

DIAMOND
&
DAWN

BOOK TWO

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ONE



The moon had not risen on the Amber Empire for a thousand tides. But that didn't mean my people never craved luster.

Or spectacle.

A crowd of silent people lingered in the Marché Cuirasse—mere steps from the orphanage I'd planned to visit. Sunlight raw as uncut ambric sent their shadows sliding along the uneven cobblestones and turned their eyes to mirror glass. They'd heard I was coming—I saw wilted paper sunbursts chased with kembric leaf hung from painted sticks. I also saw a few sharp-nosed masks, red as blood, perched jaunty on children's heads or shoved in back pockets. I saw hard mouths and bruised eyes. I saw fear.

I did not see any smiles.

I swung out of my carrosse, stepping into the ruddy light and fighting unease. In the nearly two spans since defeating Severine, I'd spent barely any time in the city. The first span had been a chaos of fleeing the Skyclad army, marshaling aid from Belsyre, and recapturing a city on the brink of revolution. And in recent weeks, I'd barely left Coeur d'Or—patching a broken government, demilitarizing a vast army, and planning a coronation left me little time for jaunts through my seething capital. But strange whispers had begun to reach the palais, and I knew it was time for me to walk among my people, even if I was not yet Amber Empress.

A platoon of Belsyre's formidable soldats moved to flank me as I approached the staring crowd, their jet-black uniforms darker than the clouds above the Midnight Dominion. Even after a span serving as my honor garde, the Loup-Garou—the

Werewolf—still made me nervous. Their booted feet stepped in unison, echoing the hollows between my heartbeats. I almost turned toward them in the dusk—to search their pale impassive faces for a sharp half smile, to seek out a pair of green eyes among their matching emerald signats, to find a trace of familiarity in all this strangeness.

I didn't turn. I clutched the fabric of my golden skirts and looked into the faces of my people, savoring the edge of my own power reflecting in their eyes. A flare of pleasure burst along my spine when I remembered—I was their dauphine. I was their *Sun Heir*.

I sank to my knees before a little girl hiding in her mother's ragged skirts. She must have been about seven, although her small size made her look younger. Hunger etched out her jaw and chiseled her ribs; I could see them jutting through the thin material of her worn frock. She was clutching one of the sun-burst kites—handmade, cut from cheap parchment and painted in garish shades of yellow and orange.

"Hello." My voice came out too soft. I cleared my throat. "What's your name?"

She nestled deeper into her mother's skirts, mute. I bit my lip and tried to see myself how she must see me. A girl—a *woman*—not much younger than her mother, gowned in a magnificent dress of kembric and cream, designed to catch the light and amplify it. A woman with ambric gilt dusted around her cheeks and along her collarbone. A woman who was to be her empress.

"My name is Mirage." I leaned closer, conspiratorial. "Although once upon a time my name was Sylvie."

Something flickered in her eyes, then disappeared. An idea coaxed the edge of my mind. I smiled, held out a hand, and made the little girl see something that wasn't there. A ball of flame appeared, blazing red as our static sun. Light poured between

my fingertips, splashing the cobbles with kembric and gowning the little girl in radiance.

She gasped, her eyes glazing with awe. Her mother's face softened. The crowd inhaled and leaned a little closer.

My smile grew. This—*this* was my gift. The legacy of illusion—a wash of impossible colors born in the dusk and glittering like sunlight in my veins. This was what drove me out of the shadows and into the light. To the Amber City, to the palais of Coeur d'Or, into this complicated, confusing, remarkable life. This was why I was here.

I made the fantastical sun bigger. But something was wrong—a taint of darkness stained the molten glow an ugly red. Brilliance battled with blight as the orb stuttered on its axis. Horror scorched my throat. My fingers trembled. I clenched my fist. The sun shattered into a thousand pieces, sending a flickering firework of scarlet and shadow bursting into the crowd. Droplets of blood danced on the breeze, then disappeared like a broken promise.

The crowd's scattered, unenthusiastic applause tasted like soured wine. I turned my gaze back to the little girl, suddenly nauseous.

"I'm Cosette," the little girl whispered, at last. "Maman calls me Etty though."

"Etty is a lovely name," I choked out, gesturing to the mass of paper and string clutched in her little palm. "May I see what you're holding?"

Etty nodded, handing over her sunburst kite without protest. I tried not to care when her mother's calloused hands tightened on her daughter's shoulders, but a shadow of resentment caught in my throat. I unfolded the symbol in my lap, smoothing its edges with fingers that came away yellow. I cooed over it, winking at Cosette. I flipped it over.

