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Defy the Dusk

BOOK ONE OF THE SUNDERING DUET

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CHAPTER 1



Flintspire

LIRIEN STEPPED INTO THE VESTIBULE, THE SMALL SPACE BETWEEN boxes illuminated by the soft glow of pyrolamps, and smiled as she discovered Davis standing guard outside the opposite door. A smile that immediately fell away as her friend said, "The archconductor is monitoring a session. From the sound of it, Edwin is having a hard time finishing. They've been at it for"—he glanced at his watch—"half an hour. You might want to wait until the old bastard manages to get off."

Lirien grimaced, her already lackluster enthusiasm for this meeting turning to dread. "The rigrat who delivered the message said the archconductor wanted to see me *quicklike*, so I'm not sure waiting is an option."

Davis winced, then gave her a sly grin. "Maybe Edwin asked the archconductor to sub you in. I can only imagine that fucking Veronica is no treat. I'd rather stick my cock in a bucket of ice—I'd get less frostbite."

Lirien crossed her arms and glared at her friend. "Do not even joke about that. You know I can't stand Edwin."

"Frontclass tax, Lir." Davis's voice deepened to the archconductor's gravelly tone as he quoted words they'd heard countless times over the last twenty years: "'Every union you make, every child you bear, is a stone laid in the foundation of humanity's return to greatness.'" Davis

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gave her a lopsided smile. "And you, my dearest friend, have not signed up to produce a single baby."

And Lirien never would. "I feel compelled to point out that neither have *you*."

"About that." Davis shifted his weight as *Dawnrider* rolled into a curve in the road, the great rig swaying slightly. "We were going to tell you today, but Reesha and I have applied for a license. Two aeromancers have sixteenth birthdays coming up, and once they are cleared to run their own windrigs and can cover for her, Reesha will be able to take time out of service."

Her friends had been hoping for a chance at a child for years, and despite her own misgivings about the matter, Lirien said, "Congratulations! Truly, Davis, I'm happy for you both!"

"I'll remember that when we need a childminder."

"You know I'll help you both however I can." She gave him a smirk. "Just get me one of those fancy harnesses and I'll take the little one uptop with me for fresh air. Smallest member of the crew."

Davis rolled his eyes, but his voice was serious as he said, "With luck, we'll have entered the new era before our child ever has to serve."

Lirien didn't believe a new era was coming in the way that most believed, but this was not the moment to dash those hopes. Wasn't the moment to bring up the dark fate that would face their child if they didn't manifest magic by the time they were fourteen, because they'd be condemned to rearclass under the archconductor's regime.

I won't let that happen.

Davis's eyes searched hers as silence stretched between them. "I wish things were different for you, Lir. It's not fair how he controls you."

Lirien shrugged, just as happy that her friend misconstrued the source of her tension, because it was better than him suspecting she was keeping secrets. "The archconductor hasn't forced the issue, thankfully. Taking me out of service is high risk, and given that I live in the mids, I think people forget that I'm technically a frontie."

"Yeah," Davis said, but he looked away as he did, toying with the glowing pyrolance fixed to his belt.

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Lirien was the Worldbreaker. Her magic had sundered the continent, which had unleashed the straxi. No one *ever* forgot that she was the most powerful elemar aboard.

"I should go in." She rolled her shoulders, then reached out to touch the flexible alloy encasing the vestibule. She didn't need to do so, because the stone set into the soles of her boots served as a conduit from her magic into the metal of the rig, but being more obvious ended the awkward conversation. Her magic flowed through *Dawnrider*'s wheels and into the road beneath them. She delved down the highway, preemptively searching for any damage that would impede the rig, because this meeting was likely going to require her undivided attention. "You and Reesha on scout duty after this?"

Davis nodded. "I'll head up once the session is over. Not even sure why the archconductor wanted me on guard duty."

It was odd for him to have been given such a mundane task, as Davis was the most powerful pyromancer in the mids, but Lirien didn't put much thought to it as she hung her greatcoat on a hook and stared at the two doors facing her.

