can sense his stare, and for a second, they just seem to look at each other like there isn't anyone else here before she sharply turns away. He doesn't stop staring for a few seconds before he looks down at me. “Good luck today.”

Stupidly, my eyes are searching in the Moon Dynasty group for their king. “You too. Where's Ziven?”

Calix smirks. “Our king is not here. He had something he had to do, but he sent me.” I nod once and Calix lowers his voice. “Don’t die, I want to see you beat Ziven in training in the future for all the times he has been a dick.”

I chuckle as he leaves, surprised he just called his king a dick. I mean, he is, but I wasn’t expecting him to say it. He goes back over to the rest of the ones that I barely know the names of, yet I’ve sat around and eaten with them for dinner. If I survive this, maybe Ziven won’t lock me in a room for the entire three days next time. I might actually get to speak to some of them. Catherine stays at my side, her shoulder nearly touching mine. “You seem to have made friends in the Moon Dynasty.”

“I don’t know if *friends* is a good title for it yet.” I smile at her. “Good luck today. I know you’ll do great.”

“So will you,” she answers, and I notice her hands shaking. I don’t know how I’m not as scared as she is. She follows my gaze, and I quickly avert my eyes. “I don’t know how I got through the first Decidere. I’m terrible at training. No matter how much I do, I just never seem to lose my curves. The only thing I’m good at is a bow and arrow. Considering my last one didn’t have those in there, I barely got through.” She gasps. “Shit, I shouldn’t have spoken about it. I probably just cursed myself for the next round.”

“You’re okay, Cath. You didn’t tell me anything.”

“Oh, my deities, you just gave me a nickname. Does that mean we are best friends now?” She sounds so genuine and excited, even as the title *best friend* sinks my heart a little. I can’t give that title to anyone else. It belonged to my best friend who saved my life.

Thankfully, Daegan walks in front of the doors, a light show flashing above our heads to gain attention. “There’s no speech this time. You do not need any more words to prepare you. May the dragons and deities judge you well.”

He looks at me for a fraction of a second, a tic in his jaw pulsing, and the look in his eyes makes me think he wants to stop me from going in there, but he steps aside. The doors click open, and everyone rushes forward like

soldiers heading to the front lines. I stay at Catherine's side, knowing I have to help her. "Come with me."

She frowns my way, but she nods once. I get to the door first, and I glance back through the chaos to make sure Catherine is right behind me. Dragons' roars echo, sensing us in their space, and I don't linger. My shoes clap on the ground as I run to the left, taking Catherine with me straight towards the steps that lie away from the crowd. There are two dragons hovering, flying in the air above the pillars across the bridge, and they don't waste time sending cascades of fire down on the group rushing across the bridge. Catherine looks at me in surprise as we start running down the steps, down and down, straight to the massive lake. Breathless, we both pause. "How did you know this was here?"

"Dumb luck," I breathlessly mutter back, resting my hands on my knees. My breath halts in the back of my throat when I see the dragon. At the edge of the pillars, there's a dragon curled up. It's asleep, its stone body crackling with every breath, its giant wings spread out in front of the pillars.

Catherine is still, and I don't need to ask if she has seen it. "We need to get past it."

I gulp. "Without waking it up might be a good idea." Although it's pointless to say that out loud, as we both know it. I see the red light in the distance, deep in the pillars, calling to me. Catherine throws her head that way, too. But her gaze drifts further to the left. She must see something, too. "Out of curiosity, what colour do you see?"

She frowns. "Yellow, like sunlight. Everyone sees yellow." I don't dare tell her that there isn't an ounce of yellow in mine, that it's pure, blazing red. I'm silent as we manage to make our way past the dragon, across the cracked wing, and just as we get in the pillars, I hear it. I turn around and see the dragon climbing to its feet, opening its massive mouth, and fire spreads out of it in thick flames. I scream, jumping behind a pillar just as it blazes past me, rows of it dancing between the stone. Flames burn the sides of my boots, my arm and leg, and it takes everything in me not to scream. I take a second to breathe through the pain before I run. I charge down the pillars, feeling the heat at my back, seeing Catherine running too, not far from me. Our eyes meet for a second, and I nod at her. Don't die.

I throw myself at the red light of the pillar, barely seeing the dragon symbol before I fall straight through it and land face-first in a bed of roses. I pick up a petal off my face as I roll over, thorns cutting into the backs of my arms and the burns on my legs.

I wince as I stand and look around me. There's nothing but empty fields as far as I can see, and in front of me is a path. Not a path. It's too big to be a path, but more like a racing track for horses. Rows of stripes line it for miles, and in the far distance, there's a cliff face. A single cliff of ragged stone reaching far up into the sky, and on the edge of it is a wooden shack that's on fire. A scream echoes to me as the front wall of the shack falls away straight towards the end of the track.

My blood goes still when I see where the scream came from. There's a little girl in the room. I can only see her red hair. She's curled around herself as she screams for help repeatedly. I don't know how I'm going to get up there, or how I'm really going to help her when I get there, but I take off without a second thought. I only get so far before I come across a big empty stretch of water, and inside, there are creatures swimming around fast, their powerful bodies slithering through the water. Every so often I catch a flash of teeth, sharp enough to make me hesitate. "Deities, dragons, whoever designed this is mad!"

I don't know if anyone is listening to me. Turning back, I see the bed of roses and the pillar I came in on waiting for me. I can go back. This is a test of choice, and if I go back, I will have the one dragon mark to show for it. The girl screams again, and her scream is familiarly terrified. I've been that scared before, screamed like that more than once. I can't leave her, even if this might not be real...it could be.

*Think, Story.* If I go in that water, whatever these creatures are will very likely rip me apart. I search around the edge of the water to see that the one side has stones. Circular stones, rows of them, but they're quite far apart. Each jump is going to be difficult. If I fall... I can't fall.

I glance at the girl screaming. This is the test. If I fail it, that girl could die, and I'm not a coward. She could be real for all I know. I don't know who she is, but she could be. With every bit of strength I've got left, I force my

legs to move. I get to the first stone and jump onto it. The creatures come closer, sensing me, wrapping tightly around the stones, waiting.

I ignore them, will myself to pretend they don't exist, and jump to the next one. I'm absolutely terrified as I go from one to the other, and just as I'm second to the last, my foot slips. My legs fall straight into the water as I cling to the stone, digging my nails into the grooves. A scream wrenches out of my throat as one of them bites into my thigh, tearing at my skin with its long teeth. I pull myself up on the ledge, screaming as I yank the silky creature off me. It kind of looks like an eel but with razor-sharp teeth. I throw it back in the water and wince at the state of my leg. There's a huge bite mark there, four puncture holes, deep and bleeding everywhere. It is oozing some yellow kind of fluid out of it—poison, maybe. I need to move quickly before the poison sets in. Everything is spinning as I manage to stand, trying not to put too much weight on my bad leg. One stone left. Just two jumps and I'm done for now.

The girl's screams make my heart beat faster and give me enough courage to jump. I stumble on the stone, barely catching myself before I fall straight off the other side. Before I can talk myself out of it, I run and jump off the stone to the other side, landing harshly on my knees. A jolt of pain radiates through my leg, and the entire world spins.

Once the spinning has stopped, I dizzily stand and begin making my way down the path. The path is sloped up and down hills, and I drag my leg as I try to run. Going down them is quite easy; up is another thing altogether. I'm sweating from head to toe as I get to another clearing and pause. There's nothing but an empty gap between two cliff walls, and three pieces of long rope hanging between it. I glance at the sky. "You've got to be kidding. I don't like heights!"

The girl is still shouting, screaming for help, and I glance up to see there's a metal ladder to the room at the top. If I can climb the stone wall, I can get to her and then get back down. It'll be safe. This can't stop me. I grab the rope. I can do this. Just jump across. Just jump across.

For a moment, I can't make my feet move through the pounding fear. I can't manage to get them to move at all as my hands freeze on the rope. What would Kyrell tell me to do? He would laugh, tell me to fucking jump and



live a little. He would be right, of course. Eventually, I tell myself I've got to do it, I've got to move. I pull the rope back as far as I can before I run and jump. My hands slip down the rope as my feet take off, and I scream all the way across as I barely manage to hold on to it before I slam onto the other side. Breathlessly, I climb to my feet.

"I did it!" I whisper to myself, pride burning through my chest. It only lasts a second as the world spins and dark spots prick my vision. I'm running out of time. Climbing is not exactly my forte, but I can manage to do it. Still, I stop at the bottom of the cliff and look up. Give me strength, deities. Show me how to do this. The rocks are jagged enough that I easily find bits to hold onto as I pull myself up, higher and higher, and I don't dare let myself look down. Rocks cut into my trousers as I climb, using the small ledges to get higher.

Sweat is dripping off me, down my face, my cheeks and back, by the time I get halfway. The ladder is swaying as I look up, or maybe it's my vision. Either way, I feel terrible. I can't stop. I'm breathing heavily by the time I manage to pull myself to the ladder and climb onto the bottom step, clinging to the bars. Keep going. I have to keep going before I pass out. The ladder is metal, and the higher I go up, the warmer the bars turn until they are uncomfortably hot to touch. It doesn't burn my hands, but it won't be long before it does. I manage to climb onto the top step to look inside the wooden room, at the little girl, who looks up at me. I pause.

She looks just like I did as a child. Long red hair, black tips, and a white dress that is now covered in ash. "You came for me. You came for me when it's terrifying to do so?"

"Yes," I breathe, climbing into the room. How is this possible? "I came for you. Come on, we need to go."

"I'm scared." Her cry echoes to me as I carefully walk across the burning planks of flooring.

"It's okay to be scared, just...you have to walk through it and know there is something better on the other side. A room that isn't burning down, and it is standing on its own," I whisper, offering her my hand. She looks right into my eyes with eyes that mirror my own before she stands up and takes my

hand. The second her hand touches mine, she fades away into nothing, and the flames burn high into the surrounding sky, blocking the ladder off. I fall to my knees, everything swaying and blurring within seconds.

I don't remember passing out, but I must have, because the next thing I'm aware of is water flooding my lungs. I cough, lifting my head out of the water and pushing on the rocks under my feet to stand in it. I'm not alone. I see someone watching me from the steps.

A tall, massive man. He is drenched in water. It drips on the stone as we stare at each other. I can't tell who it is—it's too dark, and a hood covers his face. He lifts his hand, and my eyes widen as a stone dragon swoops across the air over my head, pebbles falling off its enormous body into the water, and it heads straight into the man, who effortlessly jumps onto its back before it takes off into the cavern. Whoever that was, I think he just saved my life.

## Chapter Thirteen

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*Page Thirteen.*

*The wedding is tomorrow, and neither of them has said a word to stop it. Has the sun given up on me, his lover? Has the moon finally seen we are more than friends?*

*Is loving them both my true weakness?*

“**Y**ou look pale today.”

Calix keeps walking, leading me up the steps towards the training room as a grey pre-dawn light shines down onto us while he repeats his statement again. The oil lanterns flicker ever so softly, and this early, all I can smell is the bread that is being baked for breakfast, along with the alluring scents of everything else cooking in the kitchens below.

Calix clears his throat and I look up at the tall man. He is in dark brown clothing this morning, and some contraption is swung around his shoulder that is covered in daggers. “I mean, you usually look a little pale, but are you alright?”

He's noticed. I need to pray Ziven doesn't. "I'm fine." I square my shoulders to appear stronger, even if I'm anything but that right now. I was thankful when Ziven stormed me straight from the library yesterday into my room where food was already waiting for me, and he left me in there all night. My stomach was killing me, the cramps unbearable, and it didn't let up. I don't think I've slept at all, but it's like this every time I get my monthlies. Thankfully, they only come once every six months. Which isn't typical for fae, who have them every month, hence the name, but nothing about my body is normal in that regard.

A light cramp radiates from my lower stomach, and I barely wince. I'm so used to them, and this is mild. The worst cramps feel like I'm being stabbed repeatedly in the stomach, and sometimes they get bad enough that I pass out. There's no way to make it stop, not without a healer.

The prince used to have a healer on standby for me, dead on every six months because usually it's bad enough that Kyrell needed more help. Almost like he could sense I was going to get ill. He would be there to heal me with Kyrell, and the prince would go away while I was sick. He couldn't stand to be around me suffering and bleeding in a way he didn't enjoy.

I just have to get through training this morning, and then I'll be back in my room. Hopefully, it's not as bad as it usually is. A fresh wave of painful cramps slashes through my stomach, making my knees feel weak when I get to the top step. I've got pads on—several of them. I don't know who well equipped the bathroom for fae women, but it was definitely done well. It'll be enough to get me through.

Calix frowns at me when I take a moment to lean on the staircase before straightening up and walking with him into the training area. I'm glad it's him who is escorting me and not Sterling like last week. I got the feeling she really didn't like me. I'm not sure if Calix does like me, for that matter, but the scary man is kind. I can tell from his eyes, from how playful he is, but despite that, I wouldn't want to cross him. One of his hands alone could crush me. Ziven is waiting by the start of the running track as we walk in, his thick muscles on show in a short-sleeved black shirt. Calix looks between us. "Ziven, maybe—"

I interrupt him. “Thank you for walking me here, Calix.” Calix looks like he wants to say something more, but he doesn’t. He snaps his mouth shut and walks away to the twins, who are practice training. There is another man with them who I don’t know, his head shaved, and he looks terrifying until he laughs as something Calix says. Another name to learn. I turn back to Ziven, who is stretching. A slip of skin shows above the waistband of his trousers when he does that, and my eyes drop to it for a moment, a shiver shaking down my spine. I make sure my tone is nothing but formal. “Good morning, King Ziven.”

“Finally, you’ve learnt how to be polite.” After his sarcastic remark in place of a morning greeting, he starts running, expecting me to follow. It’s torture, more than usual. I’m breathless after only fifteen minutes of the track. After twenty minutes, I can barely keep up to do a slow jog. By the time I’ve got around the whole track, Ziven is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, and he’s frowning at me as I finally get over the finish line. Not that him frowning at me is anything new, but he looks seriously pissed. “Did your three days with Daegan consist of nothing more than dates in the greenhouse and learning how to be lazy?”

His snarl makes my hands shake, but I flatten them on my thighs. “No.”

He walks right up to me, into my space, like he enjoys towering over me. I’d bet he does. “Then why the fuck are you running like a snail who has no interest in winning the race?” I stare up at him, refusing to give an inch, refusing to tell him anything. He’ll just use my weakness against me. It’s exactly the kind of thing he does. Ziven shakes his head in disappointment. “On the mat, Storm.”

“Can I—”

“Mat! Now!” he barks at me. Hating conflict of any kind, I don’t say anything as I walk over to the mat after him. He shoves a spear at me this time. The heavy metal helps me stand a minute longer as the cramps get worse. They usually stop. They have to stop. Ziven pushes his hand into my spine. “Don’t lean on it. Stand straight and keep the spear at your side.”

It’s nearly twice the size of me and very heavy. I struggle to move it to my side without dropping it onto my toes. It doesn’t help that everything is

spinning in front of my eyes and the pain is nearly unbearable. “I’m going to drop it. What’s the point of this?”

“To find the weapon that suits you,” Ziven begins, his tone nothing short of royally pissed with me. “Spear, daggers, sword, bows, and anything else I deem fit to get you trained on. I won’t have you embarrassing my dynasty by failing in every weapon training. You are fae and under my rule, and for now, that means you do as I fucking tell you.”

I’m half tempted to try to drop the spear into his stupid head, but he walks away to the twins, coming back with one of them a moment later. Astrid has nothing but a black crop top and low-cut leggings draped across her skin, so tight they do little to hide anything. I can’t help the envy that bubbles in my throat at how flawless her skin is. Not a single scar or mark anywhere I can see. I barely remember what my skin looked like before the bites. “Have you come to watch my failure with a spear?”

She matches Ziven’s frown. I’m sure he has compulsory lessons made up in his dynasty on how to scowl in the proper way at least once a week. “If I were you, I’d be learning how to defend yourself quickly.”

“From what?” I barely get the words out before she is in front of me, and Astrid moved so fast I didn’t see her until her fist is slamming into my cheek and I stumble back, seeing stars. My grip on the spear is all that holds me up.

Tears burn in my eyes as I drag the spear with me, and Astrid sighs, looking over her shoulder at Ziven. “This is cruel. I’m not beating her for the entire lesson, Ziv.”

His tone is icy cold. “She can defend herself. She is hiding it. Again.”

I hold in a scream as she goes to hit me, narrowly missing as I move out of the way, some of Ziven’s defence training kicking in. He taught me how to dodge, and if it was any other day, I might be good enough to at least avoid her. The spear drops to my feet as her leg swings straight towards me and hits me in the back. I stumble forward, the pain in my stomach so much worse, and I cry out as I fall to the ground. Astrid doesn’t move. “I didn’t hit you that hard. Get up. You’re fae, you can defend against this!”

“I can’t,” I gasp, clutching my stomach. The cramping radiates down my legs, up my spine, and tears freely fall from my cheeks.

I barely notice Ziven crouching in front of me until he grabs my chin, turning my face to his. I wait for him to shout at me, to drag me to my feet, but it doesn’t happen. His eyes glow like the moon, bright in the endless darkness that is my life. He runs the end of his finger down my cheek, collecting my tears before smearing them between his thumb and finger. “Storm,” he begins, tense and lacking of anything good. “What is wrong with you?”

I barely get a word out to him before everything spins and I can’t keep my eyes open anymore. It feels like seconds pass before waking up, only to see Ruelle standing over me as I lie in my bed. Her eyes are glowing a bright silver, no pupil to be seen in the light. The dragon markings on her hands are glowing silver too, and the light has flooded the bedroom. Her gravelly, kind voice echoes in my ears. “I’m a healer, Story. Rest.”

My heart races. *A healer.* She is going to know what is wrong with me and tell Ziven how weak I am. “You’re coming round and you’re safe. Calm down, I will not hurt you. No one in this room will.” He will. “Why didn’t you mention to anyone that it’s your monthlies and you have an illness that makes them incredibly worse?”

My voice is hoarse. “I didn’t want to be seen as weak.”

“I don’t know how you managed to stand, let alone run a track and fight in this state. I can feel your pain, silly girl.” Something about her ranting makes me smile. She reminds me of my mother for a second, telling me I have to slow down sometimes. I have to rest. She shakes her head at me. “I’m confused by your pain. It’s not because you’re in...” She pauses and blinks, the light disappearing from her eyes but her dragon markings still glowing, the pain still numb. “Explain to me what they told you of this illness. Was it done to you? I can feel it. It marks even your blood.”

I glance over in the corner of the room at Ziven. His arms are crossed tightly as he leans against the wall, his face completely impassive. I didn’t see him there, and my mouth goes dry. “I’m not leaving. Talk.”

For a second, I feel like I'm hearing him wanting to know if I'm okay, that he is remotely interested in my well-being, before I mentally kick myself. He calls me a traitor. He tried to kill me, and we are enemies. He just wants another thing to hold against me, and there isn't anything I can do about it. Part of me knew I couldn't hide this forever. It's my curse, and it chases me. "My mother was a lessborn fae, someone without powers, and my father was a powerborn fae, someone with powers. They weren't meant to have a relationship. It's not against any law, but it's frowned upon, and it makes everything complicated. Children between the two are highly frowned upon because they're usually sick. I was found out to be sick when I went to be chosen for the districts."

"When was that?" Ruelle questions, moving to sit on the end of the bed.

I fiddle with the sheets. "You're selected when you're fourteen for one of the three districts."

"Tell me more as I finish healing what I can," she asks. As her magic washes over me, I tell her about the sorting and about the three districts you can be sent into. She doesn't show any reaction, but she winces every so often. I've never seen magic like hers. The bright silver colour she's emitting is really dazzling to stare at. Healing magic has always been orange, like the bright fruits grown on the trees in summer. Any other magic I've seen outside this place is like Daegan's, a burning yellow. "They said it was a problem with my ovaries and uterus. That it attacks me when I have my monthlies and I won't be able to have children because of it. I admit, I tend to struggle. The pain is awful, and I lose more blood than most people do. I usually just get on with it, but then I've never had training."

"I would be screaming if I was in the amount of pain you are in. Not 'get on with it.'" She looks me dead in the eye. "I didn't know what to make of you when we met. You are very interesting."

"She is trouble," Ziven mutters, but we both hear him. Ruelle smiles.

"Carry on," she urges.

"Sometimes I need healers, not all of the time. Thankfully, my monthlies only come once every six months, not regularly like most fae. It's caused by this affliction I have." The light fades from her markings, and I notice her



magic drop from the air, from my body. She is good. I don't think any healer has ever made the pain turn from terrible to a simple ache.

Ruelle clamps her hands together. "I've never heard of this illness or treated it." She looks over her shoulder at Ziven. Whatever he sees in her face makes a tic appear in his jaw. "I've been a healer for a long time, girl, and I feel sorry for you. When you need me, you better call. I will come to you, in the Sun or Moon Dynasty. It does not matter." She shakes her head. "And if I hear of you pretending to be fine and going to training, I will personally be very offended."

"Offending Ruelle is a deadly mistake," Ziven murmurs. *A joke from the king of grumpy?*

Ruelle smiles and touches my hand. "Rest. I'll be back later, but for now, you seem well enough to get some sleep. When you were passed out, I changed your clothes. I wanted you to know it was only me."

I gulp. "Thank you. You didn't have to do any—"

"Once a healer, always a healer. I took a vow to help people once, so many years ago, before I became a rider. It stays with you," she answers, picking up her walking stick.

I don't know why it shocks me. "You're a rider?"

Ruelle places both her hands on the stick, her wrinkled face smiling at me. "Of course, I am. Do I look like the type of woman to not attempt the Decidere and win myself a dragon?" I can't help but laugh. She does look like a wild woman, and Ruelle doesn't need my answer. She glances at Ziven when she gets to the door. "I will leave you, my king. Be nice to her."

I glance at my enemy in the corner, watching him as he watches me right back. I gulp again. "Let me guess, you're here to laugh and gloat that I'm so weak and pathetic. Don't bother. I already know I am all those things and worse."