Drawn on its reverse, in negative space, with charcoal and a decided hand, was an image of the moon. But this was not the silent, serene moon I remembered from the frescoes in the Sisters' Temple where I was raised. This moon had sly, slitted eyes and expectant brows, like she had just awoken from a delicious, devious dream. This moon smiled like she would shatter an empire just to see herself reflected in all its broken pieces. This moon would not forgive a world who had forsaken her.

I breathed a tiny sip of sun-stained air. Sunder had been right after all. I'd barely believed him when he'd said this image was spreading around the city like a secret. The sunburst did not surprise me, for it had long been a symbol claimed by the Sabourin dynasty—the royal line descended from Meridian's mythic blood. That blood flowed through my own veins. But the moon? I didn't understand what it had to do with me.

"Do you know what this is?" I gently waved the kite. "Do you know what these pictures mean?"

"Ye-e-es," said Ety. "The pretty yellow one's supposed to be the sun. And the other one—" She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and glanced at her mother. The woman darted her eyes to me, then gave a curt nod. "The one with the round white face is supposed to be the moon."

"Why?"

She screwed up her little face. "Why *what?*"

"I didn't—" My hands still trembled. I clutched the kite tighter. "Why did you and your mother draw the moon on the back side of the sun? What's it supposed to mean?"

"It means *you*, of course," said Ety matter-of-factly. "Because you were born in the dark, but you came to the light. Maman says you're not the Sun Heir. She keeps calling you the Du—"

I heard a rough intake of breath from the crowd. The scuffle of bodies colliding—the melee of half-drawn swords and shouting

soldats. I turned a half second before a body slammed into me, colliding with my hip and knocking my legs out from under me.

I hit the ground in a chaos of elbows and knees churning against the pavement. My neck bent back, then snapped forward. My head pummeled the cobbles with a jarring wave of pain. Darkness lapped at my vision as hands grabbed my shoulders, grappling for my throat. Panic frothed wild in my chest, and I pushed up, bloody palms on cobbles. I slammed backward into my assailant. He grunted, fingers slipping from my neck as a Loup-Garou soldat grabbed for him. I threw myself forward into a limping run, my vision swimming as I gasped for breath to scream, to flee—

A cool voice sliced through my haze of fear, quiet but demanding: *If you cannot fight—flee!*

No.

If you cannot fight, hide.

My steps slowed as sudden calm descended upon me. My frantic heart stuttered, and my palms itched. Shouts and screams sliced my ears. The churning crowd coughed up a slight figure. A weapon flashed in low sunlight. He headed straight for me.

I'd practiced for this. I knew exactly what I had to do.

I froze, then made myself invisible, a trick I'd learned just spans ago. The world glazed over me like I wasn't there. I took a half step back, replacing myself with an illusory copy. She hitched her skirts around her knees and ran. Her hair spilled out of its braid and flew out behind her like a pennant of shadow.

Footsteps clattered behind me, then stopped. The boy who attacked me stopped in the spot where my fantasy doppelgänger had just stood, close enough for me to count the beads of sweat on his upper lip and smell the stench of fear wafting off him. He was young—barely fifteen, by the looks of it, although death and violence had scrubbed his youth away. A sharp mask dangled

around his neck, painted garish red. His fist gripped a blood-stained blade. He stared after the girl in the kembric gown, sprinting toward the shadows at the edge of the Marché Cuirasse, confusion and anger and suspicion giving his face sharp edges.

What had he seen, amid the chaos, to make him look like that? Had he seen his dauphine flicker in and out of existence before fleeing across the market? Or was it enough that when I'd glanced over my shoulder in fear, he'd seen me not as a hated political opponent, but as a person?

He yanked the mask back over his face, tightened his grip on his dagger, and ran after the mirage I'd conjured as my decoy.

A bitter cocktail of fury and fear and relief coated my mouth, and I fought the urge to crumple to my knees. Instead, I blinked back into sight and turned toward the crowd, heart vaulting. Anticipated regret burned my bones, for I already knew what I would see.

The Loup-Garou had subdued the crowd with violence and precision. The damage was bad. Broken vendor stalls listed to the side, shrouded in ripped awnings. An overturned cart spilled fruit onto the pavement—split rinds spewed rich pulp onto cobblestones stained with human blood. A child wailed. I saw black-forged swords held to quivering throats; bruised arms and shredded tunics beneath a wall of glowering eyes and tearstained faces.

"Enough!" My voice came out reedy. I cleared my throat and tried again. "That's enough, I said!"

