



# The Dark Flame Series

## Bonus Chapter

### A Look Into The Past

#### Adora's Rage

She was struggling to keep up with him. Though she had long legs and was nearly as tall as him already, Damieren was just extremely fast. Even when he was walking.

This walk was different though, somehow, and Iowynn let out a dramatic huff as she finally fell in line beside her brother. “Would you slow down a little bit?” She slammed her fist into Damieren’s arm, her eyes narrowing when she saw his smirk. “It’s not funny!”

“But it is,” he chided. “I told you that if you were going to come with me, you needed to be fast. We can’t get caught. So move those boney little legs of yours.” Before she could protest or beg him to give her a break, Ren was breaking into a sprint. She saw him darting between trees, leaping over fallen logs and clearing streams as if he had simply been swept away by the wind. She ground her teeth, pumping her legs back and forth as fast as she could. She was finally within feet of him, winded and struggling, and a smile broke out across her face.

She released a victory cry when she cleared him, merely inches ahead. Her celebration didn’t last long. Because nearly as soon as she got a foot ahead of him, she was colliding with the hot, wet ground—all of the air expelling from her lungs. Damieren’s hand covered her mouth and as she rolled to her side, she saw him press a single finger to his lips.

“It’s mama, be quiet.”

She nodded, turning her head back to the figure that was moving through the forest. It *was* their mother, but she was not alone. Celestia Elletara was walking with her, their arms linked and both of them whispering.

Damieren hadn’t liked Celestia in a very long time. She’d once been a kind and gentle mother to her daughter, but all within a single year, it all changed. She was hateful to Carys. There had been countless nights he’d consoled her, wiped her tears away, and listened to her

question herself—always wondering what she'd done to deserve such harsh treatment. If it were up to him, Damieren would've removed the bitch's title and kicked her out of Credula for life. But he had no such power. And despite his hatred towards Carys's mother, his own mother seemed to still care for her. An odd pairing.

“They don't *know*, Adora. I can assure you, Carys is oblivious to it. I haven't told her anything about the Credence.” Damieren's brow furrowed, him and Iowynn exchanging confused glances as the females continued talking.

“It doesn't matter if they know of it or not, Cel. They'll *feel* it. Once their Core is ready to accept one another, they will know.”

“But they've already seen each other's cores. Shouldn't it have happened by now?”

Adora shrugged. “One would think. But I think it happened to them too young. Their minds weren't mature enough to understand what was happening.” She drew in a ragged breath and released it, reaching one hand up to rub at her brow. “We should just tell them. It doesn't mean that we're forcing them to be together. Think of it as a courtesy. We've already hidden so much. *is* they should know. Or they will lose their minds trying to understand why they feel the way they feel about one another.”

“Is she talking about you?” Iowynn whispered. Damieren had been listening so intently that he didn't realize his hand slipped away from his sister's mouth. He looked down at her, shaking his head.

“But the child you saw—“ Celestia began, but Adora gripped the female's arm tight, clipping the sentence before it could be finished.

“We will handle that when the time comes. Some things happen no matter how much you tangle the fate lines.” Adora released Celestia's shoulder. “And that vision has never changed.”

Celestia's teeth sank into her bottom lip, her eyes moving about the forest as if searching for the right words to say. “I... *fine*. We will tell them. But you know where I stand. The moment I sense any sort of danger coming for my daughter, we are *gone*.”

“I understand.”

“I mean it, Adora. No matter what the lines say, she is my *child* first.”

Adora and Celestia stared at one another for a moment, both of them with expressions that could easily translate their emotions. Fear. “We should go back to the manor before Taryn sends out a search party.” Adora spoke, her tone low, laden with a sadness Ren often heard when she was telling her stories.

Iowynn and Damieren stayed still amongst the fallen foliage, waiting silently until Celestia and Adora’s silhouettes faded into the rolling fog. Once he could no longer hear their chatter, he rose to his feet, jerking Iowynn up by the collar of her shirt—*his* shirt. She’d stolen it, the little thief.

“You *ass*,” Iowynn grumbled, swiping at the dirt on her breeches. “You nearly choked me to death.” She rubbed at her neck dramatically, eyeing him in the darkness.

Damieren rolled his eyes. Even with the slight irritation he felt at having her tag alongside him, he couldn’t stop the boyish grin that spread across his face at seeing her so disheveled. “It’d take a lot more than a second to kill you. Unfortunately. Now,” he gripped her shoulder, turning her the correct direction. “Let’s go.”