"Eat." He points at the plate of food at the bottom of the bed. "You need your strength." My stomach rumbles as I follow his gaze. There is a tray with plates of pasta, freshly cooked lemon herb chicken, and two glasses of water. The pasta and chicken have been a firm favourite of mine. I always

pick it for dinner with Daegan, and it's the only food I eat from the food left in my room. *How did he know? Was he watching?* Two books are next to the tray, one I got yesterday from Mazzis and the other I haven't seen before.

He walks to the door, and I should be happy he is leaving, but I'm not. "Really? That's all you're going to say. You just found out the woman you hate has an illness that makes her weak and pathetic. You just won. Why aren't you gloating?"

He says nothing, but he tightens his grip on the door handle so much it sounds like the metal is bending. "Storm, your body may decide to betray you occasionally, but it does not mean you're weak. It does not mean you're pathetic. Do not call yourself that shit again, or I will make your training ten times fucking harder. Only I get to insult you, no one else. Not even you." He looks back at me, and the pure fury in his eyes makes my heart leap. "We will train when you're healed. Next time, you will inform me that you're not well."

"You're acting like you actually care about your enemy," I whisper. "Someone you think is a spy, here to destroy you all. A traitor."

"You will always be a traitor and enemy to me, Storm," he snarls, pulling the door open. "But there are some fates I don't wish on even my enemy. Get well."

He walks out, shutting the door behind him, leaving me as confused as ever. Does he hate me still? *Likely*. Either way, I'm going to rest because I do need it, and then I can get back to training by tomorrow. I eat the dinner before picking up the new book, pulling it open to the first page. A silver note with sprawling black ink is taped to the first page.

*Storm,  
As you like books so much,  
maybe they can teach you alongside me.  
Read this.  
Ziven.*

I blink, turning the page and seeing it is a book full of drawings and descriptions on fighting. The first page is how to effectively block a hit to the face. I'm surprised enough that a small laugh bubbles out of my throat. I read for a few minutes before the bricks move in the frame on the wall and Hettie is climbing through, two cupcakes in her hands as usual. "I heard you weren't well. They told me I couldn't come anywhere near you just in case it was a sickness that was contagious, but Ruelle just told me it's not." She kicks her legs. "Are you okay? Can I come in?"

"Better now you're here to keep me company." My answer makes her entire face light up.

She comes over and hands me a cupcake before climbing into the bed at my side, pulling the blanket over her legs. "When you're not well, cupcakes always help. My grandmother told me that chocolate is the best fix for the broken soul."

I think I like Ruelle more and more. "I like that. Thanks for coming. I needed a friend." I take one of the cupcakes from her and notice she seems hesitant. "Are you alright?"

"Can I ask you something? You don't have to say yes."

After a bite of the cupcake, I tilt my head to the side. "Ask away."

I don't know what I expected her to ask, but she slightly surprises me. "Can you tell me what it's like outside?" Her eyes are so full of hope that I pause. How do you tell a child that the world she has dreamt of is awful and being in here means she was lucky? I don't need to ask why she wants to know. I couldn't imagine my entire life beginning and ending in this place. It's great in here on the surface, but it's still a trap she cannot leave. "Have you been to the sea?"

"I've not been to it, but I've seen it, though, in the distance," I explain, and she patiently waits. "Where I was brought up, it was in thick forests. The trees are so tall they look like they kiss the skies. They're not as tall as the trees in this forest, and they're different colours. The ones I grew up with are the darkest burning green in the hot summer, and when it gets cold, they turn black. Not a horrid black, but like a shiny black stone. When the leaves finally fall from the tree, usually a few weeks before snow begins to fall,

they turn this beautiful, almost silver colour. I used to run through the silver leaves in the wind, pretending I was flying with birds in the sky.”

I smile to myself, remembering the days that were so simple, so easy. My mother protected me from everything so I could have an innocent childhood. It was good and I owe her for the years I can remember. They are memories I can cling to now, looking back. “The community I lived in was by a massive river, which had an enormous beach bed next to it full of sand and pebbles. As a kid, my mother used to take me with other kids to collect all the pebbles, bring them back and dry them in the sun. Some of the fae women would mix paints for us, and we’d have little competitions about who made the most beautiful or unique rock. I was never very artistic, so I drew a smiley face on mine and kept it as a pet for about two years before I accidentally dropped it in the river, and it was gone. I cried for two weeks.”

She giggles. “A rock as a pet?”

I tickle her, making her laugh with me. “Well, Miss Hettie, pets weren’t allowed where I was from. They don’t... They tend to be known to breed disease by the vampyres, so they don’t allow you to have them. I desperately wanted a pet when I was a kid, and the rock was my best bet. It was called Rocky. I was also not very creative when I was seven.”

She laughs with me, laughing so much that tears leave her eyes. “I want a dragon,” she tells me when she has calmed. “I can’t believe there are no dragons outside. I thought there was and they were waiting for us or something. There’s so many here. I hear them calling to me in my dreams. I haven’t told Ziven yet. Like you, I feel the calling. Maybe we will ride together when I’m older.”

I almost frown at her before I hide my reaction. How do I tell her I never heard a calling? I don’t even know what it means, or what if she is suggesting I need to hear a calling to find a dragon? She leans back on the bed, and I follow her, wanting to lie down myself. “Tell me more, Story. Please!”

For a long time, I tell her about the cities that are beautiful and the castles, filling her mind with them without telling her the truth about what those

places are really like. We talk for ages until I feel so exhausted my eyes start to drift shut. She curls up next to me and falls asleep at my side right before I follow her. A rustle wakes me, and my eyes widen. I look up to find Ziven standing over me, leaning down and picking Hettie up. I pretend to be asleep as he kisses her head and carries her to the door, looking back at me once. I can feel his eyes on me for a long time, even if I don't dare open my own. I wonder if he's furious that she's been in here when she isn't allowed. He doesn't say anything before he steps out the door and it shuts softly behind him. The moon breaks through the thick clouds, beams shining through the window onto my face and lulling me straight back to sleep.

## Chapter Fourteen

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*Page Fourteen.*

*I made a friend in the Dawn castle. She told me there is a way I can get everything I want.*

*“Why does your blood slave always look so depressed when she is so lucky?” Princess Delphia exclaims, yawning after she is done.*

*Vampyres don't sleep and they don't get tired. She is yawning in boredom, and a bored, insane princess is frightening. I've only ever met Princess Delphia. The other two princesses haven't come to visit, and I'm glad of it after seeing how she behaves when she doesn't get her own way. Princess Delphia looks like Emyr, with the same silver hair and unnaturally vivid blue eyes, the same red fangs tipped with silver to mark them as royalty. They hold themselves the same way—like the world owes them a debt.*

*Princess Delphia's favourite blood slave is on his feet in front of her, his head bowed in submission. He's a big, muscular blond man and completely gorgeous. A fae woman with matching silky long blonde hair is bowing at his side. I'm splayed across Emyr's lap, and his sharp fingers dig into my waist, crunching the silk dress. I smile at Princess Delphia, knowing better*

than to frown for even a second longer. I clear my throat before speaking. "I'm very sorry, your grace. It's been a long day."

"Hmm." She clicks her fingers on the chair she is perched on, like a pretty bird in a beautifully decorated cage. Her eyes drift over me. "When are you going to get a new one? You've only ever had two. You're boring! I adore breaking them in, seeing the fight leave their eyes in the end. This is my fifth, just in this year alone." She kicks the man, and he stumbles back, and the crack of his ribs breaking echoes louder than the silence from his lips. He doesn't scream, cry out in pain, nothing but a small grunt. What has she done to him?

The fae climbs back up to his feet, bowing his head once again. I swear I hear the distaste in Emyr's voice. "My tastes are pretty different from yours. This fae is staying at my side forever."

"Forever?" she laughs. "Oh, brother, don't tell me you have genuine feelings for the fae bitch?" Her eyes drop to me. "You never even let me have a taste. Aren't siblings meant to share?"

"No," he snarls. "Not her."

She flutters her eyelashes at him. "Oh, brother, come on—"

"No." The single word rings out as he puts me down onto his seat and stands up in front of me. "Siblings also fight over things. She is mine, and I'll make sure you can't even look at her if you try it."

Princess Delphia barks out a laugh. "You protect her like you love her. It's sickening. She's a fae. She can never be a vampyre! She can never be your bride! You need to take one; otherwise, I will be the next heir. I can't wait to tell our father—"

His hand is around her throat in a heartbeat. He laughs right into her face. "You're a woman. You can't be an heir. You can't be anything but something to breed for new male heirs when it's decided. I doubt father will even bother with you. You're not half as pretty as our sisters, who he adores." He throws her away, and she growls as she rises to her feet. "Get out of my castle. I'm bored of you. Tell father whatever you wish."

*“Your pointless and old castle, here in a fae city!” she screams at him. “You are the forgotten heir, Emyr. Forgotten and pointless.” Princess Delphia wipes her hands on her dress, which is torn from the fight. “I will leave. I don’t want to cause any more family drama. Mother will always be annoyed if we fight. Talking of which, she’ll be here in a month to visit you. I would hide your precious blood slave. You know she hates redheads.”*

*My heart races. The queen is coming here? The princess walks out with her blood slaves following with a limb, several fae workers stumbling after her. When they’re gone, Emyr looks back at me from the head of the table. “My sister is spoilt.”*

*We finally agree on something, but I wouldn’t dare voice it. “Your sister is... lovely.” The lie is pointless. He knows I don’t mean it. He walks over, sitting on the edge of the table and reaching out to touch me. Years ago, I would have recoiled at his touch and been punished for it, but now I don’t. Recoiling from him would mean a night of pain and torture, instead of the pleasure he can offer me when he chooses. I know I crave his touch, well, my body does, even if my mind still fights. Sex means nothing, it isn’t what I want and I tell myself it doesn’t mean anything. I’m always pointlessly, endlessly fighting my body when he is near. His hand runs across my cheek, down my jaw, and finally he curls his hand around my neck. “Shall we go back to my room? We can—”*

*Interrupted as the doors are open, he lets go, snarling as he turns towards whoever came in. “Who the fuck says you can come in here without knocking?”*

*A nervous voice echoes. “My prince, there is a problem that requires your urgent attention. I’m sorry to have interrupted.”*

*I look at the vampyre by the door, and I recognise him from several of the balls. It’s the nobleman that Kyrell is in a relationship with. Lewin. He looks after the armies in the city, and he is rich enough to make even Emyr pause to listen to him. Killing nobles is frowned upon, even for the prince. Emyr told me how his family was annoyed with him for murdering the professor, but they forgave him. I doubt he will kill more nobles anytime soon. Emyr swears under his breath before standing up. “Go back to the room, Story. I’ll meet you there later.”*



*“Of course.” I bow my head, and he leaves. Kyrell is waiting outside the room to escort me back and, to my surprise, the minute we get inside, he shuts the door behind us both. Hurriedly, he leads me over to the bathroom, turning on the shower. Once the rain is pattering away on the stone below, he looks at me and smiles. “We don’t have much time, but I have a plan. You’re going to think it’s mad, but I need you to be ready and on board.”*

*“Lewin is a distraction, isn’t he?” I figure it out. I just don’t understand why.*

*“Yes, and no. There’s something going on in the city, and I haven’t told you about it...but we need to leave soon. There are maps in the army room where the weapons are.” He presses a cold metal key into my palm. Steam is rising in the room, fogging everything but not the light in his eyes. “This is the key. You need to go in there when you can and scour the maps to the south of the city. The ones that lead to the sea. I’m going to get you out of here.”*

*“What?” I shake my head. “That’s just a mission to get yourself killed. Are you insane?”*

*“No. Listen to me. I have a way to get you out. People who want to help us, you. There are things going on that you’re not aware of. I’m going to get you out, okay?” He cups my cheeks. “I’m going to get your mother out too, back to you, because you cannot die here, and you need her. I want you to scour the maps. Make yourself a drawing of a way to escape through the fields and trees to the sea, and make sure the prince does not see it. The path needs to be hidden, out of the view of the houses and vampyres. I will do everything else with Lewin and the others. Be ready in two weeks. We’ll do it the day after your twenty-first birth year.”*

*My mouth is dry. “If anyone finds out, he will kill you. I’ll lose the only person who...my best friend. I can’t lose you.”*

*He wipes away my tears. “I will always be your best friend, little Tory. I know this place is destroying you. He is destroying you. But listen to me. We’re going to get out. My mother is making the plan with us too, and Lewin is coming. We’re going to leave. Okay? We can then spend the rest of your birth years somewhere safe. You can live your life as you want it.” His*

eyes are sad. "I can't erase your scars, but I can vow to find you a better life where there won't be another scar. Another bite."

"Where would we go?" I whisper. It feels too good to be true.

Kyrell grins. "There are places to go where the vampyres cannot find us. Not even the royals."

"He will never stop looking for me. You know how he is obsessed! You know what he's like. It's too dangerous." I shake my head. "I can't—"

"Isn't it worth it? Don't you want to get out of here?" he demands.

Instantly I go to tell him no, that I've given up wanting anything a long time ago, but I pause. The only way I've thought about getting out of here is by dying. The only way I've tried to get out of here is... I can't even think the word in my mind. I look into my best friend's eyes. I trust him. I trust him more than I've trusted anyone in my entire life. He's my best friend and if he thinks we can get out of here, maybe we can. Maybe he's right. "You gotta live for me. You gotta believe that there is a reason to live, to want to fight, to want a life. You are so much more than his blood slave, Story. You are incredible and the world needs to see you. I've believed in you since the moment we met. You were just a teenager then, so scared and broken, but I saw you. That spark. It only takes a spark to make a fire, Story. Burn it all down."

I want that. I've wanted freedom since I came here, and he believes in me. "My mother wants that for you, too. She's going to get your mother to meet us in the sea. Everything will be planned perfectly, I promise. No room for error. We're going to get out of this together." He pulls me in, hugging me tight, both of us knowing that I have to shower after this hug so that the prince doesn't smell him on me. I hate that I have to do that. Could I escape? Something foreign enters my heart, lancing through it like a knife. Hope, hope of something more. Hope of seeing my mother again for the first time in so long. I smile brightly as I hug my best friend.

Hope was like a healing drug in that moment, and it took only two weeks for it to be crushed away.

There are twelve of us left, twelve to face the fifth test. I feel like I can't breathe as I watch the line, wondering if it's going to be even fewer next time. Catherine's at my side, nervously rambling about people I haven't met, and I enjoy listening to her. Her rambling calms us both down. Daegan smiles at me from near the front, and I smile back. The Sun king has brought me romance books, flowers for my room that he picked himself, and soaps for the bath that smell like roses. He looks after me, and he takes me to the library for my job, picking me up afterwards. He really is perfect in every sense of the word, and yet something just doesn't always feel right. I can't put my finger on what it is that bothers me, but something does, and I can't shake it.

My eyes drift over my shoulders when I feel someone else staring at me, meeting Ziven's stony gaze. He is with Calix and the twins, who look far friendlier. Ziven nods once to me, and I suppose that's better than him wishing I was dead. I finally know the name of the bulky man from the Moon Dynasty after Calix mentioned him. Fritz stands at the other side of me, looking down from his towering state. I ignore him, wishing he chose to stand anywhere else. I know a bully when I spot one. He took lessons from Ziven in that too, I bet. He hasn't spoken to me once in all the days I've spent in the Decidere, since the first one. He just glares at me from the other side of the group, but now the group is much smaller, and it feels like he has a score to settle.

I've seen him glaring at me for days over a table. After I was sick, Ziven actually let me come to the meals, all three of them. I'm still not allowed to wander on my own around the apartments, but it's better than nothing. On my third day there, I managed to get back to training, feeling much better. Ziven made sure I made up for the days lost, and I left feeling very bruised and sore. My body is still slightly aching.

Daegan doesn't like it, but I go and run on the track before the library in the mornings and afternoons on the days I'm with him. At first, he scowled at me, but now he runs too, and I've begun to enjoy the quietness of running. The slight feeling of freedom that comes with the exhaustion.

"You're lost in your thoughts again." Catherine nearly makes me jump. "Are you worried about today too? Did you know once we get to the sixth

day, our history only writes of ten people who ever got that far? Something about the fifth test breaks people, and they end up dead or giving up.”

I shiver. “Only ten?”

“Yes. Five is extremely rare too. Four is usually where people stop. Three is quite normal,” she explains, rubbing her arm.

“How many do you need to do to become a dragon rider?” I clear my throat.

“It’s not about how many you need,” she says, lowering her voice. “It’s whether the dragons see you as worthy enough to be a rider. The dragons may take a liking to you after just one Decidere, or five or even ten. Or they may not. There was a prince of Dawn that never got a dragon, and he did eleven. I really don’t know how I’ve gotten this far.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t turned back or died yet,” Fritz interrupts.

I ignore him, looking forward, and Catherine does too. We’ve spoken about him in the library and decided, if he tries to speak to us, that we just ignore him. He huffs. “Fine, ignore me, stupid bitches. I’m sure your fat friend won’t get very far, and even if she does, what dragon would pick her?”

Catherine’s cheeks burn red, and I swirl on him. “What the fuck did you just say about her?”

He looks pleased with himself as he steps up to me, and I’m smart enough to suspect I wouldn’t win a fight if he decided to hurt me. I can’t stand that he just said that to her, though. I barely get to say a word before Daegan’s light is flashing above us, and Fritz smirks at me before stepping back. He looks over his shoulder, and the smirk drops away. I look at Catherine, seeing how upset she is, a fury burning in my chest. I hate people who put other people down just for how they look. It’s something that people do so easily, like looks can seriously judge a person. I’d happily choose to judge someone over how kind they are over how they look.

I clasp my hands into fists, barely controlling my anger. Daegan does a speech, but I don’t hear him through the ringing in my ears before he’s stepping aside. Catherine stays at my side as we jog forward, and Fritz does too, laughing to himself about his pathetic jokes. When we get straight in,

Catherine and I head away from the bridge, but Fritz runs to stand in front of the steps. “I don’t think it’s fair you’re going down there, trying to get away. Go over the bridge.”

“Get out of our way,” I snap.

“I’ll just go—” Catherine whispers.

“Don’t you dare, Catherine. You are beautiful and kind, no matter what this fool calls you,” I tell her, rounding on Fritz. “You might be a bully who uses pathetic insults to get his own way, but I’m not letting you tell me what to do. I’ve faced people so much worse than you and survived. Move.”

“Ziven might have told me to back off, but I’m not doing that. He won’t see me kill you in here.” He steps forward. I glance at Catherine, who looks so scared. “I’ll kill you both and be done with it.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell Catherine, right before I shove her off the edge of the bridge, knowing she will land in the water and survive to get to the pillars. Her eyes are full of shock as she falls backwards, her feet slipping off the edge, and I wish I could have told her it’s safe, that the water will stop her fall. It’s better than dying up here. She is my friend, and I won’t lose another friend.

Her screams echo for a second, but I can’t focus on her as Fritz steps closer. “I’ll just go and get her next. You can’t stop me.”

I lift my head. “She’ll get to the pillars.” I’m not letting her die because Ziven sent this monster after me. I don’t believe that he told Fritz to back off; that has to be a lie. “I’m going down there, to the pillars. We don’t have to do this.”

“I’ve watched you pathetically fight,” he laughs, closing the gap between us. Everyone else has gone through the pillars, and it’s just us now. I glance across the bridge. I have one shot. Before he can see what I’m doing, I run straight for the bridge.

“Run, little Story. You can’t outpace me,” Fritz shouts at my back. I hear the dragon roar over Fritz’s shouts, and halfway across the bridge, a stone dragon crawls over it, right in front of me. Its stone wing slams between Fritz and me, crushing the ground. I turn, Fritz forgotten as I come face to

face with a massive dragon. It opens its mouth, and I close my eyes, knowing it's over for me. I scream as it roars, its breath so hot and loud that my ears pound until it stops roaring. Spit covers my body, mixed with ash, but it's not fire. When I open my eyes, still shaking from head to toe, I look right into its eyes. Silver. It's the same dragon I saw last time I was in the test, right at the end. It looks me dead in the eye, its teeth the size of me, and one bite—I would be gone.

It roars one more time before diving off the side of the bridge, not touching me. I'm left shaking and alone, Fritz long gone. Red light is shining from the pillars on the other side of the bridge, the third one in the line. I run down to it, touching the dragon, and suddenly I'm outside the front entrance to the Decidere. Confused, I glance down at my hand to see another dragon marking, and I frown, wondering what the hell that test was about. The stone door opens, flooding light into my face. I barely blink a few times before I'm in Daegan's arms, and he kisses me in front of everyone.

I swear I hear a dragon roar so loud I'm surprised the world didn't hear it.

## Chapter Fifteen

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*Page Fifteen.*

*My new husband wants an heir, but the deities have not been kind to us. I can't help but look at the rising sun, the sinking moon, and hope to escape the dawn.*

“How is it possible we’re going into the sixth test next?” Catherine’s dreamy sigh echoes to me, and I look up from my book cart. “We are making history. Well, you more than me, being new and all.”

I never thought about that, about the fact just being in the Decidere will put me in any history book. The idea is thrilling as much as it is daunting. I might die and just be a name listed, or I could be a rider. “I don’t know. I feel like I’m riding on luck and about to run out.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t say that! You aren’t just lucky, you’re amazing, and that’s why you’re doing so well.” I want to ask her a million questions about whether the test was different or not for her this time. Catherine instantly forgave me when she came out of the test only an hour or so after me. She landed in the water, but she didn’t pass out like I did. She understood that there was water down there and remembered quick

enough to turn and dive. Apparently, she's quite a good swimmer. Though I don't really know how or where she managed to learn to swim in this place.

She said that her fifth test was difficult, and that's all we ever discuss on the most important thing in our lives right now. I hate the fact we can't talk about them, because I'm still confused about so much. I didn't have a test. Nothing happened when I touched the stone, not like it usually does, and yet I still got the mark.