Swords slithered into sheaths. Booted feet kicked through limp paper sunbursts and shattered red masks. The Loup-Garou surrounded me in a loose circle, impassive faces turned outward. All but one—a tall figure detached himself from the platoon and stepped toward me. His black uniform was identical to his fellows' but for a strip of stark argyle at his shoulder and an ambric sunburst above his breast. He pushed back his hood, spilling pale

hair over his brow. Dristic-ringed eyes gleamed greener than the emerald signat glinting in his ear.

Sunder.

My heart pummeled my chest when I remembered how close I'd come to losing him. Memories flicked by—the moment I left him behind, bleeding on the steps of the Atrium, and the moment I found him again, festering and feverish, abandoned by the Skyclad when they surrendered the palais.

But that had been weeks ago. He'd survived, as I'd known he must. I leaned toward him, reaching for his stark solid presence. His gloved hand dropped to his sword hilt, but he didn't move toward me.

"Are you hurt?" His voice was soft but sharp, a blade concealed in silk.

"No," I lied. A massive bruise bloomed along my hip and I could taste blood where I'd bit my lip. "I used the feint we practiced. He ran after my decoy."

Sunder's jaw tightened, and his eyes moved toward the shadowy entrance of the marché. I followed his gaze, but the pair of figures had long since disappeared. "Do you want us to pursue him?"

"He tried to kill me," I snarled. "Would you have him get away with it?"

"He's just a boy," Sunder muttered.

Sudden sympathy made me hesitate. Again I saw his smooth boy's face—too young to shave. His skinny arms. The fear slicking his eyes.

"He was no innocent." I closed my eyes against the memory of my face in the dirt. The long sharp mask. That knife, its red hilt stained with the sweat of his fear. "Or did you miss the boot in my back and the knife at my throat?"

"Surely he wasn't the one to plan this."

“And yet, he was the one to carry it out.” My tone rang harsh.

“If we catch him—and we will catch him, demoiselle—he will be interrogated. Perhaps worse.” Something akin to sorrow razored across the planes of his face before he dropped his head into a posture of deference. The pose fit him like a poorly tailored coat. “I await your command, dauphine. Whatever it may be.”

I dared to glance past the Loup-Garou at the scene of destruction beyond. The Amber Citizens—referred to commonly as Ambers—had scattered, leaving behind the wreckage and detritus of the struggle. Despite the bloodstained cobbles, I saw no bodies. No dead.

A throb of pain shot toward my temple from where I’d slammed my head. This was not my fault. Was it? I had come here today with nothing but good intentions. But violence had been done to me, and in my defense. And yet—if I sent these soldats after that boy, he would face the consequence of a man. Was I willing to decide on such a fate?

A chill memory ghosted over me—another dusk, another decision, another brush with death. I remembered swords and soldats in uniform and the brisk tang of fear in the back of my throat. The incandescent thrill of wielding power heightened by a glass-bright need to survive.

Across the market, a scarlet mask looped over a lamppost shifted in the breeze—a long red finger pointed straight at me. I tightened my shoulders and lifted my chin.

“Find him,” I commanded. “Find him, but don’t kill him. I want to know why he tried to assassinate me.”

Sunder nodded, curt, then pulled his hood over his eyes and turned on his heel. As one, the Loup-Garou followed, a sleek machine sprinting dark through the golden streets. Two remained at my shoulders, tall and still.

Indecision churned hot in my stomach as I watched them disappear into the labyrinth of the Mews. I didn't doubt they would find the boy, but I almost wished they wouldn't. A soft part of me cried out for his youth, stolen by poverty and violence and the treacherous allure of misplaced ideals.

Perhaps, once upon a time, we'd been the same, me and that boy. We were both children. We both had a lifetime of choices laid out in front of us. We were both innocent.

Innocence. I turned the word over in my head until it stopped making sense. When had I lost my innocence? Long ago, one forgotten day in that frigid dusk where I was raised, ignored by righteous Sisters and slapped by vicious children. When I too was a child, full of impossible dreams and sunlit wishes. But then I'd discovered the royal, magical blood flowing through my veins. And I'd changed. My magical legacy had changed. *Everything* had changed.

I turned toward my carrosse, gilded and gleaming in the shadow of a tenement building. Above the roofs of the city, Coeur d'Or dazzled like a promise, a vision in kembric and amber. My satin slipper nudged a tattered piece of parchment: a pale face, a winking eye, a sly mouth.

Perhaps we had once been the same, me and that boy. But now he was a half-hearted assassin with a blade in his hand and a dungeon in his future. And I—I was the Sun Heir, dauphine of the Amber Empire and soon-to-be empress.

We were not the same at all.

And I wouldn't change that for the world.