One led to a narrow corridor that ran down the left side of the box. The other led into the box itself. Taking a deep breath, Lirien took hold of the handle of the latter and stepped inside.

She was immediately greeted with heated voices, along with the rhythmic *slap slap slap* of individuals engaged in coitus.

"I understand why you want it to be Edwin, Archconductor," Veronica snapped. "But his seed just isn't taking."

Lirien made a face, for she hated that word, but then pushed aside the thick velvet curtains. Dense pipe smoke immediately filled her lungs as her boots sank into the sumptuous carpet. The box was dimly lit with lamps, and empty but for three people. "You requested my presence, sir?"

Archconductor Taimen frowned at her, then motioned for her to approach before turning his attention back to Veronica.

The frontclass aeromancer lay naked on a velvet chaise, her heels in stirrups while Edwin pumped furiously between her legs. Sweat ran in

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rivulets down the sides of the pyromancer's face, which suggested that Davis hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said that this session had been going on for some time.

Lirien reluctantly approached, her eyes jumping from the large bar with its endless selection of liquors to the various beds with silken sheets, to the carts full of tools designed to stimulate pleasure, and then back to Taimen and the session he was monitoring.

Veronica had the Program's ledger in her hands, the bottom of the large book resting on her breasts, which jiggled with Edwin's every thrust. "I can read the charts, Archconductor. I can see the desirability of a child born from our union, but I've been fucking Edwin for *six months* and nothing. Perhaps his seed is too weak."

I hate that word.

"Or perhaps the vessel is too sour," Edwin gasped from between her legs. "It took just fine in Sabrina."

"I have had twelve children since *Dawnrider* began her roll!" Veronica snapped the ledger shut and glared at Edwin. "My eldest daughter is the first elemar of frontclass power born since the Sundering. The best you've bred is magic for the mids."

"At least none of them were nullborn!"

"I can come back later," Lirien muttered, desperate to be uptop in the open air where it didn't stink like pipe smoke, unsuccessful sex, and bigotry.

Everyone ignored her.

Taimen raised placating hands at the two fronties, his gray eyes filled with irritation. "I understand the frustration, but a loss of temper will not aid us in our quest."

"What would aid us is new studs," Veronica snapped. "If you want a union between my aeromancy and a pyromancer, why not bring in that young one standing guard outside? What's his name? Davis?"

Lirien couldn't help but tense. Davis and Reesha had been inseparable since they were children, but if he was ordered to do this, there would be no choice.

"Elemar Emberwick is a midclasser," Taimen replied, and Lirien

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struggled not to exhale in relief. "He's not powerful enough to match with you, Veronica."

"He's the strongest pyromancer in the mids," Veronica spat, then turned her gaze on the thrusting Edwin, whose pace had increased. "Emberwick is young and virile. What good is a frontclasser stud if *he can't fucking come*!" She screamed the last few words, then pulled a foot from the chaise's stirrup and kicked Edwin square in the face.

He snarled and batted her foot aside, but rather than pulling out, Edwin seemed to be spurred on by the pain.

Lirien stared at the floor, listening to the slap of skin against skin, understanding full well why Taimen had her present despite none of this having anything to do with the roads she built and maintained for *Dawnrider*. He wanted her to see her own future.

"Can't even keep it hard, can you?" Veronica screamed. "Past your prime!"

"It's like fucking a dead fish!" Edwin roared. "Loose and used and *old*!"

Instead of offending Veronica, his words seemed to have the exact opposite effect on the aeromancer.

"Yes!" Veronica moaned, her back arching. "That is the fire I need, you octogenarian prick!"

Lirien clenched her fists, forcing her mind inward until what was happening before her faded. For twenty years, the frontclassers aboard *Dawnrider* had interbred as part of the Program to increase the numbers of elemar, and it had twisted their minds in strange ways. She supposed it was the only way they could embrace the endless sexual demand, and it was certainly the only explanation for their near constant denial that the Program was *failing*.