I glance at my arms now, how different they look from only a few weeks ago. From the middle of my wrists, all the way over my hands are small dragon marks slowly moving around. They are beautiful, alive and something of my own. I've never liked marks on my skin because every one came from pain. I don't think I ever will learn to like the bites, but I do like these. Marks that I chose, I earned. I don't know why, but that is slightly different.

Catherine is humming to herself as she puts her selection of books away. "Your family must be proud," I tell her. I've met her mum and her father. They're both like Catherine. Somehow bright, so alive and joyous. Fae just aren't those things outside of here.

"Well, yes, but...my sister, she's..." She seems to be thinking of the best way to phrase her next words. "Well, I don't expect she thought that I'd get this far. I think she thought I'd end up dying, far from being a rider and being one of the few to get this far in the Decidere. She is competitive and I've always let her win at everything."

"Well, you're not doing that this time. You're standing on your own two feet." I grin at her. "I'm learning to do that, too."

"My mother did say something I wanted to ask you about," she says, lowering her voice. "People are talking about you and the king. He has never, publicly at least, had a girlfriend. But people have seen you kissing now."

I don't know what to say exactly. "What did you want to ask?"

"Are you dating? Is it serious?" she asks. "I'm just nosy and I've never had a relationship before, so I'm living through you if you tell me anything. You



don't have—”

“Okay, stop, stop,” I gently interrupt before she full-on nervously rants. “We’ve kissed a few times. He takes me on dates, but I wouldn’t call it serious. He surprised me by kissing me in front of everyone yesterday.”

She pauses, looking over at me. “That was a claiming, done on purpose. If it’s not serious for you, I think it is for him.” She might be right, more reason than ever to talk with Daegan about us. “My mother said King Ziven looked furious when you came out. I can’t believe he still hopes you die in there. She said she’d never seen him so angry.”

I wince. I kind of hoped he was getting past the hating me thing, but it seems not. I’m having a hard time completely hating him, but we will never be friends. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Of course,” she quickly answers, her cheeks burning red. “Er, tell me something about the outside world? Nothing about the vampyres.” She shivers. She can’t hide the fear in her eyes when I talk about them. “But tell me anything I don’t know.”

We have talked about a lot, and she likely knows more about the outside than even Daegan, who regularly asks me a million questions. “I...I don’t know. I know that you’re trapped in here, that you don’t leave, but it was similar to me. My life has been pretty sheltered too. I never got to explore the world. I only heard things because of my master.” I haven’t told her about the prince. I can’t get the words out when I do. Telling anyone here that I was close, more than close, to the royal family who conquered their world would end with me dead. “My mum, I think she protected me from the darkness of the world far more than I ever knew.”

“I hope I get to meet her.” Her beaming smile makes my heart warm. “What’s she like?”

There’s only one word I’d use to describe my mother. “Brave. Everything I’m not.”

“You don’t think you’re brave?” she quietly asks.

My laugh is hollow. “No, I’m definitely not.” I pick up the new pile of books, the last that need to be sorted before the end of my day. Catherine

keeps up with me as we wheel our carts through the thickness of the library, past several of the workers who I've gotten to know. All of them smile at me now, and I'm less of a stranger to them. The smell of the dusty books is relaxing, calming, and the tenseness leaves my shoulders after a while.

"I think you're brave," she eventually tells me when we both stop at the shelves I need. It's so dark back here—only a dim oil lantern is burning from a nearby desk—making it harder to find the shelf I need. I shake my head at her. I don't know where she got the idea from, but me, brave? No, brave is not something I think I am. Though I do wish that I was. Catherine hands me a few biscuits, even though food isn't allowed in the library, and winks at me. "Our secret."

My empty stomach is happy to keep her secret, and I dig into the biscuits, almost groaning at how lovely they taste. They're really nice, some sort of coconut flavour with chocolate. After we finish eating our biscuits, we get back to work.

"You're late." I jump out of my skin, dropping all the books on the floor at my feet as I turn and see Ziven leaning on the bookcase with his shoulder, his arms crossed tight. Catherine squeals, nearly tripping over her own cart.

Any conversation we had completely and utterly dies as I take Ziven in. Catherine drops her head. "Good evening, your majesty."

He barely looks at her for a second. "That's how you bow to a king, Storm. Take lessons."

His sarcastic comment might have made me laugh if it wasn't for the look in his eyes. He is mad about something, and I know it's me that's going to suffer for his bad mood in training tomorrow. "I just need to put these books away and—"

"I don't give a shit about the books. Move," he growls.

I swing on him. "Well, I give a shit about the books that need to be put away, because it is my job and I love it. So wait, or don't. I can find my own way to the Moon Dynasty, considering you lock me in there often enough!" Catherine gasps in shock, and I ignore them both to pick up my books.

Catherine makes an excuse to leave, disappearing with her cart seconds later. I really, really don't blame her. I can only imagine what Ziven looks like right now, *imagine* only because I don't dare look back at him. I keep picking up books until his giant boots are right in front of me. After I pick up the final one, I look up at him. There's nothing but pure, cold fury drawn on his face. He almost makes me wince. Almost. "What? What is wrong with you? You look..."

"I'm fine," he snarls back at me. But if this is his version of fine, I really don't know what not fine is. I thought maybe we might have come to some sort of agreement between us. Part of me was really hoping that what Fritz said was true and that he did tell him to back off. But the way he is acting now, no, he still hates me. Fritz trying to kill me was something they likely celebrated when he got back. Of all the people to survive this far, I hate that Fritz is one of them, especially after insulting Catherine when she did nothing.

I shake my head, start putting the books away, and the whole time, he glares at me. I feel like I've made a hundred mistakes and not put any of the books back where they're meant to be with the pressure of his gaze drilling into my skull. By the time I'm reaching up to try to put the last one in, it's so high that I might need to pull the ladders to be able to get to the fifth row. I feel his firm body at my back, the coldness that echoes from him spreading to me as a massive hand engulfs the book, taking it and easily pushing it into the gap I couldn't reach. I turn around in the tiny space between the bookcase and Ziven as he's completely cornered me in. He looks down at my face like he didn't expect us to be this close. I didn't expect this either. His scent engulfs me here, and I can't breathe without taking more of him in, letting him close. I'm basically at the height of his chest, and if he moved one inch closer, his body would be completely pressed against mine, and I'd have nowhere to escape to. He leans down, a mask of indifference to me slipping over his features. "We're leaving."

He steps back, and I finally let out the breath I was holding in. He is shaking his head like he's just lost the plot, and I might be right there with him. "Come along, traitor."

I have to chase him down the library corridors. "Why do you call me a traitor? I've literally done nothing to be a traitor to you."

“You’ve done everything you can to be a traitor,” he murmurs. “And for a second back there, I forgot who you’re pretending not to be.”

“Oh, right, the stupid spy idea,” I mutter, my heart racing. What would have happened if he did forget? Why do I want to find out so badly? I hate this man. This fae king who is cruel and coldhearted.

He doesn’t say a word to me as he storms out of the library, expecting me to follow. I don’t even get to retrieve the books from Mazzis, as he leaves so quickly, leading me down to the stairs to his apartments. We both stop as the doors to the apartment are wide open, and the twins aren’t there. No guard is there. “Where is Marcus?” Ziven’s furious growl echoes.

His boots slam on the floor as he walks through the open doors, and I follow him in, only to see him stop dead in his tracks. Ziven crouches down only a few feet from the door. “Marcus, what happened?” He pauses as I get to his side, only to see him going ghostly pale. My eyes drift from Ziven to the stranger, a dark-haired man who looks like he has a fever. His skin is red, sweaty and hot. He’s shaking slightly, muttering to himself with his eyes closed. But the strangest part is there are gold scales all over his cheek, glowing, glittering almost. Ziven looks at me. I can’t read his eyes, but I can feel the sadness coming off him. The fear too. “Fuck, you shouldn’t be here, Storm.”

“What is going on here?” Astrid’s voice echoes to us from the other side of the corridor. Ziven puts his hand up in the air, and a wall of silver flames, so clear it could be light itself, blocks her off from us, and the same silver flame wall goes up behind us, in front of the open apartment doors.

Ziven rises to his feet. “Evacuate to the lower floor and no one leaves. It’s the Chilgrave sickness. Marcus...he isn’t well.” Her skin pales almost as much as Ziven’s, and she covers her mouth, barely holding in the sob. The illness Daegan told me about, the one that kills them easily. He’s sick. A cry echoes from a short-haired woman, someone I don’t know, as she runs around Astrid. “No! Marcus, no!”

She slips out from Astrid’s grasp, and she slams her hands against the silver wall of flames, but it barely even moves. It doesn’t hurt her either. “Brother! No, not you. Not after all this time! We are so close!”

I can barely understand her wails, but they break my heart. I've pleaded for someone's life once, begged and watched them die anyway. Astrid pulls the woman away. "Come on, let's go. You can't help him now. Let our king be there." Astrid soothes her, leading her away, and when she is gone, Ziven locks the apartment doors.

He walks to my side as I hold Marcus's hand. His eyes focus on that, and they darken. "I am immune, but you are not. May the deities be kind to us both, because we are going to fucking need it to survive being locked in here alone."

## Chapter Sixteen

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*Page Sixteen.  
He has found the books.*

**I**'m twenty-one on this birth year, and I finally might have a life that is worth living. Hope still feels like a foreign intruder in my mind, in my heart, as I pace by the window, knowing that everything's going to change today. The queen is coming tomorrow, and hopefully, she'll distract Emyr from searching for me. Not straight away at least. We'll be long gone by the time he realises. I doubt he'll just be able to abandon the castle and his mother to chase after his lost blood slave.

It's all planned, everything's perfect and in place. As long as nothing changes, I will escape. I've spent weeks scouring over the maps with every second that I got. I barely slept with the mixture of excitement and fear that sends my heart beating too fast. Emyr hasn't noticed any change, thankfully, and keeping up the pretence around him has been difficult. Every time his teeth sink into my skin, every time he is inside me, I'm dreaming of freedom. Freedom that will never include him, never let him touch me again. There's a small drawn path in my pocket on scratchy paper, marking a line through the town, using vampyre gardens to hide ourselves in the shadows. I'm going to get to see my mother today, the first time in so long. I can't help but grin.

*A knock on the door makes my smile drop, and I straighten, unsure who it is until I hear two taps. It's the way Kyrell knocks when he wants me to run the shower so we can speak alone. Lewin comes in, shutting it softly behind him. We haven't been alone before yet. I feel like I know him so well through Kyrell. His pin straight blond hair is neatly kept in a band at the back of his head, and his fangs are red, bringing out the red shine to his dark brown eyes. Vampyres don't usually keep so much colour in their features like he has, but his skin is still drained of light, and there is a way about how he moves that marks him as a vampyre long before I see fangs. He loves Kyrell, I remind myself, and his actions prove to me that maybe this vampyre can love. "Are you ready to go, Story?"*

*For a second, I glance at my room, at the prison. I won't forget this place. It will haunt me, but I am going to leave. The single word I breathe out might as well be fire, making my blood boil. "Yes." I go to my wardrobe, and I quickly yank a small bag out. It is full of some plain working fae clothes that I've stolen from the castle servants, enough to last me a little while until I can replace all the red dresses. He hands me a black cloak, a guard's cloak, and I clip it around my shoulders. I make sure to tuck my hair into the cloak so it can't be seen, and pull the hood up. Lewin looks me over. "Be careful not to show your hair." He pauses. "And it's great to finally meet you, Story. Kyrell, he loves you like a sister, and I know you mean the world to him. Thank you for coming with us, for risking it."*

*"I love him. He is my best friend," I quietly answer. "He is the greatest person I've ever known, and he is very in love with you. I'm glad we have met finally."*

*Lewin grins for a moment, our shared love of Kyrell linking us forever. He could be my friend too, even if I thought it was never possible for a vampyre. He goes to the door, stopping and looking back. "Follow me and stay close. The others are at the meeting point, and then we follow your plan through the city. We will celebrate freedom together, Story."*

*"This doesn't feel real," I admit.*

*"It is." Lewin touches my shoulder. "I've made sure the prince is distracted by the escalating problems in the city. He won't be back until morning, and it will give us hours to get away."*

*“Hours,” I repeat with a big grin. Hours before he knows; it’s enough time to get far away. Lewin opens the door, and we both step out of the room together, only to come face to face with a woman that I have never seen before. She’s beautiful, eerily beautiful. Silver locks of her soft hair are pulled up into a complicatedly braided bun on top of her head and a tiara full of red shining gems is perched in front. A beautiful gown falls off her, a mixture of reds and silvers, all woven together to make the bodice. Tiny little flowers fill the skirt, mixed with sharp thorns. The skirt itself flows out between us, and her teeth, nothing but pure silver fangs, flash as she speaks.*

*“I came early to see my son only to find his favourite blood slave is in a relationship with this vampyre and trying to escape?” Her voice is velvety soft as she crushes my hope and terrifies me all at the same time. She shakes her head, and her hair doesn’t even move. “That’s disgusting behaviour for a blood slave held in such high honour. My son will be so very upset.” She looks over her shoulder, and my heart pounds as guards fill both ends, blocking any chance of escape.*

*Sickness rises up my throat, and I cover my mouth. “Please.”*

*“You will greet me as your queen. Shush now, shush now. I won’t kill you. My son is far too fond of your blood and body, from what my spies tell me.” She comes closer in the blink of an eye, pulling down my hood. She touches my hair. “I can see why now. You have a beauty about you, and your blood...I will taste myself.” A sob wracks my throat, and my legs feel weak. “I will teach you a lesson. That is something I’m afraid is going to hurt. I’ve taught all my children how to be strong. I will do the same to you.”*

*“You will not touch her.” Lewin knocks the queen’s hand away and steps in front of me.*

*I barely get to scream before they fight. “NO!” I’m pushed out of the way as the vampyres fight, and I can barely make out what is happening. They move so fast, and even though she’s in a dress, I can tell she’s stronger, faster than Lewin. It stops when her fangs are in his throat, and she wastes no time before she rips it out. He falls to the floor with a thud, so much blood pouring out of his neck onto the carpet as I plaster myself to the wall. His glassy eyes stare right at me, and he is gone. There is no light there. I*



*can't stop crying, sobbing so hard my body is shaking with them, and I don't notice the queen until she is grabbing my arm, yanking me upright.*

*"My guards have already gone to get my son, and together we will correct your behaviour. It is not your fault—my son has clearly been too kind to you. We will make sure that anyone that was going to help you is dead. He has not trained you well enough. That's my fault. I should have been around and come to see you sooner."*

*I begin to scream long before she begins hurting me, before my life truly gets worse, worse than it's ever been, and there is nothing but blood left in that room of nightmares.*

My body shudders as I snap back to the present. My eyes drift away from the blood pouring from Marcus's mouth, and the memory goes with it. Hours have passed since we got trapped in here. Ziven helped Marcus onto the couch in the one room that we have. It's a small, cozy room with three couches and an enormous fireplace. There are some plates of food on a side cabinet and a jug of water we can refill in the sink in the bathroom we have. There's nothing else in this short corridor area, and we can't leave. Marcus looks worse, and I wish there was something anyone could do for him. I head to the bathroom, getting some cloths and soaking them in cold water before coming back. Ziven's warning echoes to me from his spot near the fireplace. "You shouldn't go near him."

I ignore Ziven and lay the towels on Marcus's head and his chest, and he moans in either pain or comfort, I'm not sure. "If I'm going to get sick, I'm already going to be sick at this point. He deserves to be looked after, and I don't think your nursing skills are up to par."

Ziven frowns at me, and I don't even need to look to know he is. I can hear it in his voice. "Why would you look after him? You don't know him."

I don't know how to answer that. I would help him even if I knew he was a monster when he was in this state. "Why are you not in danger of getting sick? How are you immune?" Ziven doesn't bother to answer me. "Daegan told me this affects everyone here, so why not you?"

"Because I caught it before, when I was a baby. So did my twin, but only one of us survived." His answer is clipped, and I regret asking him.

“I’m sorry. I never had a sibling, let alone a twin. I couldn’t imagine how hard that must have been.”

“I was a baby. I do not remember.” His answer isn’t as cold as usual. I take it as progress. Ziven sits on the floor near the couch, and I sit down next to him. He glares at me for a moment, but eventually, he looks away. Marcus is fast asleep in some kind of fever, and I really don’t think there’s anything we can do for him except be here. Ziven moves his collar down and shows me his shoulder where the scar I’ve seen before is. This close, I can actually see it is scaled. “Considering you’ll probably die, I’ll tell you. This is what it looks like to survive. It’s rare, but sometimes children do live. No one really understands why that is.”

I pick up a strand of my hair, messing with it. “Where did it come from? I’ve never heard of it outside of here, and I’m pretty sure if there was a sickness this extreme, it would have come up at some point.”

“We do not know. It wasn’t listed in any of our ancestors’ books, notes, or stories. Mazzis has looked and had people search, but there is nothing.” He turns his gaze on me. “It started infecting us over a hundred years ago, and there isn’t a fae in here that hasn’t lost someone to it. Except you.” He looks up. “We’ve lost a lot of people, but my dynasty was hit the hardest. There are currently twenty-seven of us left, but there used to be well over three hundred.”

Deities above... “I’m sorry, Ziven. Hettie...”

“Hettie spends far too much time with you when I’ve told her not to.” His growl makes me laugh.

He blinks at me in surprise. “I get the impression Hettie doesn’t do anything that she’s told, and she gets that from you.” After a moment, I ask, “What happened to her mother?”

I really don’t expect Ziven to tell me, but maybe he is feeling sorry for me because I might die so it doesn’t matter what he tells me at this point. “She’s my niece, my sister’s only daughter.” He pauses. “She caught this when Hettie was one. There was nothing any of us could do but watch her die, and I was left with a one-year-old, who is the heir to the Moon Dynasty.

If anything happens to me, with my siblings gone...Hettie is all the family I have left. I'd do anything to protect her."

"She loves you, looks up to you," I admit. "When she sneaks in to speak to me, she makes that very clear. I'm sure your sister is proud of you both."

Ziven shakes his head. "She would hate me if she could see me now, Storm. You don't know anything."

We sit in pure silence for a long time, and I don't know what he means by that—I have the feeling I shouldn't want to find out. After a while, Ziven checks on Marcus, and I pour myself a drink of water, watching as the scary Moon Dynasty king tucks a blanket around one of his people and gently tells him he will survive this. He lies to him to give him hope. When he straightens and Marcus has once again fallen asleep, I hate the broken look in his eyes. "You know, if I catch it and die, at least you can be finally happy that your traitorous enemy is dead without you even needing to lift a finger."

Ziven crosses his thick arms. "What makes you think that dying is going to make me happy, Storm?" He glowers with his silver eyes as a flush crawls up my neck. "Even dead, you would haunt me."

"I would," I agree with a touch of a smile. Marcus starts coughing up blood, and we both look right at him. Whatever moment that was is gone. Ziven uses the cloth to clean him up, and I sit on the edge of the couch, right next to him, and pull Marcus's hand into mine. He opens his eyes for a moment, looking up at Ziven, who rests his hand on his shoulder. "Rest. You're safe."

"Look after her." His voice is croaky but easy enough to understand. "Vow it."

"I vowed to care for my people when I took the crown. I will care for her always," Ziven firmly answers. "Be with the deities, warrior of the Moon Dynasty. May the dragons and kings welcome you to their hallowed gates."

He nods once before his eyes slowly shut. I don't know who *she* is that Marcus wants protecting, but I know Ziven will keep his vow because it's Marcus's last words. The moment he's dead, I feel it like the embrace of a

cold fog. His heart has stopped and the gold scales softly fade on his skin until they are no longer glittering gold, but drained into a grey colour, almost matching Ziven's scars. Ziven pulls the blanket over his face, covering him up. "Move away." The lack of anything in his voice makes me immediately move away.

"I'm sorry," I whisper when I'm a few steps back. My eyes widen as he holds his hand over Marcus, and his whole body starts burning in silver flames. The silver fire is mesmerising to look at as it completely engulfs the body in seconds. Within a minute, there's nothing but ash on the sofa, on the burnt sofa cushions, and the fire instantly disappears. It didn't even make smoke. Ziven lifts the entire sofa with one hand and flings it in the air, slamming it against the wall as he roars. "Fuck!" He stops by the fireplace, places his hands on that mantelpiece, his muscles straining as he looks down into the burning fire.

"Ziven." I don't move closer. I know what men are like when they get angry, and I don't want to risk getting hurt. My hands shake and I clamp them to my thighs to stop it.

"Get comfy. We cannot leave for five days." He doesn't look back.

"What do you mean, five days? That would just be right before the test."

"You and I are contagious," he carefully answers, but there is such a lethal undertone that I can't ignore. "Think of Hettie dying like that if it makes you feel better about staying in here with me. I think of all the people stuck in this mansion who could get sick and die. Neither of us can leave until the five days are up. That's if you don't die before then too and end up like him." His voice is quiet. "Everyone fucking dies on me."

My heart cracks in half, and for a moment, I actually feel sorry for him. I glance at the sofa, broken in half now by the wall, Marcus's ashes spread all across it. If we stay in this room, we are both going to do nothing but annoy each other. "Why don't we train? Out there in the corridor?"

I get the feeling he needs to get out of this room just as much as I do. He looks over his shoulder. "I thought you hated training, Storm."

“I’ve grown to like it,” I admit. “I even train on the days I’m not here. My body feels stronger than it ever has before, and I want that to continue.”

“I’ll train you on one condition,” he murmurs, moving away from the fireplace.

I clear my throat. “What?”

“Tell me something true about yourself.” He watches me closely. “And I will know if you’re lying to me.”

“Do you have Etena’s powers?” I joke, but he doesn’t laugh. “Fine. Like what?”

“How many lovers have you had?” he asks. I’m surprised by his question.

I can’t look at him as I answer, so I go to the cabinet by the door, searching the drawers until I find a hair tie and pull my hair up. “My master, the second I had, was the only lover I had. I wouldn’t count him as a lover when it wasn’t my choice and I was owned by him.” When I lift my eyes, I can’t read Ziven’s expression. “You have your answer. Train me.”