They continued their trek through the darkened wood, the light of the full moon the only opening of light on their path. He felt his jaw tick each time Iowynn spared him a wary glance, the look in her eyes asking more questions than she realized. He could sense her curiosity, her desire to interrogate him about what they’d overheard. But he was in no mood to dally upon such things at the moment. He’s set his mind to a night of revelry with his friends.

And... Carys.

Just her name, the breath of it, the *thought* of it was enough to make every nerve in his body prickle with a possessive wonder. With her name came a slew of unsolicited thoughts, desires, and impulses that he’d fought off for *years*.

*They will lose their minds trying to figure out why they feel the way they feel about one another.*

No truer words had ever been spoken. That was for sure.

Damieren's sixteen-year-old mind could not fully grasp, nor understand why he felt drawn to her. He couldn't even begin to explain the overwhelming desire he had to just bury his face into her neck and *breathe* her. He'd certainly never uttered that thought to a single soul. Brynnick knew, as he always knew everything. He didn't say anything, but Damieren could see the truth in every cautious glance spared in his direction when Carys toyed with the other young males at court.

Even without these urges, he'd always thought her to be an absolute delight to look at. She was beautiful in every way. From the shape of her face to the perfect swell of her brea—

“Well, are you going to tell me what all of that was about? Or am I just going to have to guess?” Iowynn commanded.

Ren failed at hiding his annoyance, his reluctance to entertain her racing mind. “You're too young. I'll tell you when you're older.”

“I'm older *now*.” She pressed. “Just since I asked the question, I'm seconds older than I was.”

“Smart ass.” He huffed.

“Tell me.” She begged, tugging his sleeve. “Tell me, tell me, tell me!”

He wasn't frustrated with his sister, it was more frustration towards himself and the fear he felt taking root in his chest. Because talking about it meant admitting that it was real and he wanted to pretend, just for a little while longer. “Iowynn, please. Stop talking.” He looked down at her rounded eyes, at her bottom lip that was purposefully jutted, pleading. “We'll talk about it on the way home, alright?”

Another thing that enraged him was how easily Iowynn could tug at his heartstrings. He'd never fully admit how much he loved having her as a shadow, but he did. He'd gotten so used to having her following him around that he didn't know what he'd do if—he violently shook the thought from his mind, rubbing at his stinging eyes with the palms of his hands. Iowynn saw his tears, but she said nothing as they were already nearing the place Ren and his friends usually gathered for their late-night delinquencies.

The ruins were flickering with aura light, dim enough to be inconspicuous from afar, but just bright enough to see the laughing and cheery faces of those that'd gathered. Iowynn

tucked herself closer to Damieren's side, her hand coming up to grip at his belt loop. He looked down at her, giving her one kind smile before he led her the rest of the way.

It was part of the reason why he allowed Iowynn to stay with him. She was horribly shy around others. With him, Brynnick, and Carys, she was her normal chattering self. But with others, she seemed to do better hiding in the shadows. Ren wasn't much different. His delinquencies were merely performative. Underneath that cruel, princely exterior, he was as soft as the moss that was currently squishing between her toes. He was a good brother—a caring brother. She had good sisters, too, but they treated her more like a doll. They dressed her up, painted her face, and delighted over her beauty.

Any other princess would be lucky to have such beautiful, attentive sisters as Seraphine and Serah, Iowynn was lucky to have them, but she didn't want to be like them. She wanted to be like Ren. Tough and kind and funny...

Like Carys, really.

Carys was like Damieren's mirror. Their Cores sang to each other. They were more similar than either of them liked to believe and it was their similarities that often enraged one or the other. They butted heads quite often, but could rarely stand to be apart for too long. They always meandered their ways back to one another, with seemingly feigned reluctance at times. But everyone knew otherwise. They'd existed together, in separate wombs, in birth, in childhood, and now.

The crowd hadn't noticed their approach. It was only Carys who turned her face away from the boy who was holding her in his lap, her eyes focused solely on Damieren. She rose to her feet slowly, the remnants of a laugh echoing across her face. Damieren's heart thundered, his palms sweating when she took a small step in their direction. She did not give away their arrival and merely laughed and clapped her hands when Ren was able to scare their group of friends by running through their circle and causing a ruckus.

Iowynn took to Carys's side immediately, leaning against her small frame and hugging her. Carys was smaller than Iowynn, but her fire and her personality always made her seem so much larger than everyone she graced with her presence.

They hovered, both of them watching Damieren socialize. Already making a fool of himself. He'd scooped up a cup of wine into his hand, downing it almost instantly before he plopped himself between Brynnick and the boy courting Carys.