Drumming her fingers against her thighs, Lirien focused on the carpet beneath her boots, hating how the organic material kept her magic from reaching down into the road beneath *Dawnrider*'s wheels.

All magic came from the Fount, but every elemar had a different affinity. As Lirien was a terramancer, her affinity was for forming and manipulating rock, with a minor affinity for metal that allowed her

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magic to travel through the alloy frame of *Dawnrider* and into the road below. Like most terramancers, she had no affinity for organics, fire, water, or air, so her magic could not travel through them. The result was that she always felt a degree of weakness in the frontclass boxes with their carpeted floors and wood-paneled walls.

Veronica and Edwin continued to shout insults at each other, their enthusiasm mounting. Lirien shoved a hand into her uniform's jacket pocket, toying with the rocks she always kept with her. She changed their shapes, merged them together, and then broke them apart again, the tiny flow of magic calming her agitated nerves.

Veronica shrieked at the top of her lungs, either reaching orgasm or feigning it, and Edwin collapsed over her with a groan.

"Well done," Taimen said, looking up from his ledger. "You two honor the Fount in your commitment to blessed unions. I have no doubt that this session will yield strong dividends."

Lirien hoped that it would, if for no other reason than she wanted Veronica to forget that Davis ever existed.

Edwin leaned over Veronica and kissed her cheek. "Shall I crack a bottle of wine for you in the lounge box, darling?"

"That would be marvelous." Veronica sighed and tilted her head back, eyes closed.

Lirien averted her gaze as Edwin stepped back, but not before she was treated to the sight of his limp penis encircled by gray pubic hair. She grimaced, wishing there were a way to burn the vision from her memory, because while the Fount had endowed him generously with magic, it had been cheap in the matter of genitalia. Edwin pulled up his pants and walked to the far end of the box. "Don't make me wait too long, darling."

Two women stepped out of the shadows, startling Lirien, as she hadn't noticed them there. Their faces were lowered, but Lirien recognized them as rearclassers. They silently covered Veronica with a velvet blanket and then each took a firm grip on one of her legs, elevating her pelvis. Both were elemar but profoundly weak in magic. Just enough power to get a place aboard *Dawnrider*, albeit in rearclass with service duties. Though it had been twenty years since the rig began its endless

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roll with its thousand hand-selected elemar passengers, Lirien remembered how people had fought for rearclass places in the final hours before *Dawnrider* left the ruins of Allantria. How they'd *killed* for the chance to wash dishes and scrub toilets and elevate frontclass cunt in service to the Fount, because it was better than facing the night and the straxi hunting within it.

Taimen had moved to a small side table and was scribbling within his ledger, his pipe clenched between his teeth despite the ember having gone out.

"You wished to speak with me about something, sir?" Lirien asked.

"Hopefully it's about finally pulling your weight, Worldbreaker." Veronica opened her eyes and turned her face to regard Lirien, expression frosty. "I'm sure you're having a grand old time with all the studs in the mids, but we really ought to allow Edwin to impregnate you before the old fuck expires. You can pretend you're a midclasser all you want, but like it or not, you belong to the frontclass. Do. Your. Duty."

Every frontclasser was an elemar of vast power, though they possessed a variety of affinities. Aquamancers. Terramancers. Aeromancers. Oromancers. Pyromancers. Strong magic meant privilege on *Dawnrider*—the largest quarters, the best food, the greatest quality of entertainment—but it also meant that the frontclassers only rarely had to contribute to the running of the rig. To just *exist* granted them their place as long as they continued to have children.