“Alright, Storm.” He tugs off his cloak and shoes, meeting me in the corridor. The silver light of the walls he has made makes it bright, and I wait for him to tell me what to do. “Show me what you learnt from reading those books.” He tilts his head. “And not the romance books Daegan gives you.”

“How do you know about those?”

His counter is immediate and concerning. “I know about everything.” He spreads his arms out. “Stop delaying and attack.”

“Fine,” I mutter. I go to attack him in the way that I read about in the books, but he easily grabs me, turning me around and pinning me against the wall. His entire body presses into mine, and he’s holding my arm bent backwards against the middle of my back. He leans into my shoulder. I don’t know what it is about this position or him holding me like this, but my body feels like it’s on fire, completely and utterly alive under his grip. I feel like I’m burning everywhere he touches me. “Get out of this hold. I know you read about how to do it.”

I do know, but reading it and doing it to a massive, bulky king are two very different things. I suck in a breath to steel myself before I lift my leg and hit his knee, punching my elbow into his stomach and at the same time swirling round to hit his throat. Effortlessly, he stops me, pulling both my hands above my head, but I wrap my leg round his, smacking at his knee. We both go tumbling to the floor, and he lands on top of me, never hurting me with his weight as his hands brace himself. He smirks. No smiles. I think it's one of the first times I've ever seen him sort of smile at me. "Where did you learn that?"

"I found another book on training and read it in the library on my lunch," I breathlessly say. "It was all about how knees can be an easy spot on anyone, big or small." Now he is actually smiling at me, and I realise how much more dangerous he is when he smiles. Dangerous for my beating heart, for my body, which reacts so easily, forgetting the fact he made himself my enemy. Our lips are inches away and he's resting right between my legs, his entire hard, toned body pressed against mine. Do I like him? Have I gone mad? I'm sort of with Daegan, and this is a bad idea. His eyes fix on my lips, and I wonder if he is thinking about it, too. He leans back and I'm glad he does. He rubs his hand over his face, stepping away from me, and I climb to my feet. "Running. We need to warm up and then you can do that again until you've perfected the move."

He starts jogging up and down the corridor, expecting me to follow, and I do, knowing that if he kissed me right then, I wouldn't have stopped him.

## Chapter Seventeen

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*Page Seventeen.*

*I told the sun about my husband's plan,  
and he can't help me. We both think he will  
destroy himself and it will all be over.*

*But what if he doesn't? What happens to us  
all then?*

**M**y stomach feels like it's being stabbed when I wake up, but it's more than the pain I'm used to with my monthlies. It feels like every inch of my body is on fire. I cry out, my back arching as I nearly fall off the chair in the corridor where we pulled them to a few nights ago. It was better than sleeping in the same room that Marcus died in. We train in the day, eat together, and then pretend neither one of us exists for the rest. "What is wrong?" Ziven questions from the other side of the corridor where his chairs are. I look over at him, blushing as heat builds between my legs. All I feel is a burning need that runs over me, and I grow wet. His eyes widen and he steps backwards, running his hand through his black hair. "Fuck, you've got to be kidding me."

I gasp as another wave of pain nearly knocks me off the chair. “I must be getting ill.”

He replies through gritted teeth. “You’re not ill, but you need to go into that bathroom and lock yourself in. Now!”

I barely manage to stand up alone, but his roar makes me move. I don’t even know how I manage to make it to the bathroom, but the authority in his voice pushes me to hurry. I shut the door and step to the countertop, leaning against it as I clutch my stomach. My whole body feels like it’s alive. I feel like I know the second Ziven is near the door, like he is drawn to it. “Did you not know you were going into heat soon? You should have warned me. That could have ended very fucking badly.”

“What is heat?” I gasp, wanting to hear more of his voice. Needing it. “Deities, it hurts. It really hurts. Is this not the...”

“Fuck, you don’t know what going into heat is, do you?” Ziven’s voice is half groan, half understandable.

“No,” I shout back at him, feeling frustrated.

“It’s a way of mating for the fae. It’s when you want nothing more than to be with someone else. Nothing more than sex, pleasure.” The heat building between my legs every time he talks makes me believe him. “Sex or intense pleasure with another fae will stop the pain.”

“I’ve heard of it,” I moan as the pain gets more intense. “They don’t call it heat outside; they call it the frenzy. Usually it happens around the age of twenty, but maybe mine is late because of my fucked-up body.”

“You’re locked in here with me, and you’re affecting me.” His head bangs against the door. “If I come in there, I won’t be able to stop myself from having you. All of you.” Waves of frustration flow through me. I’ve heard of the frenzy. I’ve heard fae giggling about it being the best night of their entire lives, how they can never get enough. How most people love the frenzy, but this is not the time or place when I’m trapped with only my enemy.

I glance at the door. “What if I want you to come?” A drawn-out silence drifts back. “You’re my enemy.”



“And you’re mine.” I can hear the tension in his voice. “If you tell me to open the door, I will.”

My body clenches and I know my answer. I want my enemy. I need him. “Come in.”

The door practically flies off its hinges as he comes in, grabbing me around the waist and kissing me. His lips are like molten fire against my own, hurried and intense, burning me up. His tongue thrusts into my mouth, and I moan around it as he picks me up, dropping me on the counter and stepping between my legs. His hands rip at my clothes, pulling them off, and I grab his, needing them off too. My leggings are the last thing to go, and I can’t care about anything but having him closer. I’ve seen him without a shirt on so many times, but this is different, and looking at him like a lover has my body burning alive. Ziven looks at me, his massive hands holding my thighs that are covered in bites. The same bites that are littered all over my stomach, legs, and breasts. I go to cover myself up, but he kneels in front of me, tugging my ass to the edge of the counter. “Scream for me, Storm.”

His tongue licks up my slit, and the second he touches my clit, I cry out in exhilarating pleasure. He wrings every inch of my orgasm out of me, and I immediately want more. He rises to his feet, his eyes darker than I’ve ever seen them. I reach forward, undoing his belt and tugging down his trousers. He is big and thick, very erect, and I softly caress my hand down him. He grabs my thighs, groaning as he closes his eyes. With circular motions, I run my hand up and down him, noticing how he reacts, how he groans, how evidence of his arousal coats the tip of his cock.

When he has had enough, he picks me up and carries me to the shower, pushing me against the wall, and I hook my legs around him. The pain is gone, and all I can feel is need. I want him so badly—I need him inside me. He sinks his hands into my ass, plastering his lips onto mine as he thrusts into me in one smooth glide. I moan at the thickness of him, how tight he fits in me and how I can’t imagine taking any more of him until he pulls out and slams back into me, deeper this time until he is fully seated. “I love how you flush pink for me. Fuck, you’re tight.”

“Don’t stop!” I moan. He groans, biting down on my lip and thrusting into me hard. Silver fire explodes around us, and Ziven slams the shower on,

cold water spraying over us, but he doesn't stop, he doesn't quit slamming into me.

“Not a chance, Storm. Come on my cock,” he commands, sinking his hand into my hair and arching my neck up to meet his mouth. Harsh, wet slapping of our bodies fills the room, and I'm so close. “Look at you taking me, so wet for your enemy. Show me how much you hate me.”

I crash into a mind-blanking orgasm, tightening around his cock, and he roars against my lips, stilling and then shuddering as he comes in me, filling me until it feels like I'm impossibly full. Breathlessly he puts me down seconds later, and we stare at each other, the frenzy wearing off now it's got what it wanted. I think that was the best sex I've ever had in my entire life, but I would never admit that to him. He reaches out, his fingers running over my stomach and the thousands of scars. The water drips down his fingers. “Who did this to you?”

His voice is lethal, and I shiver. He runs his fingertips across the thousands of bite marks all over my stomach. My breasts, all the way up to my chest, and I hate how ugly he must think they are. “Storm, who?”

“A vampyre who owned and used me,” I breathe out, and I can't read his expression as he steps out of the shower and leaves the room. If I were a fool, I'd believe he cared.

## Chapter Eighteen

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*Page Eighteen.*

*My dragon is angry and it's my fault. This is all my fault. I shouldn't have loved them. It caused this.*

**P**ain is all I've known for what is likely weeks, but it's blurred into one endless memory of pain. I don't know when it stopped or when I started healing. I don't know how I'm even alive. The queen is no longer here, but her bite marks and Emyr's are lingering on my wrists. They've wrung everything out of me, broken me in every way that was possible. But probably the worst of it is the fact that Lewin is dead. I can be healed, but he cannot. The vampyre that tried to help me is dead. Kyrell must be heartbroken. I kept my mouth shut so Kyrell would live, and I'm proud of myself for that at least. Emyr snarls somewhere nearby. "Heal her."

"I might need more help with her current condition, your majesty." Kyrell's voice echoes back. "She is in a far worse state than I've ever seen her, and there's only so much I can do to stop someone from dying. I'm going to need more healers."

"I don't want anyone to hear of this. Gossip of my blood slave attempting to escape with her lover is not what I want," he shouts at Kyrell. I can't open

my eyes—they are too swollen—but I want to stop him from shouting at Kyrell. “No one else. I don’t give a fuck if you die healing her, guard, but do it.”

Kyrell’s voice is so gentle when he replies, “May I suggest my mother? She is a healer in this sorting district, nearly as powerful as I am, and her magic would be a boost to mine. She would be good here to heal, and she can keep a secret.”

I can feel them both looking at me. “Then fetch her, and if she says a word, you will be the one to kill your mother. I want Story looking well by tomorrow, as we have guests.”

“Of course, my prince.”

The next thing I know, there’s a woman stroking my head so softly. “Mother,” I hoarsely whisper.

“I’m not your mother, sweet darling girl. I’m sorry for everything and my place in you ending up here.” I recognise her voice. Blaire, Kyrell’s mother. My eyes sting as I open them to look up at her. Now my eyes can actually open. It hurts to let light in. It’s nothing compared to the pain of my body, the broken bones I can feel being mended, and the bites still pouring my blood across my skin. Her magic is mixing with Kyrell’s, who is on my other side. Silent tears fall down his cheeks.

My voice is broken from screaming, and I can barely get the words out. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was not your fault,” he replies, “and even if it was, you paid enough of a price for it all. Don’t apologise and we won’t speak about him again. I can’t.”

I gulp, moving my hand and my broken fingers to touch Kyrell’s arm. He covers my hand with his, and for a long time, that’s all we do. We can’t talk about it too much here, where there will be people listening. When the pain is so much better, my bones less broken than before, I glance at Blaire. “Have you seen my mother?”

The magic flickers between them, the perfect mixture of orange and yellow light as she answers. “No. It turns out she’s been moved from her district. I

*don't know where."*

*Every bit of light dies in my chest, and a familiar darkness creeps back, pulling me under. What is the point of living? It will always be like this, and I never want to feel nearly all of my bones broken, my blood pouring everywhere as he screams at me again. Kyrell touches my chin, turning my gaze from the ceiling to him. "Don't give up. Don't let this beat you. Don't fucking give up on me! I can see it in your eyes and, no, it's not happening!"*

*I rest my head back and look up at the ceiling. How do I tell him that I gave up a long time ago? That any bit of hope that was dancing in my heart, it's gone, and it really is never going to come back. Emyr beat and drained it out of me. "We'll try again. This is not the end."*

*But I don't have it in me to hope anymore, to argue with him, so I don't say anything more. For months, I refuse to speak or hope at all. Prince Emyr has won, and I am broken.*

I wake up in the apartment, curled up on the bathroom floor with a pillow under my head and a blanket covering my legs that wasn't there before. There is a breakfast tray and a drink waiting for me on the counter, and I blush, remembering what happened in this room last night. I slept with Ziven, my enemy. The frenzy, or *heat* as they call it, was overpowering, but there were moments there I thought I felt something so real.

I quickly shower, changing into the clothes left out for me, a long-sleeve T-shirt and leggings, and then I pull my boots on. I look at my flushed cheeks as I braid the front of my hair, flashes of me and Ziven coming back to me again. I can't believe that happened. I literally slept with my enemy, and Daegan didn't deserve that. I'm going to have to tell him everything and hope that he doesn't hate me. I have to end it with Daegan after this. It's cruel to keep on with him when it doesn't feel like it's the right thing to do anymore. When one touch from the Moon king sets me on fire and it's not the same with Daegan. We should have stayed as friends, no matter what happened between Ziven and me.

I step out of the room only to come face to face with Ruelle and Hettie. She wraps her arms around me tightly, her tears brushing my cheek. Hettie is

next, throwing herself at me, and she doesn't let go for a long time. "You didn't die! I was so scared."

She lost her mother to this. I can't imagine how scary this must have been. "I'm okay. I'm not sick." I don't lower my arms until she lets go first, knowing she really needed that hug.

Ruelle is leaning on her walking stick, looking me up and down. "You seem different."

"I just escaped a horrible death. It does that to you," I quickly answer.

Ruelle clicks her tongue. "Come on, Hettie. You've seen her now and we have lessons. Story is due at the Decidere."

Hettie grins up at me, squeezing me tightly one more time before leaving with Ruelle. Ruelle looks over her shoulder at me. "Good luck!"

"You must have the deities on your side, Trouble." Calix walks in, clapping his hands. "I'll escort you to the Decidere."

I join his side and head to the door, happy to be able to leave. "I don't know if they are on my side or I just got lucky."

"You must be immune," Calix muses. "Maybe because you're from outside."

Maybe. I don't know, but I'm glad not to be sick. The pathways and corridors are full of people, but they move for Calix when they spot us coming their way. I get it. I'd move out of his way if I didn't know he is actually a sweet guy. When I get to the bottom of the steps on the Decidere level, Catherine jumps at me, hugging me almost as tightly as Hettie did. "I prayed for you every morning and night when I heard. How are you?"

"Not sick." I let her go. "And thank you."

Calix clears his throat, and I realise I've not introduced them. I mean, they have lived in this mansion for their entire lives, but there are thousands of people here. "Oh, right. Calix, this is Catherine. Catherine, Calix. He looks scary, but he isn't."

“I’m scary but I don’t bite unless commanded by my king.” Calix offers her his hand. She looks like a bunny who accidentally bumped into a fox as she takes his hand. “And any friend of Story is a friend of mine.”

“I—I,” she splutters.

Thankfully, we are interrupted by Etena, who comes over and stands at my side. She ignores Calix altogether, even if he just stares at her. “You’re alive then. Are you still going to claim not to be a survivor?”

“Good to see you too, Etena,” I say.

She shakes her head at me. “The king is waiting.”

“Which one? There is more than just the sun in the sky, Etena.” Calix’s purr rolls over her, and she straightens her spine before looking at him. The air feels charged as they glare at each other, and it reminds me of how Ziven looks at me sometimes—and how I look at him, too.

“I only look up in the day,” she replies, her tone icy. “And do not speak to me.”

“Why? Frightened to remember, darling?” Calix teases, but I think he means it. She walks away before he can say anything else, and he laughs, the sound hollow and empty. I’m surprised to see Ziven is here, talking with Daegan. Neither one of them looks happy. Daegan turns my way when he sees me, coming over with a bright smile and kissing my cheek, only because I turn so that he misses my lips.

We need to talk, just not here and now. Ziven glares at us both from the corner of my eye, but I don’t dare look at him. Daegan strokes his hands down my shoulders. “You’re well. I trusted my sources, but it’s still good to see you.” He leans in. “Just say the word. I’d understand if you aren’t up to the Decidere. I can take you away from it and no one will say a word. Last week can be the last one that you did, and you will still be fantastic.”

“No, I’m fine,” I firmly answer. I want to do the Decidere. I want to do it for Kyrell, and for myself. I know I don’t have anything to prove to anyone, but I’m not giving up and taking the easy way out now. “I’m just glad I’m not sick.”

Ziven steps up to my side, and the words that leave his mouth make me want to punch him. “We did enjoy our time together. She tastes and feels delicious.” He stops as Daegan looks furious and the words hit home. “Or have you not had the chance to have her?”

My cheeks burn as Daegan looks between us before he moves right in front of Ziven, his hands glowing. Ziven curves his hand and smirks. “Go for it. Make this day interesting.”

Calix steps up between them. “Remember that everyone is watching as you two fight over her. Both of your people are frightened enough with all the changes, and if they see you fight, war will follow.”

Ziven’s eyes drift to me. “You’re right, my friend. I do not fight over her.” There’s nothing but that cold bluntness left between us as his words stake their place in my chest. And it hurts. It meant nothing to him. I don’t know why my stomach feels like it drops. It shouldn’t have meant anything to me.

I lie easily, effortlessly. “Ziven is right, it was nothing. He was helping me. I was in a frenzy...but you call it heat.” I look him up and down. “One night that can easily be forgotten.”

Ziven laughs, cruel and bitter as he walks past me, pausing to lean into my shoulder, to whisper in my ear. “Liar.”

He leaves with Calix, and I blink the tears away, refusing to let him see me cry. I am a liar. I couldn’t possibly forget that night, how he felt, because he has ruined me for anybody else. Daegan is facing away from me, and my heart clenches. I do care about him, and I never meant to hurt him. “Can we talk about it after the test?”

Daegan turns around and tilts his head, smiling. “For a second there, I thought you’d lost your mind. It’s okay, going into heat, it’s uncontrollable and you couldn’t leave. All that matters is that you’re alive and you’re still mine. This won’t—*he* will not come between us.” He possessively kisses me on the forehead before I can get a word out. “Now go, the Decidere must begin.”

He walks away before I can even get my head around the fact Daegan just accepted that. Before I can ask since when did we agree that I was his? I



feel like I'm playing a dangerous game between these two kings. I feel like I'm finally starting to understand where the writer of the book I'm reading is coming from. Standing between the sun and the moon means certain death, but I want to live.

\* \* \*

The stone doors click open to the Decidere, and the cheering begins, so loud it blocks out the sound of my racing, confused heart. Catherine's eyes are wide as I walk over, and before she can ask, I shake my head. I don't even have enough time to explain to her everything that happened, but I will talk to her after this. Right now, we have to focus. She must know more about going into heat than Daegan or Ziven is going to tell me.

She leans in. "Are you okay?"

Maybe she can make me feel a bit better about it all, about how I went utterly mad with need. "No, but I'm ready for this."

She gives me a worried glance but runs by my side behind the others, into the Decidere. Of the eight left, all of them run over straight towards the pillars except for Fritz, who goes to the steps before us, rushing down. We are running that way when a dragon jumps down off the ceiling, not just one of them, but two. They smother the steps as they roar at each other, fire spitting in every direction. I don't think they have even noticed us.

My hands shake as the giant, powerful stone dragons slam into each other, and one wraps its massive mouth around the other's neck. I step back at the same time as Catherine, mentally thinking of what to do next. The bridge. Another dragon lands on it when we turn, its back to us. Catherine leans in. "What do we do?"

The dragon on the bridge stretches its long legs out, its wings falling off the sides of the bridge and knocking off bits of it like rubble that falls and splashes into the water. It opens its mouth, a blaze of fire heading straight towards the people running for the pillars. A scream follows, along with the horrific smell of burning flesh that fills my nose seconds later. The two dragons on the stairs are fighting still, and I know we can't get past them.

There is an option, but it's not one I want to take. "We need to jump off the bridge, straight into the water before that dragon turns around."

Catherine gulps. "Okay." She takes my hand. "Together, we got this." We both run straight towards the dragon on the bridge while it's distracted, getting as close as we possibly can to the middle of the bridge. It turns its head back, its rows of glittering white teeth ready to snap, and fire heads straight our way. I jump off with Catherine right before the flames can engulf us, a scream climbing up my throat, but this time I hold it in, refusing to let the blackness take over before I turn around, pointing my arms out and diving straight into the water. Seconds later, I see Catherine in the water as I swim up, gasping as I break through the water's surface. Flames have poured down the steps from the dragons fighting above, illuminating everything in a dark orange glow. We swim towards the pillars, and I pull myself out, water dripping from my hair and clothes.

I wince as the dragons above make more noises, slamming each other into rocks. "Why are they fighting?"

"Territorial, I'd guess," she answers as she looks around. "But get to your pillar before they sense us." She's completely right. I don't have time to wonder why dragons are fighting as I turn around and run towards the pillars. Catherine is right behind me for a few minutes before she carts off towards hers, and I search the pillars for the light. A panic laces down my spine as I hear more dragon roars and echoes of them getting closer. Those giant beasts, they could just crush me so easily, and I really don't want to be in the way when they fight.

I barrel down the pillars, hundreds of them passing me by. Where is it? Finally, I see a red light near the wall, a pillar that's almost half-eaten by the rocky wall edge. I don't wait before throwing myself at it, knowing that I'll appear on the other side and in the test—it's safer than out here.

I stumble, heavy boots holding me down. In fact, all of my clothes are heavy because they are armour. My clothes have transformed and I'm now wearing full armour and scratchy cotton under it. The metal is the deepest purple colour, tinged with red. I glance around and realise that I'm not alone. There are rows of soldiers here, so many of them, and they're marching forward. I'm one of them.

A soldier bumps into me from behind and gives me a warning look, and I quickly turn around and get back in line, marching along with the others in the thick desert sand. I can taste the sand in the hot air, and the sun shines down on us, almost as warm as the air. Every breath heats my lungs, and I'm sweating within seconds. I need to find out where I am. I move closer to the soldier next to me, noticing how he's ridiculously tall compared to me, but thin underneath his armour. "Where are we going?"

The soldier has a helmet on, and I wonder why I wasn't dressed in one. "To fight the dragons. They've come to our land and they've killed our people. Where else would our army be heading? Of course we're going to fight the dragons."

My heart freezes in my chest. I wonder what in the deities is going on? For at least ten minutes, all we do is walk before I hear them, and my mouth goes dry. The unnatural growl of a dragon echoing in the air, the sense that suddenly we aren't the predator but the prey. The smell of fire and smoke engulfing my senses until I can't do anything but breathe it in.

A dragon suddenly flies above us, his stone wings spread out, and a fire rains down in a line where it flies. I barely manage to jump to the side to avoid being burnt, but the man I was speaking to, he's gone. Nothing but bones are left, still burning with red flames. I scream in horror, stumbling back and tripping, right onto another dead soldier that is little more than burnt armour. In a panic, I crawl to my feet, my hands sticky with mud and ash before I start to run. I need to get as far away as I possibly can.