Leif wasn't an awful person, but Ren didn't like him solely for the fact that he was a tad bit possessive. He'd hardly let Carys out of his sight this summer and it was ruining their fun.

*You cannot blame him for being drawn to such a flame. If you strike a match, the pests will follow the heat.*

Ren shook away the hissing thought, shoving down the crawling sensation that stirred at the base of his spine. He took another drink, hoping to silence their whispers.

Across the way, Carys eyed him in silent reverie, with a hint of sadness to her smile. "What happened?" She asked, leaning closer to Iowynn.

Iowynn's stomach plummeted, blinking away the image of him on his knees, his slashed-up back bared to her. It wasn't what she intended to see upon entering Taryn's study, but the gleam in Taryn's eyes told her that he'd summoned her there to see what he'd done. As a warning. She shuddered. "He received lashings. I don't even know what they were for this time."

Carys stifled, her own stomach feeling as if a large stone had been dropped into it. "Does he want to talk about it?"

"I don't know. He doesn't want to talk about much of anything these days."

It was true. Carys spent most of her days at his side, but he barely uttered a single word unless it was in the form of a quip or a nasty joke. Not only was it his lack of communication that struck her as odd, but also the things he did when he believed no one was watching.

She caught him talking angrily to himself in the nursery just that morning. At the time, she believed him to be speaking with his mother or even Brynnick, but when she opened the door, she saw that he was alone. And the way he looked at her made her heart ache, like he wanted to tell her something, but was terrified of what that something would entail. So, instead of speaking, they slipped into bed with one another and hid under a mass of blankets, foreheads pressed together, just as they'd done when they were children.

Ren just watched her in that fortress of quilts and though their fingers were interlocked, it felt as if his hands were all over her, spreading like the chill of a winter breeze.

Gooseflesh formed on her arms at the memory, her eyes moving from the orange flames at the center of their group and then to Ren. Iowynn was already beside him, already popping the end of a smoke pipe into her mouth and putting it on. For a brief moment, a smile twitched at the corner of her mouth, but as quickly as it appeared, it faded.

The hairs on her arms still stood on-end. A deep, aching pit formed in her chest, slowly filling, growing stronger and stronger the longer she watched Iowynn. She wanted to scream. It felt like it was the only way to get the pressure to release and it was already spreading through her, hitting her gut.

She needed Ren.

Panting and frantic, she bristled towards where Damieren sat. He paid her no mind at first, but the moment Carys touched his shoulder, the prince rose to his feet and followed her out into the forest as if it were a queen's command.

Once out of earshot of their friends, Carys flung herself into Damieren's arms. He welcomed her, lifted her closer, and encased his arms around her trembling frame. His wince of pain did not go unnoticed and though guilt tried clawing its way into her psyche, her fear overshadowed it immeasurably. Her breathing was ragged, her heart pounding against her chest and his as she looked up at him.

"What happened with Taryn?" Carys asked.

Dread settled there, in the swelling of emotions inside her. Damieren's face changed. "He saw her." He whispered. "Taryn saw what Iowynn can do. And—I wouldn't tell him the truth."

"We can run away." Carys panted. "We can get Iowynn and we can all run away. Tonight. To Holiadon."

"Carys—"

"Let's run away, Ren. *Please*." She was begging him. Carys was not one to beg anyone for anything. The confusion he felt was evident in the furrowing of his brow, the slight twitch in his eye as he looked over her face. She was pale, a single tear now rolling down her ashen cheek. "It feels like... it feels like I can't breathe. Like I'm buried. Something is coming, Damieren, and it feels like..."

“Don’t say it.” Ren closed his eyes, still clinging to her as all of the blood drained from his face. “Everything will be fine—*Iowynn* will be fine.” Neither of them knew if it was a promise or wishful thinking, but they didn’t have time to dwell on it. Their hurried breaths mingled, and their eyes lingered on one another, searching.

It was a silent plea for him to help her make it go away—that fear rooted and coiled so tightly, deep in her Core. Damieren needed no words, just the single tilt of her chin before his lips descended upon hers. He kissed her deeply, a rough sort of kiss that made her mind go silent. Carys hooked her arms tighter around his neck, grunting against the force of something hard hitting her back.

Bark dug across her skin, catching on her curls as Damieren’s hands felt along her curves. She pulled away from their kiss, gasping for air as his lips found her throat. “I’ll make it go away.” He whispered against her skin. “We don’t have to run, Care. I’ll make it go away.”

