

There was an awkward silence that stretched between the group of dragons. The tension had become quite evident, especially with Dia and Sol. All Sirius had known about them was that they were siblings, but they certainly didn't have a good relationship. Perhaps Sol was also upset that he had to trek through the mire of the Gloom Empire, a place filled with swamps, but devoid of all magic.

Mare followed close behind the group, silent and lethal. He watched the world with the eyes of a predator, just as one would expect from an Aether dragon. Sirius didn't trust the Ravager Wyvern, but it wasn't like he couldn't take him on. As Sirius glanced back, he noticed the Celestial Feline poking its head out from the Solar Flare dragon's shoulders. Its three eyes blinked slowly and methodically.

Mud stuck between the talons of the dragons, but the canopy was far too dense to fly low and watch for any prey. Thus, they had stuck to walking, which made the process far more arduous. A slither of a crescent moon barely peaked out between the thick swath of tree branches, and a whisper of a brisk wind had picked up. Sirius shivered slightly, longing for the feathery down that Sol and Mare had. Dia's tail twitched slightly, her eyes narrowing as the night grew colder.

Bioluminescent mushrooms clustered on the ground between patches of thistles, their presence casting a blue and green glow upon the tree trunks. Perhaps there was some beauty to the Gloom Empire at night.

Just then, the snapping of twigs rang throughout the marshland forest. The deer scent wafted towards the group, indicating they were downwind of the prey. *Perfect*. This wasn't the type of prey Sirius usually hunted; no, his prey was far more dangerous and way less edible.

Dia halted and stood as still as a stone statue, and Sol and Mare came to a stop behind her. Sol was getting ready to growl at her to keep moving before he noticed the flicker of a tan hide between the undergrowth.

*Typical from a pampered brat*, Sirius thought, having dealt with many noble or domestic dragons in his time. He didn't know that Sol and Dia had been raised in a cult-esque flight before Dia had killed the majority of those gold and white feathered beasts.

To her, they had deserved fire and brimstone for making her an outcast. And she had never forgiven her brother for ignoring her and acting like they were his real family.

The deer herd had not noticed the dragons yet, and they took this time to fan out and pounce on the unsuspecting prey. Dia had a particular way of using the shadows to kill, and she was as silent as...well, an assassin. Sirius had the same approach, but he actually *was* an assassin. He almost wished Darius was here for the hunt.

Mare and the Celestial Feline fought side by side, the cat going for the eyes while Mare tore his prey apart. He was truly a beast of The Aether, and he definitely did not deal a swift blow for anything unfortunate enough to be locked by his talons.

Surprisingly, Sol had caught one, though he took the time to whisper something to the prey that he had caught.

*What is that fool doing? He's wasting time; didn't the flight teach him to catch as much as he could to feed the young and elderly? I thought that was what they did.*

*Well, I can't understand. Being an assassin means I hunt alone.*

By now, the deer had scattered, the elderly and injured being picked off from the herd. That was what survival was about. They could not come back and help the stragglers, for they would die before they could save anyone.

Sirius sighed. *That is why Lyra and her little rat are foolish. She clings to a weak human. Darius should have killed him when he had the chance.*

Grunting, Sirius swiveled around, enjoying the prey he had just caught. He tried to ignore the sheer violence of Mare, not being particularly interested in what Aether dragons did. Dia and Sol ate as far away from each other as possible, even when Sol tried to speak to her. Obviously, their bond was irreparable.

As he ate, Sirius considered the family he had destroyed. Lyra had loved him, but he had betrayed that love. Of course, he had always planned to betray her; that was what an assassin did to their target's closest companion.

Ultimately, their first son had paid the biggest price.