I'm going too fast, not looking where I'm headed, and I run straight into the path of a dragon as it lands in front of me. My foot lodges in between two rocks, and I'm stuck as I come face to face with a dragon. Blood stains its massive grey teeth, and fire lingers at the back of its throat as it looks at me. A group of soldiers run at it, spears high in the air, and it turns, sending waves of hot fire from its mouth. As they scream, I cover my ears, slamming my eyes shut. "This isn't real. This isn't real."

"Here!" A spear is shoved into my hand, and I open my eyes, looking at a soldier standing in front of the dragon. "For our dynasty. Stab this monster straight through its mouth. All you have to do is pierce its skin, and the venom will kill it. Make your death worth it."

“What?” I question, my eyes widening as I look at the spear that’s placed in my hand. It’s heavy, and the end is dripping with something that looks like silver paint. The soldier inclines his head before he starts running away, leaving me trapped. I reach down, pulling at my foot, but it is too lodged between the rocks, and I can’t escape.

My hand shakes as I look at this beautiful creature as it turns back to me, and I can’t do it. The spear drops out of my hand, and the dragon pauses. For a second, I think it’s going to show me mercy, but that’s foolish. Dragons do not show fae any mercy. It opens its mouth, and a furious, damning fire pours into me, setting every inch of me alight. I scream and scream and scream until I realise that I’m not burning anymore. I’m actually cold.

I open my eyes and shiver, finding myself sitting on the bridge in front of the pillars, faintly smelling of smoke but not a single burn on me. The doors ahead slide open as I lift my hand up in the light. On my right hand, there’s another mark.

Killing the monster was never part of that test. It was letting the dragon live even if it meant I would die.

## Chapter Nineteen

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*Page Nineteen.*

*I found a way to save them all, but...it will cost me everything. It will cost my life.*

“I come offering gifts. Well, food, but it’s meant to be a gift.”

I glance up from my rows of books at Daegan as he steps into the light of the lantern at the end of the library corridor. He’s holding up a wicker basket that I can tell is filled with food from the smell alone, and my stomach rumbles in answer to him before I even get a word out. I give him a tight smile. “My work isn’t done, not for a while yet, and there’s no food allowed in here.”

Daegan walks in. “I’m sure Mazzis will look the other way for me.” He sits down on the chair next to me, close enough his leg brushes mine. I clear the books, putting them back in the organised piles to make room. Daegan uses the space up, taking out cakes, sandwiches, fruit and dried potatoes that have been cut into circle shapes, sprinkled with salt, and they are slowly becoming one of my favourites.

I go to thank him, but the words feel too heavy to speak. It’s been awkward between us after everything that happened with Ziven. I have to admit that I’ve been avoiding him. The awkwardness doesn’t seem to fade as he looks

at me and I finally manage to speak. “Thanks for bringing food. You didn’t have to.”

“You feel guilty, and you’ve been avoiding me.” He arches an eyebrow at me when I almost go to deny it. “It’s understandable and I’m not mad at you. Being in heat makes you do insane things with people that you would never touch usually. I know this because it’s what happened with my brother, and he ended up dead because of it.”

“Your brother?” I whisper.

Daegan looks down. “He went into heat when he was around Ziven’s sister. I had no idea they even liked each other, but they spent the night together.” He waits a second, like he doesn’t have the words to describe the next part. “Ziven was furious about it, and he killed my brother over it all. He is evil, and any friendship between us died that day. There was war.”

I cover my mouth. “Ziven just killed him?”

“Yes, brutally. He left his body torn up and a moon drawn in blood on his cheek.” I can hear the pain in his voice. “Nine months later, Henrietta was born. I gather you haven’t talked about her because Ziven told you not to, and I didn’t ask in case he hurt you.”

My shoulders drop. “You were protecting me?”

“I always have done since we met.” He picks up my hand. “I really believe we have something special.” I search his eyes, unsure how to feel about this new information. I never liked Ziven from the beginning, and I was scared of him at first, but then I thought maybe he was just misunderstood. Maybe he was good. Henrietta seems to love him. “It’s part of our agreement that Henrietta stays there, and I don’t go anywhere near her. It was the only way to stop the war and keep everyone safe.”

“She’s your niece. Isn’t she?” I quietly ask. That’s why she has his tanned skin, why her hair is so fair.

He tilts his lips up. “Yes.”

I add everything up I know about him, about how he has no other blood relatives other than cousins who are distant cousins only in distant

marriage. “Does that make her your heir, too? To the Sun Dynasty and the Moon Dynasty?”

He repeats the single word. “Yes.”

I blink. “I’m surprised you let her live with him, with them, and not let her grow up knowing you.”

Daegan pours two glasses of wine for us, spilling his before answering. “Ziven may not have the numbers, but the Moon Dynasty was extremely powerful once, especially their royal family. A war between me and Ziven, it killed hundreds of our people in only a few months. We nearly lost everything. I’m not sure who would survive us going to war again, but everyone in this place who we are responsible for would be casualties of our actions. We don’t have a lot of people left, and we already have a war waiting for us outside this place with the vampyres. One of us had to be responsible. I told Ziven he could keep custody of her until she comes of age, and she can then spend time in both of the dynasties, under the terms of our laws, just like you are right now. She can make her own decisions then.”

He put his people first and Ziven didn’t? “That was good of you, to put your people first. Though it must be hard if she’s your only family left.”

He sighs, putting his glass down. “I don’t know her. I’ve not even seen her since she was one. She does not come out of the apartments much. When she does, Ziven makes sure that I’m not around.”

I have to give him something. “She’s lovely and strong.”

“I hear she looks like my brother. The blond hair was his.” He picks up a strawberry, eating it whole. “I wanted to tell you all of this so you can make a knowledgeable decision about your loyalty. Ziven doesn’t deserve your friendship. You don’t need to feel awkward about what happened in there with him. It is truly forgotten. Let’s eat together and move on from it and go on another date soon.”

“Okay,” I tell him. Though I know I’m being a complete coward, because I should tell him that it doesn’t matter if we go on other dates. I’m just not sure that we should be more than friends, but I’m grateful he told me the

truth about Ziven. I don't have it in me to start that argument right now when he brought me food and company.

Catherine is deep within the library, looking for a book that hasn't been pulled out in well over twenty years. She recommended I didn't come with her unless I wanted to be covered in dust. I happily opted out of that idea. I've been several rows in, and it's definitely dusty down there. "I'm going off to training in a bit. Calix invited me to learn how to use a bow and arrow," I explain. I'm still staying in Ziven's apartment at the moment, but he lets me come to the library now, although he hasn't really spoken to me since that night. Other than very sharp words. *Move. Go. Eat.* I'm pretty sure he hates me more now than ever.

Daegan's smile is charming. "I'll walk you to them." After we've finished our food and walk out, I find Mazzis is waiting for me with a single book in his hands this time.

He respectfully bows his head towards Daegan. "It's good to see you. I don't often find you in this library's walls."

"I missed my friend." Daegan snakes his hand around my waist, a possessive gesture. "And I brought her lunch."

Mazzis laughs. "I would tell you off about there being no food allowed in the library, but it's you." He looks at me. "Story, this book is truly memorable. I read this one over ten years ago, and I could never get it out of my head. It's addictive." He presses it into my hand. "It's a murder mystery."

"Thank you once again." I take the book and smile. I feel like I'm in the right place when I'm here. There are several authors that I've become absolutely addicted to from this immense library, and I've read everything that I could find by them. I've barely even scratched the surface of the books here. I'm still mostly living off Mazzis's recommendations, but he never gets it wrong. Ziven has left me several books on combat, and I enjoy reading those too. Why are there never enough hours in the day to read? Mazzis gives me an equal number of books on learning things I never knew and adventures to open my mind.

"Have a good day," Mazzis tells me with an easy smile.



I grin at my friend. Somehow, I tend to be good at making friends with the kings of the dynasties. “See you around, Mazzis.” He inclines his head my way, and I do the same back to him. Daegan says his goodbyes before he is leading me out. “I’m not sure whether I should bow to him. I mean, he is a king, but it feels really...strange.”

“You don’t bow to any of the kings here,” he laughs. “Don’t change that now.”

“Would you like me to bow to you?” I ask, actually curious. I look up at him.

“No, not you.”

I smile softly at him. Why does it feel like we’ve been friends for a really long time? He might not like me anymore and demand I bow when I explain how I feel about this friendship becoming any more than it is. I think I just want to be alone right now, not have my head completely jammed by both the moon and the sun like it currently is. Ziven is bad news, and I have to stay away from him. He makes that easy by not talking to me.

I barely get two steps into the training room when Sterling steps right up into my space. Calix is a few steps behind her, rushing over. “Story, you turned up!”

“I know you usually do morning training, so why are you here?” Sterling doesn’t waste a moment.

“Don’t be rude,” Calix interrupts, looking at her. “I invited her for training, and she is welcome—”

“Not after what she did,” Sterling all but screeches. “The king might like her, but I do not.”

Oh, this is about Ziven? “I think you’ll find Ziven doesn’t like me.”

Sterling crosses her arms. “I’m not training with this stupid bitch—”

Daegan’s hands glow like burning suns. “Stop.”

She seems to just realise the Sun Dynasty king is here, and she pauses. Her eyes flicker to me. “You want to train? Then fine, you can train against me. Except it’ll be a fight, and the only way one of us loses is passing out or tapping out. Three taps on the floor, and you better make sure I see you do them.” She walks over to the massive mat in the centre of the room. “Come on.”

Calix shakes his head. “No, no. Ziven’s not here and—”

“I’m sure the perfect stranger can make her own decisions.” Sterling opens her arms, walking backwards.

“She’s not fighting.” Daegan’s tone is final.

She laughs, looking me up and down. “Fine then. I’m demanding a challenge in the name of the Decidere.”

“Fuck,” Calix swears, rubbing his face. Even Daegan goes silent. Calix lowers his voice. “Participants in the Decidere cannot refuse a challenge issued by anyone else.”

My mouth goes dry. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

Daegan leans closer. “He’s not. If she challenges you, she’s challenging you for your place in the Decidere, for the marks on your hands and arms. If she wins, the marks will go to her, and she will take your place on Sunday. She has never been in the Decidere before, and it’s a cheap way to get in.”

“It’s not something we practice. It’s a cowardly move,” Calix agrees, loud enough for the crowd that has circled around us and for Sterling to hear.

Sterling shrugs a shoulder. “On the mat. I’ll wait for you.”

She sneers at me before walking away. My hands are already sweaty. “Let me guess, she’s a really good fighter.”

Calix winces. “Yes. I’m going to go and get Ziven. Maybe he can stop her.”

He runs off, leaving me alone with Daegan and most of the Moon Dynasty staring at us. He leans so close to my ear. “Say the word and I’ll kill her.”

“Daegan, don’t,” I quickly answer. I know that it’d be one hell of a fight, and it would hurt Ziven’s people, what he’s got left of them. I won’t be the one to cause that, even if Ziven can’t be trusted and we are nothing to each other anymore. “I’ll be okay.”

“No, you won’t.” He grabs my wrist, holding me in place, tight enough that he almost hurts me. “You can’t die like this!”

He looks furious, and I cover his hand on my wrist. “Let me go, please.” Daegan doesn’t for a second, looking around like he wants to fight all of them, but he finally releases me with a frustrated blow of breath. He follows me over to the mat where Sterling is waiting.

I straighten my back and nod towards her. She cracks her knuckles. “I’m going to enjoy this. Did you really think you’d come into our dynasty, claim the king, and no one would be bothered by that?” Claim him? What the fuck is she talking about? “Do you not think he’s promised to other people? He’s our king!”

Some people clap from the crowd, and the back of my neck feels warm. I didn’t claim anything or anyone, but I’m not arguing that with her. “Unless we’re having a fight with words, perhaps we get on with it?”

I refuse to show that I’m absolutely terrified of fighting her, but she isn’t the worst monster to ever hurt me. Nothing she could do could compare to the pain I’ve experienced in the past. A part of me doesn’t want to lose the marks that I’ve earned in the Decidere, lose those dragons and my chance of being a dragon rider. I’m not sure if that’s even something I want, but these marks, I earned them. She’s not taking them from me.

Sterling goes straight for me. She doesn’t waste time, and she’s fast. I barely dodge out of her way, but she catches the side of my top, yanking me back and tearing at the side as she punches me straight in the throat. I gasp for air as I stumble away, just looking up in time as she comes straight at me with her boot. But I jump away, still gasping for air from the hit but managing to focus. She comes at me again, and that’s when I notice the dagger in her hand. My eyes widen and I steer away to the other side of the mat. “Weapons weren’t part of the challenge.”

“Weapons are allowed in the challenge.” She waves me over. “And it will make this over quick.”

A dagger is pressed into my hand, and I turn back, seeing Etena. “Calix told me, and I ran here.”

“I’ve not fought with daggers!” I whisper, never taking my eyes off Sterling.

“Here’s a hint. Stab with the pointy end.”

I can feel her rolling her eyes at me, but I don’t have time to reply, as Sterling is on me. We start circling each other, Daegan shouting over the cheering. “Sterling, whatever you want, it is yours, just stop this.”

Sterling huffs. “I want her blood on my hands. There’s nothing you can offer me, Sun king. I’m not part of your dynasty.”

“Where the fuck is Ziven?” Daegan roars. I try to block him out and focus on Sterling, knowing if I let my guard down, she is going to kill me. She doesn’t want me to pass out, she wants me dead. She lashes for me, her dagger cutting straight across my thigh, but I quickly use my other hand as I ignore the pain, swinging out so my dagger cuts straight across her arm. She cries out as she reaches for my throat with her hand, but I dodge out of the way, her fingers slipping through my hair and yanking some of the locks with her. I wish I’d tied it back.

For a while, I manage to avoid her. I’m simply moving out of the way as quickly as possible, and after a few minutes, I think she’s doing it on purpose to wear me out. I remember Ziven telling me that it’s a good way to beat a fast enemy. To keep them fighting and eventually they will get tired. I might have speed on my side because she’s quite tall, more muscular than I am, but I would have to eventually slow down.

I need to end this quickly, but I don’t have the skills to beat her. Daegan’s right, she is going to kill me. I can’t beat her. Focus, Story. There has to be a way. Getting close to her means a very good chance of that dagger going through a part of my body. Not that I haven’t had daggers stuck in me before and survived it. I barely even feel the pain from the cut pouring from my leg, and I certainly don’t let it slow me down.

I feel the minute Ziven arrives. Sterling's eyes flicker over my head. "Stop her!" Daegan's demand echoes to me.

"It is a challenge," Ziven purrs. "So, no." The word rings out. He's not going to help me.

"I told you to fucking stop this madness. If she dies in there—"

"I said no. I'm not helping her." Ziven's lethal voice is firm. Daegan goes quiet, and if he is talking, I can't hear him. I don't know why I expected Ziven to help me. Of course he wouldn't. Ziven has come to watch his enemy fail and die.

Sterling corners me, lashing out again with that sharp dagger of hers, and I barely block it, grabbing her wrist. I pull my knee up straight into her stomach, and she falls over with a scream. I quickly run away to the other side of the mat, getting my breath back.

Large warm fingers wrap around my waist, one fingertip dipping into the band of my trousers just barely. My heart races as Ziven's hot breath blows near my ear. "We both know you can win this, Storm. I trained you, and no one gets to hurt my enemy other than me. Get back in there and fight."

His hand slips away, along with him, and for some reason, those words give me strength. With that strength, I decide to attack her first, and she doesn't expect it. She blocks my dagger that I was aiming straight at her shoulder, but that was a distraction. I kick her other hand, knocking her dagger straight out, and it flies across the mat. Her eyes widen as I lift my fist and punch her straight in the face. My thumb cracks under the pressure, but a feeling of satisfaction powers me. I wrap my leg around hers, using the same move that I read about and practiced with Ziven, knocking her straight down. I jump on her, grabbing my dagger tightly in my grip and holding it straight above her heart. Her eyes widen as she looks up at me. "Where the fuck did you learn that?"

I lean down, breathless, but I can't help smiling. "Your king taught me. Tap out."

"You won't stab me!" she shouts back, anger burning in her eyes as bright as her cheeks.

“Really want to bet on that?” I ask, knowing she might be right. The Story who walked in here by accident months ago wouldn’t have dared to do it, to hurt anyone. But I’m not her anymore. I chose to live; I chose to have a life, and I’m not backing down. “You tried to steal everything I earned and risked my life for.” I push the dagger slightly into her skin. “I have been used and abused for most of my fucking life. I have never had someone stand behind me, train me, and tell me I can do this. Do you think there is even a second of doubt that I won’t push this into you to save myself? Because I will.” I make sure to look her in the eye. “Because I’ve done everything possible to save myself and decide I want to live. That isn’t changing because of you.”

Whatever she sees in my eyes makes her tap the floor three times, and I climb off her. Cheers echo around, and I glance over as Ziven steps to my side, taking the dagger from my hand. He flings it and it flies across the room, straight into Sterling’s shoulder. She screams, falling to the ground. The cheers go silent. “Next time anyone makes a challenge against her, that will be just the start of what will happen to you.”

He walks away without another word, leaving everyone staring at me, including Daegan. Daegan walks away without saying anything, but the look of disappointment in his eyes is not going to be easy to forget.

## Chapter Twenty

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*Page Twenty.*

*The books are death, bound and printed by the deities. I wish I never, ever prayed to them.*

There are only three of us left. Catherine, Fritz, and me. I stand between both of them, watching the doors to the Decidere, feeling the music of the drums beating like they are my own heartbeat. The last test was brutal, and truthfully, I'm worried about doing the next if they are all going to be like that one. I look at Catherine, admiring how calm she is. I know her though, and she will be very uncalm on the inside even if she manages to hide it super well. "Do you feel like this will be the last one for you? It feels like it might be mine."

Catherine opens her mouth to reply, but it's Fritz who interrupts. "It won't be mine." I glance at him as he carries on. "The Moon Dynasty has the strongest dragons and powerful riders. I will join them, finally." Fritz drops his eyes to me and quickly looks away. "You must be good. Our king made it clear I'm not to touch you today."

He really is disgusting.

“Maybe he just wants you focusing on what’s important—becoming a rider,” I snarkily reply. “But I’m happy you’re leaving us alone.”

I don’t want to speak to him anymore, and I turn to Catherine. I take her hand and squeeze it once. She squeezes it back. “You’ve got this.”

She gulps. “We can fly together.”

“It’s a vow,” I whisper back, making sure Fritz can’t hear and make fun of us. I say it as confidently as I can, even if I don’t feel that way, but I know she needs to hear it. Daegan steps up in front of the doors, beams of light glittering above us like twinkling stars, and the drums stop. Daegan looks at me and smiles softly before looking around at the crowd as they go quiet.

I thought he was upset with me after the challenge, but when I saw him yesterday, he acted like nothing happened. Ziven still hasn’t come anywhere near me, and he doesn’t even come to the meals. Hettie told me he is eating in his room and training all day with a grumpy face on him. He is not here, and I didn’t expect him to be. But Calix, the twins, and all of the Moon Dynasty are missing too. I thought they might come to witness, but I guess not.

“We are making history here in our home as we welcome these three into the seventh Decidere. In our history, not many have gotten this far, and we are exceedingly proud of the three fae that stand before us!” Cheers echo so loud they hurt my ears. “They are ready to take their places with the dragons. We wish you well, and we will pray to the deities for your safe return. May the sun and dragons be with you.”

He raises his hands, and the doors slide open. Fritz runs in like something’s on fire behind him, but Catherine and I walk straight to the door. It slams shut behind us with a bang that echoes loud. Neither of us talks or wastes any time up here, not when a dragon could appear at any moment and we would have to escape. We make our way to the steps, rushing to the bottom, and I don’t see Fritz, but I don’t really care. Thankfully, it’s empty and silent down here. I can’t hear any dragons roaring. Catherine still whispers. “The light’s coming this way for me.” She points far to the left.

I don’t have to look long before I see the familiar red glow from deep within the stones, right in the middle aisle. “The light is straight ahead for



me.” It’s getting brighter by the second, burning bright red like a red sun high in the sky. “Good luck.”

“Good luck to you too,” she echoes. No matter how confident I’ve become over the last few weeks, every time I’m in front of these stones, I feel like a scared child watching the forest, imagining all the monsters that could lurk within. Catherine runs for her pillar, and I smile at her back. I really, really want her to win this and become a rider. Any dragon would be lucky to have her...but me? I’m broken and I can’t imagine any dragon wanting me at all.

I walk through the pillars, my heart pounding as I come to the red glowing light. The symbol of the dragon is so bright it hurts to look at, but I touch it with my finger. Everything seems to change around me, a red fog blowing around in the breeze, swirling fast, and when it settles, I’m no longer in the pillars. I’m in a forest, thick, old trees spread up high, and it’s the forest I know. It’s the one I grew up in.

I look over my shoulder at the village ahead, smoke rising in the air from the huts. My heart races—my mother might be there. I remember that Blaire was told she had been moved to another district, but it doesn’t stop my feet from taking off for my old home. The only place in the world I have ever felt safe. Even if she isn’t there, I just want to see our old home once more.

I race through the forest, down the familiar paths that are deserted, and into the village. I know my way around the huts, hearing children’s laughter from within several of them but never seeing any faces. I find ours, right in the corner of the village, nestled in thick grass and hedges. The blue, curved bark walls make most of the hut, and straw is laid on the top. A small hole is letting smoke out, and that means someone might be in there.

Warm light from the fire glows through the edges of the blue door. The same door that marked my height from when I was a toddler, all the way until I was thirteen. It was a birth year tradition—chocolate cake, swimming in the lake, and making a new mark on the door. My hand shakes as I pull the door open and step inside, into the entrance hall. There are curtained areas hiding our beds, a small fire pit in the middle, and not much else in here.

None of it matters because my mother is there. She's sitting cross-legged next to the fire, in front of a low stone table I've never seen. A long, sage green dress covers her from the neck down, the colour of a breeder, and I thought it always washed out my mother's beautiful red hair, pale skin, and sharp features. When she looks up, her eyes are nothing but burning red flames. "Sit down, Story Dehana."