The Sundering was judgment. Taimen's preached words filled her head. *Elemar allowed the Fount's sacred gift to bleed from our bloodlines by coupling with nullborns, and it punished us by unleashing the straxi into the night. The Fount reminded us that there is a cost when magic is left to wither, and we must earn its favor again if we wish the elemar to see the dawn of a new era.*

It was utter fucking bullshit. Lirien had sundered the world. Her magic had manifested unexpectedly when she was a child, and she'd had no control over it. Her terramancy had sent quakes rippling across the continent, one of which tore open the Gorge where the straxi eggs had been waiting dormant. With the focus on rebuilding the damage inflicted by the quakes, no one had realized the threat the straxi posed

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until it was too late and they began swarming. Taimen believed the Fount had unleashed the straxi to kill off the nullborn, who he called abominations. Except the straxi liked eating elemar just as much as they liked eating nullborns, which Lirien had always thought was a fairly profound flaw in his argument.

Yet the archconductor had a way of speaking that made people believe him. That made people obey him.

Even Lirien.

But not when it came to being bred like a prized mare.

Hold on to your anger, Lirien silently ordered herself even as she said, "I have done my duty every day for twenty years, Veronica."

"We don't need any more highways." Veronica sneered. "There are terramancers in the mids who can fix cracks and make repairs. The Fount gave you your magic, Worldbreaker, and it demands recompense."

"Elemar Flintspire's time as a vessel will come soon enough," Taimen said. "But we've a more pressing concern. The equinox approaches, and with it, the Gauntlet Run."

There were limits to how fast even *Dawnrider* could travel, and to remain constantly in daylight required the long days of summer. To that end, they switched hemispheres on the equinoxes, traveling the length of the highway known as the Gauntlet that stretched between the northern and southern poles. The highway was named so because *Dawnrider*'s journey along it was the only time when they had to face the night. But the straxi were not the only threat.

"You're worried about Vox attacking?"

Taimen didn't answer, focusing instead on relighting his pipe. Only when it was smoking properly did he say, "Vox and his feralists have long been a problem, but his success in killing Gaven on our last Gauntlet Run and Amalise two years prior speak to a specific goal."

"Killing fronties." Lirien cleared her throat. "Frontclassers, I mean."

The archconductor stared at her with his cold gray eyes, then said, "It is the power of those who serve in *Dawnrider*'s frontclass that allows us the safety of dawnspeed, for only they can part the seas. It is because of them that we are able to traverse our grand path toward a

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new era for the elemar. It is not the frontclass that Vox attacks but our very future."

Given that the feralists fixated on stealing supplies and food whenever they managed to get aboard, Lirien didn't think they were focused on ideologies, but all she said was, "You have something in mind for Vox, sir?"

"It's time we put him down." Taimen blew out a ring of smoke. "He will set a trap for *Dawnrider* during the Gauntlet Run, but we will set a trap of our own. We will send out windrigs in advance of our progress. Eyes in the sky to locate Vox's *Duskchaser.* Once they have done so, you will destroy Vox, his rig, and everyone aboard."

Lirien bit the insides of her cheeks. Not because she had any compunctions against slaying Vox—she welcomed that chance, because she'd lost friends in his attacks. Her hesitancy was because feralists' rigs weren't just full of fighters. They were moving villages, which meant they'd have innocents aboard. Children. Lirien's magic was not a knife in the dark. It was an eruption that killed without discrimination.

"We will begin the Gauntlet Run in a matter of weeks, and he knows we aim to cross the equator precisely on the equinox," Taimen continued. "Vox favors attacking us when we slow in our approach to the sea crossing, because it is when most of our frontclass elemar are exposed in the uptop. I see no reason why he would change that habit."

"Agreed." The word came out flatter than she'd intended.

Taimen gave her an appraising stare. "I sense your hesitation to go on the offense, but allow me to remind you that all the aquamancers and aeromancers in the mids working together don't have enough power to reliably part the seas. It is our precious frontclassers who make that feat possible, and if we lose them, we will have to face the long dark of winter. I know you perceive the frontclass as indolent, but recognize that losing even one of them risks the survival of everyone aboard."