It was his own form of pleading to get her to stay. Carys had begged him to run away with her before. Many times. He once told her he never left Credula because of his mother and his siblings, but that was not the truth at all. He’d tried to leave, but neither him, nor his siblings could ever get out. They were trapped here. There was no running. And he *could not* fathom a life where she was out of reach—a life where Carys was somewhere else and he had to stay in place, forever kneeling to a male that didn’t even deserve for him to lower his head.

Ren’s mouth dragged across the skin of her neck, his maw tingling in response to the rapid pulse just under the surface, a pulse that beat in time with his own. “Don’t run away.” He said, teeth grazing, aching to mark—to claim.

Carys’s head swam, her fingers curling in the raven-colored waves at the top of his neck. She was flushed, body heating in response to the chill that seemed to slither across her skin like phantom ropes of ice. She prepared to bring his lips back to hers, only for them to be forced away from one another by a brute force slamming into Ren’s side.

She landed on the ground, the bark of the tree ripping through her shirt and skin as she fell. When she lifted her eyes, she saw Ren straddling the figure that’s shoved him, his fist raised to strike. Carys scrambled to her feet, managing to clear the space between herself and the boys before Ren could land what was sure to be a bone-shattering punch. She gripped his wrist, tugging him back until Leif was able to get off the ground and back to his feet.

She winced at the look of disgust on Leif's face, eyes dropping to the ground as he took a step closer to her. "I have excused the two of you for running off with one another for far too long. I told myself that it was just your friendship, but this does not look like friendship."

"What does it look like, Leif?" Ren asked, his voice laced with a certain smugness that always managed to grate a particular nerve in Carys's body. She clenched her jaw, anger seeping into her chest as Ren took a swaggering step towards Leif. "Are you intimidated by me?" She watched, horrified, as Leif shifted uncomfortably. Her cheeks reddened, her palms growing slick at her sides. "Are you afraid that I'll have my way with her before you can?"

Her anger snapped, finally. "Can you stop talking about me like I'm not here?" She demanded. Her eyes flickered to Leif, guilt settling in her features upon seeing the pain in his eyes. "There is nothing going on between us. It was a lapse in judgment—it meant *nothing*."

A stab and a twist.

That was what it felt like. Like a blow straight to his gut. Ren smirked at her, still, unwilling to allow her or anyone else to see his hurt. He'd hidden it all so well when it came to Taryn and his punishments, he could *certainly* conceal it now. "Right." Ren nodded. "She's my best friend, Leif. Sometimes things just get a little carried away."

Leif scoffed, moving forward to grip Carys's wrist. Ren flinched, his brow twitching upwards when his eyes did not fail to catch the slight wince that formed on Carys's face.

"That hurts." Carys whispered, tugging back on Leif's grip.

"We're going." The young male began pulling her, albeit unsuccessfully, in the direction of the ruins. Carys tried prying his hand off her arm, her brow crumpling with both anger and pain when he jerked her forward. "I *said* that we are going." Each of Leif's words were clipped, the last ending in a snarl that sent a chill as cold and lethal as death coursing through his veins.

Ren's hand snapped forward with lightning-quick speed, closing around the front of Leif's neck. The young male rasped for air, grappling at Ren's hands as if his efforts would be able to break his vise-like grip. His attempts were fruitless.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Ren growled, digging his thumb deeper into Leif's flesh. He saw the fear in the boy's face, the panic as he continued struggling. "Doesn't feel

good, does it?” His brow peaked. “Word to the wise, it’d be best for everyone to know that any unwanted touch she receives will be dealt back to the body the hands belong to. *Tenfold.*”

“You think... it will...make...her,” Ren pressed down harder, teeth bared at the sound of Leif’s strangled voice. “Want to... sleep with you?”

The prince’s head kicked to one side, the cold chill of his shadows swirling at the base of his spine. They chanted for him to make Leif bleed, to bring him unimaginable pain that he would *never forget*. “You think that I defend her honor just to have her in my bed?” He laughed softly, dangerously. He could feel Carys watching him, could feel her waiting for what he was going to say next. “She *has* been in my bed. She’s in my bed every single night. Do you know why that is?” Ren hummed, smirking as he slowly released his grip on Leif’s neck. The young male collapsed to his knees, sucking in gulps of air and clutching at the bruises that were already starting to form there.

“Since you are too busy trying to catch your breath to answer, I’ll do it for you.” He squatted, leveling their eyes. “Because I am the only male in this kingdom that she feels safe with. And I am the only male in this kingdom that doesn’t look at her and only see something to fuck.”