"Mum?" My hoarse croak lingers in the air. "Is it really you?"

"Sit down," she repeats. Her voice is so much like my mother's, but it is lacking the warmth I always heard when she spoke to me. Whoever this is, it is not my mother but some kind of cruel pretence. I can pretend too, just pretend that she is my mother, and I am getting the reward of seeing her again when I thought I never would. Her eyes, they keep burning like a fire that's never going to stop, and it sends a chill down my spine. I glance at the cushion in front of the table before I sit down on it, and a deck of cards appears in the centre of the table. My mother runs her hands over the deck, and they spread out, all of them face down. "Choose a card."

I don't know what game we are playing, what part of the Decidere this is, but I pick up one and hold it up in front of me. On the card is a picture of death, a man hidden in a black cloak, and he is holding an hourglass. I know these kinds of cards. My mum used to have them, and I played with them sometimes when she wasn't looking. Tarot cards of the old fae. She said that they were used by fae years ago and they could predict futures. That gift is long gone, never seen again, like so much of our magic. "It's death."

The second I lay the card down, she makes her demand. "Pick another." There is an energy in the air, a tension that makes me think twice about refusing. This is a test, I'm not sure about what, but I don't want to say no. I choose the last card on the left, turning it over.

It's a scene that is clearly of two lovers, kissing in a ballroom, their faces hidden. "Death and a lover?"

"They are one," she responds. I think of Ziven, how easily he wanted me dead, but how different he was in that bathroom. How he could easily make me think and feel like we weren't enemies at all. "Pick another card."

Running my eyes over the deck, I choose my next one in the middle. The word *sacrifice* is written on the card. There's a beautiful drawing of death itself. Bone face and bone hands are all that can be seen under a dark hood, its own hands wrapped around its neck. "Sacrifice."

"You have your answer. Now you face your trial." The smoke fades away, blowing everything around it until it's just my mother and me, alone in an empty space. "Only one leaves."

"No." Horror chokes my response. Two daggers appear in my hands, and I lift the shiny red blades. I know what I'm doing as I let them go, and they clink as they drop onto the ground.

My mother, or whatever this thing is, tilts her head to the side. "Do you refuse us?"

Tears burn in my eyes. "My mother is all I have in this world. I know you're not her, but I cannot do this."

My mother's voice changes, growing darker. "You will not gain your seventh mark."

I wipe my tears away. "I know." My mother fades away in red smoke, leaving me in front of the doors of the Decidere. Turning around, I see Catherine on the back of a stone dragon, flying across the pillars and diving below. Fritz is right after her, on a smaller dragon, but it's fast, and I barely see them for a second. I wait and wait, but no dragon comes for me, nothing changes. I glance at my hands, my arms, not seeing another mark, and it's clear my Decidere is over.

The doors swing open behind me, and I step out into the bright light, finding only Daegan waiting for me. "You're safe."

He hugs me, running his hand down my back, but I feel lost. "Don't be sad, Story. You may have failed the seventh Decidere, but it's amazing you even got that far. The dragons, they haven't chosen you as a new rider, but I didn't think they would. I am sorry."

"How do you know that?" I question as he still holds me. I need him to hold me up right now.

“Our marks glow the colour of our powers, of our dynasty.” His reply only crushes me more. “When we ride our dragons, they glow. They would be glowing a bright yellow for the Sun Dynasty.”

He takes my hand when he pulls away. I can't wash away the disappointment I feel. I wanted that more than I thought I did. “There were only twenty riders chosen this year, much fewer than usual. I'm sure that's the reason why they didn't choose you. Do not worry, I will protect you from anything that comes. But first, the celebration ball will be held on Saturday. Ziven said that your time in his dynasty is over after it.”

My eyes drift over my shoulder as the door to the Decidere closes, my hope of being a dragon rider with it.

## Chapter Twenty-One

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*Page Twenty-One.*

*Does he love me? Will he ever? I feel like a fool dancing in the light of the moon, with the sun burnt into my back when I'm near them. Dawn...he watches. He watches until any light within him turns into hate.*

I'm curled up in a chair in the living room when Ruelle and Hettie come into the room. I'm surprised to see them so early in the morning. In fact, I've barely seen any of the Moon Dynasty since the end of the seventh test, and I've given up trying to find them in this place where nearly all of the doors are locked. I eat alone now, back in my room, and I don't have it in me to argue with that. Hettie is in a dark dress, the black dress made of tiny flowers, and I can't help but wonder if it would look prettier in a more colourful shade than black. Her blonde hair is what makes me smile. She has braided the front of her hair across her head, hanging down on her left side just like mine.

"Are you sad?" Hettie questions from the door. Ruelle waits at her side, her hands clasped together on her walking stick. "Grandmother said you might

be sad, so I'm not going to come here to annoy and upset you."

"You could never, Hettie." I playfully widen my arms. "I'm happy and I would love your company."

Hettie grins so brightly and her smile reminds me of Daegan now I know who she really is. It's hard to think she could be anyone else. Hettie looks up at Ruelle. "See, told you so."

"Yes, you were right. Do not get used to it; the young always make some mistakes." She taps Hettie's nose before looking at me. "We were reading an interesting book, and Hettie told me how much you love books and how you might like to listen to this one. May we join you?"

"I would love that." I put down my own book on defence moves as Hettie runs in, and she sits on my lap. Ruelle takes the chair opposite us, and soon the only noise is the flickering embers. The smoky scent of the room is comforting, along with Hettie's hug as Ruelle wastes no time digging into her book. "This book is a fairy tale, something none of us knows if it's true or not. I must tell you that from the beginning, as you might fear the world after reading my tale."

"How scary," Hettie murmurs under her breath.

Ruelle reads fast and quick, like she has read this book a million times. "This story is about a prince of the Dawn Dynasty, born years past. His father, the king, was very sick. It was a surprise when the prince was born, a miracle baby and an heir at last. He slowly became the only one left in the Dawn Dynasty line, and he had to make sure it continued. Long ago, the Dawn Dynasty was trusted with the protection of two books. The books were written by magical beings foreign to this world, and the Dawn king was warned they must never be opened. One was silver, one was gold. Twins in everything but their contents and colour. They were claimed to be written by beings older than the deities themselves."

"How interesting." I lean forward. I've never heard anything like this, yet it's familiar. It reminds me of some of the pages in the weird book Daegan gave me.

“He took the books, which should never have been opened, for himself. The vow that the Dawn Dynasty took when they acquired the books was long gone in his mind. His wife warned him not to open them, but he was very determined that they had to be opened because neither one of them had an heir, and an heir was needed to continue on in peace. Without an heir, the Dawn Dynasty would fail and die. He opened the books to find a cure for his wife’s infertility, but he did not want to risk her life. He loved her dearly, and so, in the choice of not risking her life, he used the magic on himself. A dark twisted spell, and it turned him into the first vampyre ever known to our world.” My mouth is dry as I listen. “There was once a fae prince who read every book known to the world. He was a fae who loved to read, and it cost him too much. When he was done, he used the dark magics of the ancient books he found to make the first vampyre. He turned himself immortal so that he may never die, and he conquered the world from the dragon riders in five days.”

“Is that true? Five days?” I question.

“Our history tells us it was over quickly, so parts of this tale might be true,” Ruelle agrees. “I will continue on. The vampyres not only bred their immortality, but he used their magic to make thousands of them overnight, until he had an unstoppable army. There came a price. After a while, it became obvious that he could not make any more vampyres, and his wife, who ran from him, had taken the books and disappeared.”

“His wife had stolen the books?” Hettie asks. “What a twist! He did all of that for her and she left him!”

“Maybe she didn’t want to be transformed,” I muse. “This is why I love reading. It tells you stories that you would never hear otherwise.”

Ruelle nods. “Anyone who believes a book isn’t the most powerful weapon in the world is a complete fool.” She glances at Hettie. “One of the lessons I repeatedly tell this one over here who doesn’t like to read.”

My mouth pops open. “You don’t like to read, Hettie?”

She shrugs. “I get a bit bored.”

The bell rings, echoing throughout the corridors, marking the next hour. “I’ve got to get to the library for work, but I’d love to see you soon.”

“She will find you, no doubt,” Ruelle says as we both climb up off the chair. Hettie hugs me tight before running off, and Ruelle sighs. “You looked so sad when you first got here. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I recognise grief. Now you’re grieving a dragon you’ve never met. I’m sorry. The dragons’ logic can never be completely understood by us. They are immortal creatures who have lived in this world long before fae ever existed.” She walks away and looks back. “I really did think you’d come out to be one of the best dragon riders yet.”

I smile faintly at her. “But I won’t. It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” Ruelle replies as she walks away. I shake my head, waiting a few moments to calm down and make sure I don’t cry before I leave the Moon Dynasty apartment, nodding at the two guards. When I get closer to the dragon in the centre, I pause when I overhear arguing. I recognise Ziven. “I don’t agree anymore.”

Daegan’s reply is swift and almost sarcastic. “Why?” He laughs once. “Oh, don’t tell me you’ve actually... You were always the weak one of the pair of us, and look where that has kept us for all these years! Our people come first. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that.”

I hear someone slam something into a wall. Maybe a person. Ziven’s tone is unyielding and bitter. “I have *never* fucking forgotten that, but this isn’t the right way.”

“It’s the only way!” Daegan growls back. “Just look the other way and don’t get involved. You should have done that last time with our siblings and—”

“You’re fucking dead,” Ziven answers, and I don’t doubt him for a second. My heart bangs in my chest as I step out of the corridor to interrupt them. Silver fire explodes out of Ziven, bursting in every direction, and I’m immediately caught in the silver fire. A wave of fire lands straight in my chest like a whip, and I go flying back, slamming into the wall as I scream in pain.



“Story!” Daegan shouts, running over. I wince as he picks me up into his arms and holds me against my chest. “You’re a fucking monster, King Ziven!”

I look at Ziven through the pain, through the dark dots clouding my vision. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him look different...guilty. “Storm, I didn’t mean—”

“This is why you’re a monster and why you should stay down in these apartments. Story, not Storm—that’s not her name—will not be coming back here again.” Daegan carries me away before Ziven can say anything at all to that. He won’t say anything. He wanted me gone anyway. “I’ll get you to a healer. I’m sorry that he did that to you. I love you, Story, and I will make sure no one hurts you again.”

I’m glad I pass out, because I don’t know what I’d ever say back to him as my mind stays with the Moon Dynasty king.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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*Page Twenty-Two.*

*I've decided what I have to do next. I will fix my mistake before it ends the world. My dragon must live...and so must they.*

**“W**e're leaving. This life for you is over.”

Kyrell pulls the quilts off me, his whisper feeling louder than it is in the darkness. I blink at the light as he sets a lamp next to my bedside.

I grin, pulling him into a hug and not caring about the consequences. “You're back. I've missed you,” I express.

He hugs me back but then he pulls away, lifting my face. His magic spreads across my body, healing the bruises he finds. “You don't look well. I'm so sorry I couldn't get back.” He lowers his hands to mine. “The prince used my power on his new experiments, and I'm guessing he has been careful enough with you so I wouldn't need to come. I believe he saw how disgusted I was and the fact that I clearly care about you.” He sighs. “I was never leaving you here, and we are leaving. Get up.”

“What are you talking about?” I shake my head.

*“We’re going. Now.” He pulls me from the bed, but I yank my hands from his. “The king is coming here tomorrow. The prince is distracted tonight but this will be your last chance. There isn’t time to tell you everything, but I promise this is the only chance we have to get out. I’ve made sure everything will—”*

*“Like last time?” My voice is hollow, as empty as I feel. “I don’t want this birth year to be even worse by losing you. It feels like a joke that I’ve just turned twenty-two and you’re doing this. I’m not trying to escape with you again. You’ll end up getting killed, and I cannot live with that. I can barely live with myself as it is!” My voice breaks and tears fall too fast between us.*

*He cups both of my cheeks, holding my gaze. I know he cares about me, loves me—I can see it—but this is too risky. “I lost the love of my life that night, and there will never be anyone else for me. If I don’t keep trying, he died for nothing. I made a vow to the deities that I would get you out of this life. You’re my best friend and you need a chance of living in this miserable world where not everyone ever gets a chance. You need a life out of here, to be that bright and fucking amazing person I know is there in your soul.”*

*I sob, clasping his arms. “I can’t—” I can barely get the words out. “I’m broken, used, and I should be dead!”*

*“You are not any of those things. You’re special and you’re my best friend.” Tears fall from his eyes. “You don’t need to be his blood slave. I’m not having that be your life, so we’re going to escape. There is a boat waiting for you to the south, and you’ve only got to get to it. Promise me when I get you out of this castle that you’ll do that if I’m not with you. I know a way out, a secret passageway of tunnels above the castle ceilings. You’re going to go that way with me, okay?”*

*My body shakes. “I can’t. Please don’t expect me to be brave. I am not. I’m not you!” I whisper. “You’re so full of hope and life, and you want more from the world. I just want to die!”*

*“You’re not a very good liar, at least not to me.” His voice is gentle. “You are brave like your mother and fierce like your father was rumoured to be. I’ve planned this for months and months, knowing that you are more than strong enough to break out. I believe in you, even if you don’t believe in*

*yourself. Lewin and my mother wanted you to escape just as much as I did.”*

*“He will kill me if he catches me trying to escape again. He would kill you first to punish me.” I can’t risk him. He is all I have left. “This would be madness. Just madness.”*

*“Live, Story Dehana. Come on, try to have a life that you choose. Even if you die trying to escape, isn’t it better than slowly dying in here?” He looks right into my eyes. “We both know he will never let you go. He really believes he loves you when that thing doesn’t know what the word means. I love you; you are my family and I can’t stand back to watch your soul being chipped away day by day anymore. We have a chance. I want you to promise me that you’re going to try to live. That you’re going to fight, with all the blood still pumping in your veins that belongs to you—not him. Because this world needs you. It needs readers, dreamers and people who love without conditions.”*

*“Okay,” I breathe the word out. “I don’t want to die here. I don’t want to be here. I-I can choose to leave with you and take the chance even if I’m scared.”*

*Saying the word okay is so much more than just a word; it feels like snapping out of the slumber that I’ve been in. How numb I felt since my twenty-first birth year, since I was a teenager and taken by the prince. My heart beats faster, not in fear this time but in my strength. “Then change and let’s go.”*

*I quickly throw on the clothes hidden in the bottom of my drawers, dark leggings and a matching top, before coming back to Kyrell, who is waiting by the door. He nods at me, offering me his hand, and I take it before we are racing out the door. My guards are lying on the floor, snoring deeply, and I don’t have time to wonder what Kyrell did to them. My hair flows behind me as we run, only a single braid pulling the locks from my face, and he stops suddenly, opening a door, and we both go inside. He locks it behind us, slipping the key into his pocket. It’s dark, but there is light coming from the window, and I can just about make out the shelves of the closet. He pulls out a sturdy box into the middle of the room, standing on it, and he moves a metal cross-patterned grate in the ceiling. “Up you go, Tory.”*

*With his help, I climb on the box and jump into the gap, Kyrell pushing my foot up to help me get in. My boots slide on the stone, making too much noise and I pull them off, leaving them in the tunnel. It's a small tunnel with cold air blowing through it from somewhere, and way too many cobwebs. Kyrell comes up next, far more gracefully than I did, pulling the grate back over and clicking it in place. "Here are the locks." He points them out to me, tiny latches on the edges, as he clicks them all shut. "We need to get to the south of the castle—this way." We crawl for a while through the tunnels, and I stay close, keeping as silent as I can. Vampyres can hear anything, but I doubt they would think to look up here. When we get to a cross path in the tunnels, he looks back at me. "Do you remember the path you drew from last time?"*

*"Vaguely," I whisper.*

*"Just run through the gardens. I've paid people to look the other way, and there will be fae looking out for you, making sure their masters don't see," he tells me. I thought this was a random plan, but it sounds like he has been planning this for a long time. "Get to the sea. There'll be a boat waiting there for you."*

*"You sound like you're not coming with me."*

*He shakes his head. "Wherever you are, Tory, I'll be with you. Even if we both end up dead. I need you to know this in case anything goes wrong."*

*I crawl after him through the tunnels again, and it's so tight, the walls pushing against my shoulders all the way and making it hard to breathe. When we get to a corner, he opens up a grate and looks down, waiting for a moment to make sure it's empty. "That way goes over the throne room." I glance at it over his shoulder. How narrow it is. "I won't get through there, but you can. I'm a guard in the castle. No one's going to look my way, and I'll find you."*

*"I don't want us to—"*

*"Story, I believe the deities are on our side. We will be okay." He kisses my forehead. "Be brave." He drops down the gap before I can talk him out of it, winking playfully up at me. "See you soon."*

*Reluctantly, I click the locks shut and begin crawling over and into the tunnel. There is a gap at the edge, where the stone has worn away, and I can just about see him through the grates, walking with his head bowed, but then he stops. My heart's in my chest as I powerlessly watch as two guards grab his arms and start dragging him towards a room. The throne room. I can't breathe as I can do nothing but crawl faster through the tunnel, searching for the entrance to the tunnels above the throne room. As quietly as possible, I find the right one and search the tunnel above the throne room until I get to a small gap where I can see in. There's only a sliver of space between the stones, barely anything to see through.*

*I watch as Kyrell is thrown in front of the throne, and sickness rises in my throat. The prince isn't here anymore, but there's a man on the throne. A man with a crown that can only mark him as one person—the vampyre king. Blood red crystal spikes stretch up like thorns all the way across the crown, and his long silver hair falls in locks all down his back. His eyes burn bright orange, like fire almost, but his skin is pale. It almost looks like it's cracking with age. He might have once been handsome, but now he is hard to look at, and my blood runs cold. He has my best friend. The king leans back, clicking his long nails on the arm of the red throne. "You were guarding my son's favourite blood slave's room. Where is she?" When Kyrell says nothing, he continues. "I went to get her, and she's gone."*

*"I have not seen her, your highness," Kyrell answers, barely holding in the fear in his voice. Or the hate.*

*"Do not lie to your king, fae slave." The king's roar echoes so loud it hurts my ears even up here. "I know you have her hidden, but it is only a matter of time. You have been known to my spies for months, Kyrell. Your mother too. I enjoyed torturing her for information, but she did not talk."*

*"You bastard!" Kyrell roars, and the guard grabs his shoulder, punching him hard in the face with his other hand. The king carries on, "You know our laws, boy. You have been known to consort in the city with the fae that do not want to be ruled anymore. Fools, the lot of you. I will enjoy ripping out any trace of this rebellion with my teeth."*

*Kyrell lifts his head. "You will never be rid of us. We never asked to be ruled by you." He stands up, and the king lifts his hand, telling the guards*

to let him. “The fae will get revenge, and you will burn for it. You will never find her either.”

Kyrell. Tears slip into my lips, the salty taste doing nothing to stop me from wanting to go down there and risk everything. The only reason I don't is because we would both end up dead, and Kyrell wanted me to promise to live. I promise, Kyrell. I will live for you.

The king gets off his throne, heavy and expensive clothing draped in red and silver. “For years, I've looked for something across every part of this world.” He begins walking around Kyrell, his thick boots slamming onto the tiles. “A book, two books actually, but only one of them really matters to me. It was hidden by someone, someone that I loved so long ago. She took it, and in it contained magic on how to turn fae, like yourself, into vampyres. Only certain bloodlines could work.” He stops in front of Kyrell. “I asked my son for help, and he asked for something in return. My son has refused every marriage offer that I gave him, every female that I presented, until he admitted he was in love with someone else. A fae. I understood him. I have a blood slave myself and she is perfection. If I could turn her into a vampyre, I would. But I need this book to continue my work. The last known records of it were in the city. I told my son, if he found it, he could turn his precious blood slave into a vampyre and marry her. He found the book two years ago.”

My heart nearly stops. He wanted to turn me into a vampyre, a monster like him? “Only a few days ago, he made the magic work. I came here to witness him turn her, a mere fae bitch, into a vampyre princess. Tell me where she is. It is an honour we wish to give her. She will bear his children, live at his side forever, and one day be a queen.”

He doesn't speak; he doesn't say a word. I know in my heart he would die keeping me safe—I'd do the same for him, but I can't. I cover my mouth as the king yanks Kyrell's head back. “I will rip you apart to find out where Story Dehana is. You will talk.”

“She's free, and nothing you could do to me would make me tell you where she is.” Kyrell laughs and the sound echoes in the throne room like a ghost. I will stay and watch, and when he is thrown in the dungeons, I can get him

*out. We can still escape together. We can still—“She is free from your monster of a son, and she will live! I will never tell you where she is.”*

*The king looks him in the eye, nodding his head. “I believe you.” Suddenly, the king slams his hand into Kyrell’s chest, and I barely hold in my scream that would mix with Kyrell’s as his heart is ripped from his chest. My best friend stays on his knees for only a second before he falls with a thud on the ground.*

*He’s gone, dead.*

*He died to protect me.*

*The king roars as he squeezes my friend’s heart into nothing but slush and blood. “Find her. Search the castle. Search the fucking city and find my son. She couldn’t have gone far, and bring her to me!”*

*The guards run out, shouts echoing with the command as the king walks out of the throne room, leaving Kyrell dead in the centre of it. Live, Story. Keep moving. I can hear his voice in my head like he is still alive, and I move. With tears falling down my face, I quickly get moving, scurrying down the stone. I’m unsure of which path in the next crossroads, but I can’t stop. I keep going forward, keep moving, keep living. For my best friend. I have to live—for my best friend.*

*When I come to an exit grate that leads outside the castle, I slowly open the locks and look around. I don’t see anything but the stars and the moon for company. The entrance to the Hydra Forest to the north is in front of me, the thick wooden gate that is swung open in the wind and rain. I’m on the wrong side of the castle. I have to take this chance. I climb out of the grate and run into the forest, and I don’t look back.*

*I blink from the memory, pulling my eyes from the forest outside the window, and look down at the book I was reading, Daegan’s book, as I don’t have a title for it. I’m reading the last pages of my book when the bedroom door is knocked twice, and I sigh, putting it down before walking over to the door. Daegan is waiting on the other side in a dark brown tux. His eyes widen as he looks me over from head to toe. “Where did you get that dress? It wasn’t one I left out.”*



I clear my throat. I thought he might not like the dress, but I really do. It's the first dress I've chosen for myself. The midnight purple dress is beautiful, and I loved it right away. The top half has glittery purple fabric and a tight corset that falls into a ballgown skirt, which looks like stained glass flowers. It shimmers as I move, glittering almost. A long slit reaches up to my thigh, making it easy to move in. "It's not just one colour. Ruelle gave it to me, as she claimed she was too old to attend in a dress." I touch the gold leaf necklaces around my neck. "But I wore these that you left for me. Thank you."