This was how Taimen held control: by making everyone believe that survival was impossible without his oromancy to hold *Dawnrider* together. That it was impossible without the extreme power of the frontclassers to part the seas to allow passage between the continents. But after this Gauntlet Run, Veronica and the other fronties would learn the

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bitter taste of irrelevancy, because *Dawnrider* would need them to cross the world no longer.

Holding on to that thought, Lirien said, "I'll be ready."

"You will do your duty and serve, Elemar Flintspire."

I'll do my duty to Dawnrider, Lirien thought. *I will serve my people.* "Yes, sir."

The door to the rear of the box opened, and a rigrat appeared. Lirien winced, immediately recognizing him as Veronica's eldest son, Richard.

Her *nullborn son,* who'd been sent to live in the rearclass on his fourteenth birthday. He was a good kid, a reliable messenger, and everyone in the mids and rear liked him a great deal.

"Sir," he said, inclining his head to Taimen. "There's a scavver rig deadstopped on the highway. Scouts are saying they're blocking our path."

Taimen grimaced in annoyance. "Bring word to the engine that Elemar Flintspire is on her way to resolve the issue."

"Yes, sir." Richard's eyes slid to Veronica, who was staring, expressionless, at the painted ceiling of the box. "Hope you're doing all right, Mom."

Veronica didn't answer. Didn't so much as acknowledge that anyone had spoken.

Lirien watched Richard's face, which was marked with hollow cheeks and shadowed eyes from the deprivations the rear endured, fill with hurt. For fourteen years, Veronica had mothered him in frontclass, but because the Fount had not seen fit to gift him with magic, she now treated him as though he didn't exist.

"Did they say how far ahead the rig is, Ricky?" Lirien asked, catching hold of his shoulder so that he was looking at her rather than his mother.

"Half an hour at our current speed, but it took me some time to find you, Elemar Flintspire. Down to twenty minutes by now, I reckon."

"You better hurry back to the engine, then. They'll be worried."

As Ricky raced to the exit, Taimen moved to press a hand to a decorative slit in the wood paneling of the box, bare palm sinking into the exposed metal. His brows knit as his oromancy rang the chimes that

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would signal the pyromancers fueling the engine to decrease their speed. When he withdrew his hand, the silvery alloy was once again smooth and pristine. He was the most powerful oromancer alive and *Dawnrider*'s creator—a fact the archconductor never let anyone forget.

Almost instantaneously, *Dawnrider*'s gentle sway changed its rhythm, the great rig's speed easing.

"The Fount will reward your dedication, Veronica," Taimen said, then he gestured to Lirien. "Elemar Flintspire, time is short."

His swift strides took him to the exit, but as Lirien moved to follow, a rope of air coiled around her wrist and yanked her back. Her hip slammed against the chaise, the rope compressing painfully as Veronica drew her close.

The aeromancer's eyes were liquid bright as she hissed, "I see your judgment, Worldbreaker. Always holding yourself above the rest of us despite the fact *you* caused the Sundering."

Lirien met Veronica's gaze with her own unblinking stare.

"I did not choose Richard's fate." A tear ran down Veronica's cheek. "The Fount judged him unworthy and denied him magic. I don't know why, but I do know that I must accept the Fount's decision or risk bringing further punishment down upon us all. The straxi were unleashed to punish us for our crime of valuing the ingenuity of the nullborn more than Fount-gifted magic. The elemar forgot that we were superior, forgot that we deserved to dominate, and all of this suffering is so that we never forget that fact again. I will make whatever sacrifice is necessary to ensure we survive into the new era, but there is a part of me that hopes when you finally deign to serve as a vessel that you will come to know the pain of having a child that is unworthy."

The rope of air vanished, and Lirien pulled away. A thousand retorts rose to her lips, but all she did was incline her head, because Veronica's days of indolence were numbered. "I hope the Fount blesses you with all that you deserve, Veronica. Dawnspeed."

As Lirien twisted on her heel to leave the box, the alarm bells down *Dawnrider*'s great length began to keen their warning of an obstacle ahead, but in Lirien's mind, they warned of a far worse threat on her horizon.