

WE THREE HEROES

THE MEDORAN CHRONICLES NOVELLAS

LYNETTE NONI



CROWNS AND CURSES

A NOVELLA OF
THE MEDORAN CHRONICLES

One

Delucia was dreaming again.

Tonight, it was a good dream. She was flying on the back of a mythical draekon, high up in the sky, the sun bathing her skin and reflecting off the crimson scales beneath her.

Glancing down, she could see the whole of Tryllin laid out, from the harbour all the way up to the palace and beyond. If she squinted past the glow of the shining city, she could almost see the balcony of her bedroom jutting out from the eastern tower. But she cast her eyes away. Right now, her life at the palace didn't exist. Here and now, she had no responsibilities, no duties, no obligations. Soaring high above the city, she wasn't a princess—she wasn't the heir to the human throne of Medora. She was nothing. She was no one.

She was free.

Then the clouds swept in, stealing the sunshine, and suddenly the draekon beneath her vanished.

With the powerful beast no longer keeping her aloft, Delucia began to fall.

An endless scream left her lips as she plummeted towards the city that was no longer shining, but shadowed by darkness. Fire—there was fire everywhere, smoke rising to the heavens. It burned her skin and clogged her throat, choking her screams, allowing the cries of others to reach her ears as she fell closer

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and closer to the ground. The city itself seemed to be screaming in pain—along with all those trapped within it.

People—those were Delucia's people.

And they were dying.

A thunderclap sounded, the noise so loud it pierced Delucia's ears and drowned out the screams. Lightning streaked all around her, so bright it was blinding, taking with it the vision of the burning city. All that remained of her senses was the ringing in her ears, the scent of smoke, the wind tearing at her body, and the scorching heat of the embers that were now nearly within reach.

Her sight cleared just in time to see the single image, one almost as shocking as the end of her beloved Tryllin.

It was a man—a man standing at the steps of the palace, a crown of golden hair atop his head, eyes blazing like the fires surrounding him.

His face—Delucia had never seen such a face. He was so beautiful it hurt to look at him. And yet, she could feel the emotion pouring from him, the disgust, the loathing. It was like oil coating her skin, suffocating and poisoning her from the outside in. Because somehow she knew that this beautiful man considered her amongst what he detested. Like the city dying around them, he wished for her to suffer the same fate.

And as she fell close enough for his golden eyes to lock on hers, the last thing she saw was his satisfied expression as he witnessed her death.



Delucia sat up with a gasp, her hand flying to her pounding chest. Panting loudly, she tried to steady her breathing, allowing the early morning light streaming into her bedroom to soothe her.

“It was a dream,” she whispered to herself. “Just a dream.”

But... it had felt so *real*.

Her doubt was enough that she pushed back her covers and rose on shaking legs, staggering towards her balcony. Only when she looked upon the beauty of Tryllin laid out across the horizon did she utter a sigh of relief.

No smoke, no fire, no shadows, no storm.

Indeed, there was not a single cloud overhead, the rising sun hinting that it was going to be a glorious day.

Finally, her heartbeat began to calm. Unable to help herself, she let out a quiet laugh, wondering what had possessed her to think it had been anything other than a fantasy conjured by her sleeping mind.

“Something amusing, Princess?”

Startled, Delucia spun around to find her stern tutor at the entrance to her room. The bushy-haired woman had one grey eyebrow arched and was clearly waiting for an answer.

“Just a dream I had, Mistress Alma,” Delucia said, fidgeting with the edge of her nightgown.

“A dream?”

Delucia knew better than to answer truthfully, the warning in Alma’s voice enough to prompt caution. But she couldn’t help herself. “I was flying on a draekon, until I wasn’t, and then I saw a man, only he wasn’t a man at all.”

Alma’s eyebrow arched even higher, enough that it was like a baseless triangle resting above her eye. “A man who is not a man? What madness is this you speak?”

Delucia bit her lip as she considered the swiftly fading dream, the vision losing clarity the longer she was awake. Given the ending, she didn’t want to recall most of what she’d seen, what she’d felt. But fading or not, she still felt certain enough of her answer to say, “I think—Mistress, I think he was a Meyarin.”

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Alma's second eyebrow rose to meet her first. "Draekons and Meyarins? Gracious, child. You're thirteen years old—such nonsense should be beyond you." Her forehead crinkled, the lines deep with age. "I take it Master Ying is to blame for filling your mind with such tales of whimsy?"

"It was only a dream, Mistress," Delucia said quietly, feeling a stab of worry. She didn't want Master Ying to get in trouble—not again. It wasn't his fault she was always begging for stories from the time when Meyarins and draekons had ruled Medora. Millennia may have passed since either of the immortal races were last seen, but unlike most humans, Ying was not as quick to dismiss or forget legends of the past. And since he was charged with educating Delucia on the history of their world—amongst other things—he was the best chance she had to learn what no one else would teach.

Of course, it helped that Ying himself was just as fascinated by the ancient immortal beings as Delucia was. She knew he would love to hear about her dream, unlike the strict Mistress Alma, who was looking at her with clear disapproval.

"Princesses do not dwell on dreams," Alma said. "What you envision while sleeping is no one's business but your own—and it's to stay that way. Do you hear me?"