“Ren—” Her voice was a whisper, a gasp. The moment she spoke his name, he rose to his feet and moved towards her. Carys didn’t flinch away from the hands that were, only seconds ago, attempting to snuff the life from Leif’s body. She moved into the hand he placed on her shoulder, both of them sparing Leif a shouldered look of pity before returning to the ruins.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered. “I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

Carys frowned at the disappointment she felt, an ache forming in her chest with the fear that he could ever possibly regret *her*. “We can’t do that again. Ever.” She breathed through the constricting feeling, eyes burning. A strange warmth settled in between her lungs and her belly, a feeling similar to that of drinking far too much liquor at once.

Which was exactly what she wanted to do.



Carys clasped her head between her hands. There was no hope that the pressure would relieve the pounding in her skull, but she would take that deep pulsating pain over the feeling she had the night before. It was a good distraction.

When the servers placed her food in front of her, she winced at the sound of the porcelain sliding over the marble table-top, cringed at the sight of the meats and eggs sitting before her. She opted for the small bowl of fruit they'd placed to the side, her stomach rumbling with nausea even though the fruit was as delicious as it always was.

The door to her room creaked open and there was no point in her wondering who it was, she knew it was him by the way he smelled. By the way he walked.

Ren paused, hovering beside her until she finally looked up at him. "Funny," he teased. "I distinctly remember telling you that you'd feel like hell in the morning. Now look at you."

She plopped another slice of apple into her mouth, dramatically biting down on it with eyes narrowed. A warning. "The sound of your voice is worse than the sound of utensils scraping across a plate. The door was locked for a reason."

"Good thing I have a key."

"Please go be annoying somewhere else."

Ren smirked, plopping down in the chair across from hers. "Unfortunately, you're the only one I can annoy at the moment. Everyone else that finds me irritating has, conveniently, made themselves busy elsewhere." He reached across the table and picked up her fork. He stabbed at her eggs before bringing them to his mouth. She shook her head, eyeing him through tightened slits that, she hoped, would send a message. It didn't. "I wanted to see how you were feeling. About Leif."

She swallowed her food, making a face that borderlined disgust and boredom. But the feeling in her chest returned and it was hard to push it away. Especially with how he looked at her—like he genuinely cared. He did, she was sure, because Ren always cared. He was her best friend, but there was a part of her that wanted him to care in a different way. "I've had relationships end before. I'm fine." She huffed, aggravated that he kept taking food off her plate. She slid it to him, rolling her eyes when he beamed a large smile in her direction.

*Spoiled.*

Carys watched him as he ate, observing each of his features that had always seemed too beautiful to exist on a male. Ren was gorgeous in the most handsome way possible, but with all of his beauty came that dark *something* that lurked just beneath the surface of his skin. She could never put her finger on it, but it'd never really mattered anyway. He was different with her. *Gentle*. Even though he was a nuisance with a smart mouth, he never did anything to her that could truly harm her. This version of him was one that very few were allowed to see and of all the secrets they shared, this hidden side of him was *hers*.

This Ren was her secret.

Her favorite one.

“Not that my opinion matters much anyway, you are a young female who is capable of making her own decisions in terms of a partner, but you deserve better than that. You can do so much better than someone like him.” Ren spoke in between chews, occasionally glancing up at her as he stabbed at the various selections on the plate. “He’s not the kind of person you should be wasting your time on.”

“Really?” She picked up a grape. “What kind of person would *you* suggest wasting time on?”

“Someone who makes you laugh.”

She smirked and narrowed her eyes, teeth sinking into the grape. “Mmmm.” Encouraging him to continue was probably not the best idea, but she was interested in what he had to say. “And?”

Ren lifted his eyes to hers. “Someone who makes you feel like you are worth more than a warm body to sleep next to. Or to fill.” He didn’t need her invitation to keep going, Ren merely took one look at her and knew what he wanted to say. “You should be with someone who *sees* you, Carys. Someone who can look at all of your perfectly fractured pieces and loves you in spite of it all.” The air surrounding them seemed to lose its movement. The soft breeze that had been flowing in from the large, arched windows was now just thick tension. Carys shivered, looking down at the single cherry that remained in the bowl. “You deserve to be with

someone who would never think that the weight you carry is burdensome. Or that it makes you any different from the rest of the world.”

Tears stung her eyes as she dropped her gaze to the slight bruise Leif had left on her wrist the night before. She shivered, remembering Ren’s words all too clearly.