"What did you mean by the colour?" he questions, stepping into my room. If he was mad, it's gone now, and he seems content that I chose to wear the necklaces he selected.

"When you're in the dark, it's purple, but when there's light, it looks green." Daegan tilts his head, shining sunlight from his hand onto me, lighting up the dress that sparkles green. "Lovely, right?"

The light fades. "If she wasn't from the Moon Dynasty, I'd thank her. You look absolutely exquisite in this dress." He steps closer, running his hand down my spine. I wish that, when he touched me, it felt like it did when Ziven did. I don't feel anything. He glances at the book on the side when I step back. "Are you still reading the book I gave you? I thought you'd be done with it by now."

"Yes, I'm on the last page, but we can go—"

"We have all night. Read it," he offers, sitting on the edge of my bed.

"I need to put my shoes on first." I grin at him. I quickly slip on my heels, happy they fit so well. I'm not going to ask how Daegan knew what shoe size I am. I grab the book, sitting down on the edge of the bed and reading the final page.

"I found a way to save them, but it's going to cost me. I cannot live with myself any other way. I will take the books, and I will do what is needed. May the deities bless me with hope and not hate me, but he might. War crushes every soul that enters the battlefield, but what if I could stop the war, just for a time?" I turn the page, only to see the rest has been ripped

out. I lift the book. “Look, the ending’s been ripped out! I won’t know what she did. That’s so frustrating.”

“Maybe we can find the pages after the ball.” He offers me his hand.

“Are you sure you don’t know where they are?” I run my fingers over the ripped pages, my loose hair falling over my bare shoulders. I didn’t braid it tonight, and I tuck it behind my ears. “At least twenty pages have been ripped out of the back. I’m surprised I didn’t notice it before.”

Daegan slips the book from my hands and puts it down. “I will find the ending for you. It has to be around here somewhere. Now come, I really want to dance with you.” He really looks very handsome. “Are you any good at dancing?”

For some reason, the question really bothers me. I haven’t told him much about my past, yet he claims to love me. If he knew me at all, he’d know I’m very good at dancing and it’s one of the things I was taught by Emyr that I like. I was forced to dance with Emyr nearly every weekend, sometimes more than that in a week. I was taught to dance to absolute perfection, but he never knew I enjoyed the freedom I felt when I was dancing. I’ve danced with my leg broken once. I’ve danced and danced until my feet are torn up, because I was always a puppet on his string, doing anything he commanded. If I hadn’t escaped, it would have been like that forever.

He can never find me, which means I can’t leave. Even if I could escape, what would be the point? I haven’t looked for a door, a way out, in a long time now. I don’t want to be trapped with someone else again, but in here? I’m safe. “Can we talk after the dancing and the ball?” It’s time. Even if he hates me, it’s time to tell him how I feel. I refuse to be someone else’s possession when I don’t love them.

“Of course. I can never refuse you.” He leads me to a part of the mansion that I’ve never been in, through the auditorium into a ballroom in the back. It’s like the auditorium, almost, but with curling staircases around the edges instead of seats, wrapping around the tiled dance floor that must be a mile long. There’s an orchestra playing at the front, music I’ve never heard, but

it's strangely familiar to me. The ballroom is packed to the edges, and I feel like an intruder, here celebrating when I didn't become a dragon rider.

The majority of people are dressed in golds, yellows, or brown dresses. I wish I had worn them now; I stand out too much. They have a bit of orange in the crowd but not much. The men's suits are all brown, and there is so much of the Sun Dynasty in here that I wouldn't even know if anyone from the Moon Dynasty was even present. They'd be engulfed in all of this. I look around the crowd, straightening my shoulders as several people look our way. "Come and dance with me before someone tries to steal you away."

Etena catches my eye from a corridor leading out of the room, and she's not wearing a dress, instead, just her usual clothes and weapons. Not that I actually expected her to wear a dress. She watches me back and smiles once, which I return as Daegan leads me to the other front of the room. He spins me around once, pulling me back into his arms. "You're a good dancer, Dae."

"You've never given me a nickname before. I like it," he replies with a grin. After a few minutes, he has figured out I know this dance well. "Where did you learn?"

I clear my throat. "My master liked to make me dance."

His eyes turn stony. "I'm sorry." I lean my head on his shoulder, content to let him lead the dance and forget the past for tonight. He keeps his arms wrapped tightly around me. "I've enjoyed all these weeks with you, getting to know you. You feel like you're so much to me."

I don't have the words to tell him that I do feel like he is a very good friend but I'm not sure I feel exactly the same way he does. "It's been great to get to know you, too." If deflecting was an art form, I know I'd win awards for it. He only hums in response. We dance for several songs before we take a break to get a drink and talk with some of the people from the Sun Dynasty, who seem to know more about me than I possibly could ever know about them. Daegan is halfway through a conversation when Etena steps up to his side. "I need to talk to you. Alone."

Daegan leans into me. "Wait for me here. I'll come back soon."

He quickly leaves with Etena, while I wonder what that is about. I watch someone playing the violin so effortlessly, while I've never been good with musical instruments. My mother once tried to teach me how to play the piano, but my fingers were always too clumsy, and the violin, I know I could never play like that. "Dance with me."

I turn, never even hearing Ziven step up to my side. Ziven is holding out his hand, but my mouth parts when I get a good look at what he is wearing. Ziven is a gorgeous man; I've always thought that. The intimidating part of him usually outweighs the beauty, but in a tux, with a black crystal crown... he is breath-taking. His hair is tidily brushed to the side, the top buttons loose on his black shirt, and he is not wearing a tie, but somehow, he makes it work. Casual, yet dangerously devastating for any woman. But his eyes are nothing but serious, pure silver moonlight. "Where I come from, it is extremely rude to refuse a dance."

"You can refuse me, Storm," he offers, more of an offer of peace between us than I've ever seen. "I will never force you to do anything."

I take his hand, surprised by how quick he is to tug me onto the dance floor. He spins me around, pulling me back into his arms, pressing our bodies together. We move together like we've danced a hundred times, so effortlessly that I don't need to think about how my body is moving to the music. I know people are staring. I know I should look around, but my eyes are fixed on his like we are the only people here as he spins us around to the song until it ends, and he steps back. There is a look of indecision in his eyes as he pauses.

"Come with me." I don't get a chance to ask where we are going as he leads me through the dancers and to the side of the ballroom, to a staircase, and we go up together. It leads all the way up to the top, nearly above the ballroom as another song begins to play. It's louder up here, the music echoing and amplifying. My eyes widen as we get into a small, cozy room. It's made of pure glass on every side and in the shape of a dome.

Standing in it feels like standing in the stars. "This is so beautiful." Ziven is staring at me like he is starving, and I've seen that look before. Felt what it's like when he gives in. I glance at my dress, and the darkness has made it pure green.

“Like you.” Ziven tugs me to him once more, and I wrap my arms around his thick shoulders.

“I never had you down as a dancer, Ziven. Why’d you bring me here?” When he doesn’t answer, my heart races. “Luring your enemy alone is a good way to get rid of them.”

“Nothing I do will ever make me rid of you.” He runs his hand up my back, sending shivers down my spine for more than one reason before weaving his hand into my hair. He pulls our faces close so there’s not an inch between us. Our lips are only seconds away. My body seems to come alive under his touch, remembering what he tastes like, wondering what it’d be like for him to kiss me again. I crave it. Every touch from him, knowing it could be my end, knowing that he’s dangerous and I really shouldn’t want him anywhere near me. “Do not trust Daegan, Story.”

My blood goes cold with the warning. He has never called me by my real name before. “Are you jealous?”

“Perhaps, but that’s not the reason I’m warning you.” He searches my eyes. “I know you’re lying about things in your past, and I really hope the one thing you’re lying about is that you can’t get out of here. If you can, find a door. Go. Don’t ever come back. Go tonight.”

“Ziven...why would—”

His lips take mine, demanding and carnal with every stroke. He claims me with his mouth, with a scintillating kiss that he steals so easily from me, and I’m helpless to do anything but enjoy him. Want him. Need my enemy more than I want to breathe. He breaks away and lets me go. I stare at his back, breathless as he walks away from me, and he leaves me with nothing but the stars for company and my lips burning from his touch.

I stay with the stars for a while before going to join the ballroom, Ziven’s warning running over and over in my mind. Mazzis soon finds me and asks me to dance with him. My feet are killing me by the time that I manage to break away and refuse any more dances from the many people who ask. Just as I go over to the table of food, Daegan returns to the ballroom, heading right for me.

There's a bit of blood on his collar and a faint smell of smoke that blows over me when he is close. He looks scruffier than before, and I can't help but ask, "What happened to you?"

"There were some escaped...animals. I was helping, couldn't leave Etena alone to deal with it." He wraps his arm around my waist. "Do you want a drink, or can we go somewhere alone if you want? I'll just get asked to dance with all the ladies here, and I really only want to see you tonight."

I pick up two biscuits and grin at him, pushing Ziven's jealous warning to the back of my mind. Daegan has done nothing but help me, guide me, and look after me since I got here. Ziven has done the opposite, and I would be dead if he had won. "I trust you and I'd love to leave."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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*Page Twenty-Three.*

*He called me a traitor for loving him.*

**D**aegan leads me towards the greenhouse, where it's completely deserted. In fact, everything is so silent, and the music from the ballroom sounds like it's miles away instead of only the other side of the dragon wing bridge. The dragon statue gleams in the light of the moon, bright silver dancing across its massive wings and marking our path. We head around the steps, Daegan's hand on my lower back, until we get to the greenhouse doors, and he opens them for me to step in. The greenhouse feels like our place.

*Don't trust Daegan.* Ziven's haunting words won't leave my mind, and I can still feel his lips claiming me. He was jealous. He knows that I'm not going back to his dynasty after tonight, and maybe he regrets making me feel like I can't go back there. I know he didn't mean to hurt me when he was fighting with Daegan, but Daegan is right. The Moon Dynasty is dangerous for me because of how I feel about Ziven. Either way, perhaps it's better that I don't spend any time with him at all after tonight. We're no good for each other. He will destroy me at this rate. As for Daegan, he's kind and forgiving. He puts his people first. He's a good person. He is who I should be worried about. Not Ziven. I need to forget Ziven.

“I lied to you.” My head shoots up, looking towards Daegan, and for a second, I feel nervous. We both stop near our bench, the place we always end up on our dates.

He looks over the forest as I frown. “What about?”

“The last pages of the book. I ripped them out myself long ago.” His answer only makes my stomach drop further.

“Why would you do that?” I quietly ask. He will have a good reason, he must. “If you didn’t want me to read them, you could—”

“I didn’t want anyone to read them. That book is more than a book. If you’ve not guessed already, it’s a diary.” He looks back at me. “It’s based on the life of the last princess of the Twilight Dynasty, who became the queen of the Dawn Dynasty and the Twilight Dynasty by the end of her life. She wrote that book. I know that because she was my lover, and she left the book to me.”

I freeze. “How? What? I don’t understand...”

“Everyone here has lied to you from the beginning. We’re immortal and we never age once we hit twenty-five. We have lived in this cursed place for five hundred years, never aging, never changing. We just exist here. We live forever and it’s her fault. She did this to us and claimed it was some great chance for us to survive. The princess made a mistake in the name of sacrificing herself.” His voice is empty of any emotion. “Years ago, there were so many of us and our numbers were dwindling, and if we didn’t agree on peace, we would have killed each other off. It was agreed upon that when a female was born in the Sun Dynasty or the Moon, we would marry the children off, uniting the biggest lands to make one royal family. The same would happen for the Twilight and the Dawn, and eventually even their children would marry the children of the Sun and Moon combined. Unfortunately, only male heirs were ever born for the Sun and Moon Dynasties. The same for the Dawn but not the Twilight.”

His laugh is hollow as I stand in shock. Stunned by his story. “No. There was a sole princess born, and her mother died in childbirth. Her father refused to remarry, but no one would have thought any other children were true heirs, anyway. The first marriage is all that counts in fae royal families.



Her father, the king, was ambitious. He wanted more than the Dawn Dynasty for his only daughter. He had the only princess to trade, so he made sure that we all spent time together. I fell in love with her, and she fell in love with me. Ziven...they became best friends.”

“But in the book, she said she loved the moon.” My whisper only angers him.

A flame burns across his eyes. “She was delusional, and we all knew that in the end. The princess believed we were both entwined mates to her. It wasn’t true.” His smile is too quick, too nasty, and it surprises me. He’s never spoken to me like that. He never seemed to have spoken to anyone like that, but what would I know? They have all lied to me...even Catherine.

“My father would not have it. He did not want me marrying her. He was waiting for one of his heirs to marry the Moon Dynasty, and nothing was going to change on that. I ended my relationship, and there was no relationship between her and Ziven, so she married the Dawn prince.”

I remember this from the book. She wasn’t happy. She wanted one of them to save her from the marriage. “It was a good move on my father’s part. Ziven’s too as his mother birthed his sister only days after the marriage. The Twilight princess had problems. She could not have children. She could not breed any heirs. For years, every healer in the world tried to help and failed. There was no heir to take the Dawn or Twilight Dynasty if they did not have a child. There was a distant cousin, Mazzis, but he was weak and did not want the throne.”

The fairy tale that Ruelle told me is coming back, the words echoing. What if it was all true and no fairy tale? What if they were trying to tell me the truth the whole time? “The Dawn prince was a power-hungry asshole, and he found books that had been promised to the Dawn Dynasty for a long time. No one else knew they existed, what power they had. In his attempts to change his wife’s failure, the magic rebounded onto him instead and turned him into a vampyre, the first vampyre, who is now the king of everything outside this mansion.” He rolls his eyes. “He locked his wife away, unsure why the magic would not work on her, but it would not. He began turning the people of the Dawn Dynasty into vampyres. Nearly all of

them, to make an army. Mazzis took a group and ran to us, and we hid them. The vampyre king was ruthless and did all of this in a matter of days, before even any of us knew what was going to happen.”

It took five days for the vampyres to conquer the world. Ruelle’s story wasn’t a tale at all, it was real. “There was war like nothing I’d ever seen in my life.” I watch the memories of the horrors shine across his eyes. “Millions died within a day. Millions on the next day, and we all knew by nightfall on the fifth day, we would be dead. The vampyre king’s book had magic on how to stun our dragons so he could murder and kill them. He never did the Decidere, and he hated dragons. The princess stole the book, along with her dragon, and flew here.” He spits the words out. “With the cost of her life, she made this trap, binding us here and the dragons below. She sacrificed herself using dark magic from the book. The other book was lost out in the world.”

“If you have this magical book, can’t you use it to get out?”

He crosses his arms. “The magic in the book is very clear. A sacrifice of love locked the doors, and only a sacrifice of love from the princess can unlock them. The magic made sure the Decidere would not begin until you came back to us. I didn’t wish to lie to you, along with everyone here, but you are our only hope of escaping.”

I have so many questions. “Why are you telling me all this? Why lie to me since I got here? And what about Hettie? You said you don’t change. Is that why there are no children here? You didn’t hide them for the Decidere, did you?”

“There are no children other than Hettie. She is a miracle. One that none of us understands. No child was born until her or after her.” He pauses.

“I don’t get what all this has to do with me.” I back away slowly from him. Ziven told me to run from him, and everything is screaming in me to do just that. He was protecting me. “Ziven said that you...”

“Ziven is the reason I’m telling you all of this now. He is the reason you won’t survive tonight.” His threat makes me feel sick. “Do you know why he calls you a traitor? Do you know why he hates you? Why he’s hated you since you got here and wanted you dead?”

I shake my head before he continues. “Because it’s you. You’re the princess reborn, just as the book vowed. *On a storm, the saviour who is a traitor to her race will arrive. On a storm, the princess will return and, with her death, one chance of freedom.*” He throws a page down on the bench, those sentences written over and over on it. “How do you think you just walked in here? You’re her. Reborn once again. Only you can get us out. I never lied to you about that, but you need to love someone in here before dying to sacrifice yourself; otherwise, it won’t work.” He sneers at me. “I wanted it to be me, for everything you cost us, but Ziven...it’s him you love. I saw you both tonight and knew it was time. You should have listened to him, but I’m glad you didn’t.” Daegan laughs at me. “Ziven, somehow you made the cold bastard grow a heart. He has been helping you since the beginning, getting his man to push you off the cliff and into the better pillars so you’d win the first Decidere. Training you to fight, protecting you from even his own people, and going as far as sending his dragon to protect you in the Decidere. The fool even went into the Decidere and pulled you out of the water, saving your life.”

My heart clenches. I was wrong, so wrong about him. Daegan is still ranting. “I made sure he wouldn’t interrupt us tonight. He can’t do what needs to be done to save us all. One life...it is nothing in comparison to the world. You owe me. You owe your race your life.”

A beam of light shoots straight through my stomach. The world freezes for a second, right before I scream, falling to my knees in pain that blurs my vision. I grasp my stomach as blood pours out, a slow way to die. Daegan sighs as he walks over to me, leans down, and cups my cheek. “You look just like her, the very image of the princess who cursed us all to save us. For what it is worth, I am sorry you end like this, but you die in here, looking at the sky. I will get my army ready to fly. The Decidere made me sure this was the right way. It found you unworthy of a dragon. This is the only right thing to do for my people.”

The pain is unimaginable, and I can’t focus. I can’t breathe as he walks away from me. “Help, stop, please!”

“Goodbye, Story Dehana.” He walks away, leaving me alone to die slowly in the greenhouse like I mean nothing to any of them. I guess I don’t. For a long time, I hold my stomach, feeling my blood pouring through my fingers

as I look up at the stars and the moon, high above, waiting for a little bit of strength. Only I grow cold by the second, and I can feel the darkness creeping in, death waiting for me with an open hand. I don't want to die. Please, don't let me die from this.

With a groan, I turn over onto my stomach and crawl forward towards the doors. Hot tears stream down my face as I keep going forward, closer and closer to the greenhouse doors as black dots float across my vision. I'm not sure how I make it there, but I use the handle to pull myself up to stand, wrapping my arm tightly around my stomach, feeling even weaker by the second as I slide through the door. I stumble outside, dizzily walking onto the dragon wing. I swear I'm seeing things as the dragon's head turns towards me, tilting its head to the side, rock cracking with the movement.

A soft female voice fills my mind. "Come to me."

I know it must be death talking, not the stone dragon statue that I'm imagining moving and talking to me. I've lost too much blood, and I have nothing to lose anymore. My blood drops onto the stone as I walk across the bridge to the middle and stand on the back of the dragon, climbing off the bridge onto a small ledge. I don't even have the strength to be scared of falling. "You're not alone."

I collapse forward, slamming into the stone as it crumbles, and I can't find the power to even lift my head. The sound is deafening, but all I see is the rock fading away underneath me, revealing nothing but the shining red crystal body of a dragon. All the rock falls away from this gigantic dragon, revealing beautiful red wings that look like rubies, clear and see-through, shining as hard as any diamond. This beautiful creature, not a stone dragon but more like a crystal dragon, turns its head back to meet me. Its eyes burn like purple fires as her voice echoes in my mind. "You were tested in the Decidere, and I watched. You were brave like your mother when you believed in your soul you couldn't be; you were a warrior like your father when you have never been trained to be one; you were a survivor when you knew your body was broken; and you are now my rider. You were found to be stronger than any dragon below, and I have waited for your rebirth, Story Dehana. Now we ride to save this world."

My dragon flies up and shatters the glass ceiling.

# Epilogue

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Prince Emyr



**H**e finally wakes.

I glance at the betraying man lying on a slab, who cost me her. My favourite blood slave, the only woman I will ever love. Story Dehana. I can imagine her in front of me every time I close my eyes, her hair the same shade as her blood, her curvy body I love to sink into at the same time as my teeth do. I trained her to please me, and she tastes like what I imagine a deity would. She is mine and I will get her back. This man took her, but letting him die wasn't going to get her back. His entire body shakes, and he screams in pain like he has done for weeks in a deep slumber. This is usually how they wake up, and sometimes they die. I've turned so many of them now. Some of them survive, some of them do not, but this one...this one, I think he will. He has to serve his prince. He shakes and shakes, sweat glistening all over his body as the colour drains from his skin. I enjoy this part. His hair drains of the brown, blending the deep shade to a silver until his blue eyes pop open and he turns his head to me.

He touches his chest where there's a scar where his heart used to be. I've never brought one back without a heart before. My father said it was possible. "Story."

I nod as I roughly grab Kyrell's chin, turning him towards me. "You are going to go find Story Dehana. Hunt her. Tell her I have her mother, and if

she doesn't come back to me...I will turn her mother into a vampyre like you."

[KEEP READING HERE WITH BOOK TWO.](#)

## From the Author.



Hello! Thank you for reading my book, *A Vow of Dragons and Storms*. The next book is called— *A Book of Royals and Deities*. It will be out later this year. I can't wait to continue Story's ~~story~~ tale! When I wrote Story's character, I wanted to write a character who never gives up even when her body, life, circumstances and everything is telling her the opposite. I also wanted to write the enemy who you can't help but fall for and a character who believes books are everything because I believe that too. Oh and dragons!

Thank you as always to my family, my editor, my writing side kicks aka my dogs and the lovely beta readers.