*“Because I am the only male in this kingdom that she feels safe with.”*

He was right. And, for the briefest moment, she believed—*hoped*—that all of those things he claimed she deserved meant *him*.

“Someone who sees the beauty inside of you and holds it to a higher regard than the shape of your lips, the thickness of your thighs, or how prettily your eyes sparkle when you’re trying to impress their friends.” He sighed. “I just don’t want you to settle.” His body went still. So still that Carys couldn’t tell if he’d been locked in a trance or not. “Never settle for someone who does not give you those things. Promise me.”

She blinked. “I’m too young to think about settling down any time soon.”

“Accidents happen every day. Who is to say that you don’t find yourself pregnant by one of these grimey little miscreants?” He made a face. “I’m afraid that I might actually murder someone if that happens.”

“I’m safe, Ren. You don’t need to concern yourself with things like that. I don’t even *want* children.” She grumbled. “I’m not even sure I want to get married, either. From what I’ve seen, marriage is only useful when it comes to political gain.”

“Would you marry me?” Both of them finally looked up from their food, eyes going wide and faces turning red as they stared at one another. Ren suppressed the urge to run and hide, forcing his infamous grin onto his face. Carys narrowed her eyes. “Just a jest.” He chuckled. The knock on her door interrupted her retort, both of them looking to the doorway to see Brynnick standing there. His wiry limbs trembled, his face drained of all color as he stepped closer towards them. Carys felt it again—that swelling dread in her chest.

“You need to come.” Brynnick said, voice shaking just as much as his body. “Both of you.”

Exchanging looks of worry and confusion, Carys and Ren pushed themselves to their feet and followed Brynnick through the manor. There was not a single sound that could be heard—not a single whisper. The servants were gone, the birds did not chirp, and the rapids of the river were muted. *Hushed*. As if all of the water had dried up.

It was Adora's blood-curdling and guttural scream of horror that brought Ren to his knees. He didn't even have to see it. He *knew*.

Brynnick and Carys dropped down beside him, wrapping their arms around his shaking frame as they watched the coroner and his apprentices carry a body wrapped in linens out of the manor doors. They drew closer to the prince, cheeks stained with readily falling tears, as if to shield him from the horrifying scene. They created a shield around him, but it did nothing to prevent the sounds of his mother's screams from reaching his ears.

He heard them over and over again—each one driving a dagger of rage through his bleeding heart.

Carys turned her head to face the footsteps that approached. Taryn loomed over them, his expression one of pride and not a man who had just lost a family member. All he did, all he said as he passed by the boy assumed to be his son, was:

“Your sister is dead.”

A rumble sounded at the back of Ren's throat, his eyes wild as he looked up at the king. He watched his figure grow smaller and smaller the further he walked. But he still rose to his feet. He stood on shaking knees, blinking the tears out of his eyes as he reached for the dagger at his side. Carys gasped, eyes homing in on his movements and whispered hushed pleas for him to stop.

He couldn't hear her. All he heard was the roaring, the echoing of his mother's heartache that reverberated off every object within the manor. Her pain, her *terror* bled into the walls, drenching them with sorrow. Before anyone could stop him, Ren was already charging towards Taryn, dagger raised and prepared to strike. Before he could drag the blade across the broad neck of the king, Taryn turned to face him.

A burning pain seared through his flesh, stealing the air from his lungs. Ren gasped, tear-filled eyes going wide as he looked down at his chest. The golden pommel of a knife stared

back at him, his own blood dripping down his skin. It was an unsettling warmth. One that sent a prickling sensation up the back of his neck to the top of his head.

He smiled.

“I may not ever be able to prove it, but I know you did this.” Ren seethed, teeth grinding through the pain of every spoken word, his chest feeling full of fire. “I will make every single day of your existence a living hell. I will make you wish you’d taken your own life instead of hers.”

Taryn smirked. “You know, you remind me of someone. A close friend of your mother’s. I never got to return the favor of him impaling me on my own sword, but...” his eyes dropped to the knife. “I supposed the debt has been paid.”

The squelching sound of the knife being pulled from his flesh made his stomach turn over. Ren knew that it wasn’t a fatal wound—Taryn was never great with his aim and missed Ren’s heart by an inch. But *knowing*...knowing that the blow was intended to kill forced anger and hate to replace Ren’s desire for approval from the only father he’d ever known.

It was the day Taryn signed his own death warrant—the day that the woman whose screams haunted the manor for years to come, finally decided that enough was enough.

Adora declared war.