If you wish to pre-order book two, the link is here—

Finishing with some artwork of my favourite scene with Story and Ziven at the ball—







G. Bailey is a USA Today and International Bestselling Author of fantasy and paranormal romance. She is an avid reader, with her own library, where she spends her days pushing her cat off her laptop.  
She lives in England with her sweet children, her gorgeous (and slightly mad) golden retrievers, cats who own the house, and her teenage sweetheart turned husband.

(You can find exclusive teasers, random giveaways and sneak peeks of new books on the way in Bailey's Pack on Facebook or her being awkward on Tiktok— gbaileybooks)

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## Bonus read of Court of Dragons and Crowns by G. Bailey



**The dragon kings need a queen, and they have chosen me to compete in their race.**

Four gorgeous dragon shifter kings break into my home and kill my ex-boyfriend before taking me to their world to compete to be their queen. Once every thousand years, the dragon kings come together to find human brides from Earth, and if they don't have their brides in one hundred days, their courts will lose their magic. I didn't know the world of magic and dragons existed, not until I'm thrown headfirst into it and expected to compete in a deadly competition to be one of their four brides.

Arden, Emrys, Grayson and Lysander are cruel, entitled, and I don't want anything to do with them.

In this world of glittering dresses, sharp teeth, and claws, I need to become stronger than the dragons themselves.

*They want a bride—but I'll be nothing but a nightmare when I win.*

**This is a full-length enemies to lovers fantasy romance with dragon shifters, a badass heroine and possessive alpha males. Perfect for fans of spicy fantasy whychoose? romance.**

## Chapter 24

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### *Bonus read of Court of Dragons and Crowns by G. Bailey*



“**T**here’s a dragon in the sea. Can’t you see him?”

The waves brush against the stone steps, smothering the bottom two until they can’t be seen anymore as the local crazy man walks past, muttering to himself about sea dragons and magic. The cold, beautiful coastline of Silloth stretches out for miles, wrapping around a small corner of England, but it feels like it’s a million worlds apart from the rest of the busy world. It certainly is in the middle of nowhere, for me at least. The sky fills with bright, vibrant oranges and yellows that reflect across the calm blue sea as the sun sets. This is my favourite part of the day, but it fails to make me smile, to make me feel less lost and alone today. I wrap my tanned arms around my short legs, breathing in the familiar sea air, and try to forget today. It doesn’t work.

“Ellelin!”

Fuck. I knew hiding here wasn’t a good idea, as he knows it’s my secret spot, away from the visiting tourists. This is the end of the promenade, where it meets the old lighthouse. I climb to my feet, just as my boyfriend—no, ex-boyfriend as of half an hour ago—stumbles to a stop in front of me, sand spraying onto my worn boots. He’s handsome, so my grandmother

says, six foot tall with blond hair and honey brown eyes. She also told me the pretty ones always, always fuck up in the end.

She was right.

“I can explain. If you’ll just listen—”

I chuckle, wiping a stray violet lock of my hair out of my eyes. Dying my black hair violet was one of the only things I’ve done for myself in a long time, and I love the colour. Finley said he preferred it black. “Explain what, exactly, Finley? You want to explain how you slept with a friend of mine? I don’t think that needs to be explained. We’re over.”

I turn around and leave. I’m done with him, and this damn town I’ve been trapped in since I was six and my grandmother took me in. The sad truth is this is the only place I have ever known, and I don’t have any friends except for my ex-boyfriend and my friend who he slept with. I don’t have anyone but my grandmother, and something about that fact makes me sad. I can’t remember my life before I was six, and my grandmother won’t tell me anything about where I lived before that. I only know that my parents died tragically after travelling for years but that my mum was born here, in Silloth. I’ve been stuck here with my grandmother, my only remaining family, and I’ve never left.

School finishes soon, only three days away from graduating, and then I can leave. I can get out of this small town, see what the world has to offer me. My grades are high, and I’ve been accepted to several universities from Edinburgh to London. I just need to make my choice exactly how far I want to go from my grandmother. She still needs my help, but I’m not sure I can be here to help her without giving up the chance of leaving this town. The stubborn old lady refuses to let us have any carers in.

Finley scrambles up to my side, grabbing hold of my arm to pull me to a stop. “Let me go,” I demand, loud enough to turn the heads of several people nearby. Finley looks around, noticing how many people are looking, and roughly lets me go. I shake my head and turn away, walking back to my house.

“Ellelin, please, just listen to me!”

I pause, turning back to look at him standing on the edge of the road. “Look, we were going to break up. I’m going off to university, and I’m sure not staying around here for you. Just go and live your life. We both know your life is here with your family. Just leave me the hell alone.”

“But I love you,” he weakly protests.

I chuckle as I walk away. I’ve always told him not to say that to me, because I don’t believe you can fall in love at eighteen, or at least, I never felt that way about him. Love is destruction, according to my grandmother and every romance book I’ve ever read. So no thank you. I want security, a decent apartment, and money to travel the world. Not a life trapped in a small town, popping out babies with a man I don’t really care that much for as he cheats on me. That would be my life here with Finley, and I’d rather have no life than that.

I look at Finley once last time, remembering that he was charming and made me laugh once, but every one of those good memories is now tainted. “You certainly didn’t love me when you were screwing my only friend. It’s over. Leave me alone.”

Finley looks like I’ve broken his heart as I tuck my hands into my pocket to warm them up and cross the road, hoping he doesn’t follow me this time. The bitterly cold sea breeze blows against my black hoodie and leggings, reminding me I shouldn’t have left without my thicker coat this morning.

I head down the streets until I come to our small, terraced home, the street quiet and empty. All the terraces around here are a multitude of colours like a rainbow, and ours is yellow. The yellow paint now is chipped, faded, and cracked in so many places, and the windows look close to falling off, but I love this house. It’s quirky, like my grandmother, and I’ve never not felt at home here. Our house stands out in the row as every other house is freshly painted, but we don’t have the money for that, and our neighbours make sure to mention the paint every time I bump into them. One day, I’m going to have a good job and be able to repaint the house for my grandmother. One day.

Unlocking the latch, I open the door and head inside, where the warmth of the lit fire makes me sigh. “Nan, it’s me.”

I take my coat off and rub my eyes. I'm exhausted after cleaning caravans for two hours after school to give us a bit of extra money for food, as my grandmother tries her best, but everything is expensive. Between work and school and caring for my grandmother, some days I feel like I never rest. No wonder my boyfriend cheated on me. Never have enough time to be with him—with anybody, in truth—which makes it sadder that I decided to surprise him by walking to his and sneaking in through his bedroom window today.

My grandmother doesn't reply to me, and I frown as our cat, Jinks, jumps up onto the back of the sofa. Jinks is pure white with strange red glowing eyes, but the vet swears it's normal. I swear he looks like the devil, especially in the middle of the night. I stroke the back of his head as he purrs at me for food. "Alright, Jinks."

I feed him in the small kitchen at the back of our house before going to search for my grandmother in the garden, where she usually is. The thick grey clouds above suggest it's going to rain soon, and the sun has nearly set completely. The solar fairy lights around our garden flicker to life along the path as I walk down the long stretch. The garden stretches all the way back, and my grandmother has filled it with beautiful flowers, trees, and bushes. I find my grandmother at the back of the garden, on a metal bench, wrapped in a pink knitted blanket, watching the sky above. Her sea-coloured blue eyes, the same as mine, fall on me, and her wrinkled face lights up with a loving smile. Her grey hair is messily pulled up into a bun, exotic, multicoloured flower slides clipped in, and she is barefoot even when it is a cold late summer day.

"Elle, darling. How was your day?"

I sigh, sitting next to her and crossing my boots. "Finley cheated on me with Daisy. You were right about him."

Her hand picks up mine and she pats it twice. "I don't like being right, dear. He was never good enough for you."

I lean my head on the rotting shed behind the bench. "How did you meet this one true love of your life you tell me about? How did you know you loved him?"



She sadly smiles at me, looking away after a moment. “You simply know when you meet the one who will turn your life upside down. I knew because I couldn’t stand your grandad. He was arrogant, annoying, and always two steps behind me. He drove me around the bend most of the time. But one day I realised it wasn’t that I hated him, that I loved him, and I didn’t want him to ever stop annoying me. We built a life together, had your mother, and we were happy until his stupid heart packed out on me. Typical. Men always leave first.”

I smile at her, enjoying her story. “I don’t think I ever cared about Finley all that much.”

“I know, dear. That’s why you are allowed to feel sorry for yourself tonight, and tomorrow you’re going to face the world with a smile. He isn’t worth crying over. When you meet the man that is, you won’t ever be able to move on. You will just exist.”

For a moment, I see her sorrow, and in a blink, she hides it. I’m all my grandmother has left now everyone else is dead, and sometimes I think I’m lucky I don’t remember my parents or grandfather. I don’t have to mourn them like she does. I change the subject, as I don’t want to upset her. “Are you going out tonight?”

She stands up. “Of course. Dorris needs her ass kicked at bingo. If I don’t go, who else would put her in her place?”

I chuckle, standing up and linking my arm through hers as we walk back to the house. “I’m going to curl up on the sofa, watch some disgustingly cheesy movie about love, and eat chocolate ice cream, because that will make me feel better.”

My grandmother kisses the side of my head. “Leave some ice cream for me, dear. When I’m back, we can share and talk shit about Finley.”

I laugh, breathing in how she smells like mint and garden herbs, which makes me relax. This is home and I’ll miss it, but I’m ready to get out and see the world.

A few hours later, I curl up on the sofa after my grandmother has gone out and turn on the TV to search for a good movie. I just pop open the lid of my

chocolate ice cream when there is a frantic banging on the front door. I groan, putting down the tub as the banging continues. I know exactly who it is. Finley knows when my grandmother goes out to bingo, as it's usually our time alone. I unlock the door, intending to tell him to piss off, but he barges in without asking. I slam the door shut behind him.

“You’re interrupting my ice cream and crappy movie. What do you want?”

Finley runs his hand through his hair, and I smell the alcohol on him. Great, he is drunk. “To talk to you. You have to give me another chance. You just have to let me fix us. I love you so much.”

I roll my eyes, going back to the door to open it, but he grabs my arm to stop me. He’s always been a bit grabby when he’s had a drink, and considering he’s twice the size of me, I can’t do much as he pulls me away from the door and back into the living room. For the first time, I realise that I should not have opened the door to him. “Let me go, Finley, and go home. We can talk when you’re sober.”

“No,” he angrily snaps, tugging me against his body. “Look, you just need to listen to me. She kissed me and then one thing led to another. I was just horny and stupid, but I love you. You have to forgive me, Elle.”

I try to pull myself away from him, but his grip is iron-tight, borderline painful. “No, I don’t. We can talk tomorrow, Finley. Let me go.”

Instead of letting me go, his thick hand wraps around my throat as he tries to kiss me, and I panic, trying to push him away. My voice comes out frantic, and I scream, “Let me go!”

Finley doesn’t listen, pushing me backwards towards the sofa, kissing my cheek and mumbling about loving me. Dread pools in my stomach as I struggle in his arms, trying to get away and fearing what will happen if I can’t. Dating Finley was a big mistake, but I was never scared of him until now. I manage to lift my leg and I knee him hard, making him groan in pain and let me go. He trips on the sofa, falling to his knees and cupping his balls. “What the hell is wrong with you? Get out of my house and don’t come back!”

He glances up, and the look he gives me sends chills down my spine. He's going to hurt me for that. "No, I'm going to make you listen to me. You're mine, Ellelin, and we are not breaking up!"

I back away towards the kitchen, knowing I'm going to have to leave and run. He is drunk, so I have a good chance of escaping through the garden if I run fast. At least if I scream outside, my neighbours will come and see what is happening.

I hear the back door unlock, and my shoulders sag in relief. My grandmother's back from bingo early, and maybe the shock of seeing her will make Finley leave. Finley rises to his feet as I stumble away, and he pauses, looking over my shoulder to the kitchen. All the colour leaves his face. A shocked scream rips out of my throat as a silver dagger swiftly flies past my cheek and slams into his chest, blood spraying across the carpet between us. His scream is bloodcurdling and terrible, as I freeze in shock. Red hot fire spreads out from the dagger, burning him so quickly that, within seconds, he's nothing but ash falling softly on the blood-stained carpet. The dagger falls with a thud, and my scream dies away as I turn around slowly.

My heart pounds in my chest as I face the four massive men standing in my tiny kitchen. The man in the middle lowers his hand, smiling at me through waves of shiny thick black hair as his red, fiery eyes meet mine.

"You can thank me later."

## Chapter 25

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### *Bonus read of Court of Dragons and Crowns by G. Bailey*



“Y -you killed him?” I sputter, taking a step back in shock. I’m shaking from head to toe as the men all look between each other.

“Humans don’t like murder, dumbass,” the red-haired man says, patting the shoulder of the man who threw the dagger. He is wearing a black shirt tucked into black trousers that scream money. “Arden, you broke this one. You can deal with her. The last one bit me.”

Arden groans. “I’m not dealing with this one, Lysander. I’m already bored.”

Arden leans against the wall, picking up another dagger from his long trench coat and playing with it, throwing it up and down in the air. Lysander looks at the other two. One of them watches from the darkness of the back of the kitchen, and I can only see his outline. The other steps forward, a playful smile on his lips as locks of white hair fall into his moss green eyes, and he pushes it aside. He goes to say something when a deep voice speaks from the back of the kitchen. “She’s going to run, and then she’s my problem.”

“She’s not going to run, Grayson. Arden just saved her from whoever that fucker was,” he murmurs. “I’m Emrys. You’re Ellelin, right?”

“Boyfriend. That was my ex-boyfriend, and you just murdered him,” I croak, snapping out of my shock. “How did you do that? How did you burn him?”

Arden’s laugh is deep and taunting, just like his eyes as they meet mine. “We are dragon shifter kings, babe. Fire is my skill.”

“Arden, you’re being a dick and scaring her,” Emrys mutters, stepping closer to me with his hands in the air. He is wearing a dark blue jumper and dark jeans. For some reason, I get the feeling they don’t wear clothes like this often. “He forgets humans don’t know about magic and dragons. We aren’t here to hurt you.”

Lysander sits down on my grandmother’s chair, crossing his legs at the ankle. “Just let Matron explain it all. We burnt her boyfriend to a crisp; she isn’t going to believe anything else we say.”

Emrys ignores him. “We’re dragon kings from four courts. We’re not from this world. Your world is connected to several worlds, including ours, and we can travel between.”

My hands feel sweaty as I cross my arms. “What does this have to do with me?”

Lysander grins. “You’ve been chosen. All you need to do for now is come with us through a portal.”

I lower my arms. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” I step back and accidentally stand in what is left of Finley. I step aside, cringing as I rub my shoe on the carpet.

Arden laughs, the sound echoing. “She just stood on her piece of shit boyfriend. It’s almost funny.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Fuck you.”

He meets my gaze, running his eyes up and down over me. “Anytime, princess.”

My cheeks burn as I take another step back, looking between them all, focusing on the shadow outline of the man in my kitchen. For whatever

reason, he feels like he's the most dangerous of them all, and I can't even see what he looks like from here. They all look pretty dangerous, and I'm not sure how I'm going to get out of this. They're all muscular, ridiculously tall, and handsome. All I can think about now is how they just burnt my ex-boyfriend to a crisp in the middle of my living room. How is that even possible? And now they're talking about kidnapping me.

I steel my back. They aren't taking me anywhere without a fight. "I'm not going with you. Get out of my house."

Emrys tilts his head to the side, his forest green eyes softening. "I know this is creepy and you don't trust us, but we don't want to harm you. You have been chosen to come to our world and compete in an event. This is an honour. There are several bloodlines in this world that came from ours, including yours. Your bloodline was sworn to the same magic we are bound to, allowing us to find you and bring you back to our world. Four of the chosen will become our brides. Become dragon queens. More will be explained later."

I feel delirious as I chuckle and then laugh. "I'm pretty sure I'm going mad. I must be dreaming. Going completely mad. You're kidnapping me to become your dragon queen, and I have to compete for the honour? I'm not fucking doing that. Find a girl the normal way."

"I like this one," Emrys laughs.

Arden throws a dagger at him, and swiftly he catches it midair. "I don't."

Emrys pockets the dagger before he runs his hands over his face, looking frustrated. "We are wasting time here. Let's just knock her out and go home."

"Agreed," Arden replies, leaning off the wall. I don't think, only act, as I turn and run. The front door lock melts as I run for it, so instead, I fly around the banister of the stairs, lugging my ass up the steps as fast as I can, my heart pounding.

"Arden, go after her. You freaked her out by killing someone!" Emrys demands.

“He was going to attack her! She should thank me for killing his worthless ass!” Arden all but growls.

“I will go and fix this mess,” Lysander sighs, my grandmother’s chair creaking, “while you two fight like children.”

“Good luck!” Arden shouts while laughing.

I get to the top of the stairs, stumbling around the corner and pulling the bathroom door open, slamming it shut behind me and locking it. I don’t know what use the locks are going to be against—what did they say they were? Dragon shifters? Are they actual dragons, wings, and scales and all that? No, this can’t be real. No, none of this can be real. I’m going mad.

I hear Lysander’s heavy feet thudding up the stairs after me. He is real, and I have to find a way to escape. I look around the room for anything. Anything at all to defend myself with. My eyes flicker to the small, frosted window. I’ve never climbed through it. It’s thin and I’m not sure I will fit through it. Fuck it. I have to try. I start cranking it open when I hear the bathroom door handle being twisted, the door shaking. My mouth parts in surprise as clear water runs up the door from the bottom, smothering every inch of it. I don’t move as the water suddenly turns to ice, the door shattering in shards of wood and ice. Lysander stands on the other side, leaning against the frame, his thick arms crossed. “Running is completely useless, Elle.”

“Don’t call me that. You killed the last person who called me that!” I snap. I might have hated Finley for cheating and attacking me, but he didn’t deserve to burn to death.

He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t control fire, Elle. I’m the water dragon king, so you can’t blame me for that one. If it matters, I agree with Arden. He deserved to die for laying a hand on a woman. I would have done far worse with him if we had more time.”

For a moment, he lets me see past the charming smile to the true darkness hidden in his soul, and it scares me. I’m not going with them. No fucking way. “Don’t make us chase you. It’s boring and pointless. You can’t escape.”

“Fuck you!” I snap, picking up the nearest thing and throwing it at him. My nan’s multi-coloured squeaky duck flies pathetically through the air, and he catches it. Lysander’s lips twitch in amusement before he squeaks it once and throws it over his shoulder. “Fine. We’ll do this the hard way if we must.”

He steps into the bathroom and reaches for me. In a split second, I look around quickly for anything and grab the top of the toilet lid, lifting it and smashing it straight across his head. He looks so surprised for a second, right before he collapses onto the ground, blood pouring from a deep cut on his forehead. “Holy shit.”

I drop the toilet lid on the floor, wasting no time as the others might notice. I go to the window again, propping myself up on the ledge and pushing my legs through first. I manage to squeeze right through the window as I hear them running up my stairs. My heart pounds as I softly shut the window and lie down on the tiles of the back porch, listening to them for a second.

“Whoa, the little human princess knocked him out. How the fuck did she do that?” Arden questions.

Emrys laughs. “Make sure Grayson doesn’t do anything stupid, while I heal him. She’s impressive, that one. Make sure she doesn’t hurt herself trying to escape.”

“It was the toilet seat,” Arden laughs, and I hear him picking it up. “Or was it the rubber duck in the hallway? Either way, it’s hilarious.”

“I’ll get her,” Grayson’s dark voice states.

The others go silent. Emrys clears his throat. “Don’t hurt her.”

His voice is like death. “The brat hurt us.”

“Gray!” Emrys shouts, but Grayson doesn’t reply. Dammit, he is coming for me, and I’ve wasted too much time. I slide down the roof panels, some of them clicking under my weight. Rain begins to pour out of the sky, making the roof slippery. A cry escapes my throat as I slip, sliding off the roof and slamming hard onto the grass. Ignoring the pain in my ribs, I climb to my feet and start sprinting straight up the garden. All at once, thick green vines shoot out of the surrounding ground, coming out of everywhere, and one



trips me. I fall over, only to be caught in the vines. I fight them as they are wrapping around my legs, arms, and chest. I manage to snap a few of them, but more just keep appearing until they're wrapped so tightly around me, squeezing me until I almost can't breathe.

Grayson's face comes into the moonlight. He is gorgeous with thick brown hair, dark golden skin, but there is a harshness to his silver eyes that matches the cruel smirk he gives me. He looks at me like I'm pathetic. "You're going to die first in the Dragon Crown Race. You're clearly stupid."

"Let me go, you fucking monster!" I scream, struggling and wriggling the best I can. He smells like the earth itself and a mixture of sandalwood that reminds me of forest walks. "Let me go! Let me go! HELP! I'm being kidnapped by crazy magic men who think they are dragons! HELP!"

"Shush, brat. You're just embarrassing yourself and giving me a headache," he mutters, picking me up with the vines like I weigh nothing. He throws me over his shoulder. "It's time to go."

My eyes widen as he twists around to look at the others, who are walking up the garden path to us. There's something in the middle of our garden. It looks like a shimmery wall, almost like it's water, but it's gold, illuminating and bright on the other side. Creatures fly through the air around the mountains and castle in the distance. They are too big to be birds. They are dragons. Actual dragons. Through it, I can see tall mountains and a silver castle nestled right in the middle of them. Orange fields surround the mountains, luminated by the night sky full of glowing yellow stars. I scream, panicking as Grayson turns and begins to walk towards it.

"Will you knock her out, Emrys? She is pissing me off," Grayson growls. *I'm pissing him off?* They are literally kidnapping me and making it sound like a chore. I hate them so much. What is my grandmother going to think when she comes home, finding a pile of ash and that I'm missing? She is going to be so worried. She has lost everyone else.

Emrys walks up to me, his eyes surprisingly soft as I keep screaming, hoping someone will come and help me. No one is going to save me from them. Oh my god. "I'm vaguely impressed with you, Elle. I hope you win."

He touches my cheek, and suddenly I can't breathe. I gasp for air right before everything falls away into darkness, where I can hear wings.

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