Delucia decided not to remind Alma that she'd only been answering the question asked of her. Instead, she ducked her head and replied, "Yes, Mistress."

"Good," Alma said brusquely. "Now get dressed, child, or you'll be late for breakfast."

As Alma turned and left the room, Delucia looked out at the view again, a sense of melancholy settling over her. While the latter half of her dream had turned into a nightmare, the beginning had been wonderful. The sense of freedom she'd felt while soaring the skies—oh, how she longed to close her eyes and return to that moment.

But... the joy of her memory was fleeting, overshadowed by the horrors that had happened at the end—horrors that were still affecting her, since her pulse, while much calmer, had yet to ease into a resting heart rate. The man—the Meyarin—the way he'd looked at her... Delucia had *felt* his hatred. Just as she'd felt his pleasure when she'd met her end.

Shuddering, she turned from the view, determined to let go of the lingering dream.

This wasn't the first time a vision had affected her so. She'd been a vivid dreamer for as long as she could remember, and she often awoke with clear memories of what her subconscious mind had experienced while sleeping. It was just... lately, her dreams had left her feeling... different. Not necessarily a bad kind of different, just different. Especially on the days when her dreams were... more than dreams.

Delucia hadn't told anyone, but at least three times so far over the summer, she'd had dreams that had come true. Small, inconsequential things, for the most part. Like when she'd dreamed that Warden Cassidy would be retiring from her position as head of the Shields, with Commander Nisha promoting Warden William into the role. That had happened in real life not two days after Delucia had already seen it—in *her sleep*.

Then there was the time she'd dreamed about Advisor Jaxon scolding his grandson Declan for wearing a wrinkled shirt while visiting the palace, with Jaxon so lost in his tirade that he'd missed a step and tripped down the stairs, breaking his ankle. Delucia had never liked the surly advisor, but she'd still felt bad when that dream had come to pass, wondering if perhaps she should have sought to warn him.

Lastly, just three days ago, Delucia had dreamed that a small delegation would be visiting the palace from the coastal city of Harovell—and indeed, that very morning, she had awoken to

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hear the news from her father that guests would be arriving that evening and staying with them for the following ten days.

Delucia wasn't sure what to make of her dreams—of her premonitions. Once was a fluke, twice was a question mark, but three times? And with each occurrence offering such specific detail? She was beginning to wonder if she should tell someone. Not that she knew who, exactly, she should share her concerns with.

It wasn't a question of who might believe her; she *was* a princess, after all. No, it was a question of who might fear for her sanity. That was why she had remained silent so long—that, and the niggling doubts she felt about her own recollections.

If nothing else, she found comfort in knowing that her most recent dream wasn't one that foretold future events. Mistress Alma had been right about the nonsense her sleeping mind had conjured—draekons and Meyarins had long since been lost to the past.

“Princess! Why are you still standing there?”

Delucia jumped at Alma's voice, the tutor having returned only to find Delucia right where she'd left her.

“Your parents and their guests are waiting for you in the north tower. Goodness, child, stop daydreaming and get a move on.”

Delucia offered a quick apology and hurried towards the clothes her attendants had laid out during the night. Being the height of summer, she was relieved to find a simple skirt and top combination, paired with comfortable sandals. In seconds, she was dressed and wrangling her deep red hair up into a ponytail as she rushed after Alma and out of her room.

While Mistress Alma was officially considered a tutor in what Delucia considered ‘Princess Studies’—department, etiquette, literature, music and the arts—she was also in charge of Delucia's day-to-day schedule. She was more a royal nanny

than a tutor, someone the king and queen trusted to manage Delucia and make sure she was where she needed to be, when she needed to be there.

Like right now—when Delucia was meant to be at breakfast with her family.

As the human rulers of Medora, her parents were always busy. But when it was within their power, they made sure to start the day by spending time with their daughter.

Normally, Delucia treasured their daily breakfasts—the only dedicated family time she was almost always guaranteed to have with them. While her classes with Mistress Alma and Master Ying were on hold for the summer, meaning she had plenty of free time up her sleeves, her parents were afforded no such holiday from their royal obligations. They weren't just *hers*—they belonged to the whole of Medora. Just as Delucia herself did, and would even more when the time came for her to take over the throne.

That day, however, was long into the future. For now, Delucia had to settle for sharing her parents with the rest of the world, something she was able to do without resentment because she knew just how much they loved her. That, and they always made sure that the time they spent with her, brief though it might sometimes be, was without distraction. Their breakfasts were for *them*. As a *family*.

... Except on the rare occasion that others joined them. Like yesterday. And today. And the rest of the coming week.

There was a reason Delucia was dragging her feet along the corridors, why she wasn't eager to reach the north tower like most other mornings. And that was because, part of the delegation who had arrived would be dining with them again—the group from Harovell whose visit she had dreamed.

That dream wasn't the first time she'd seen them.

She'd met them before. Just the once. Five years ago.

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They'd stayed longer than ten days that time. And when they'd finally returned to their city on the west coast, they'd done so only after teaching Delucia some hard truths—truths she had spent the last five years living by.

Truths she would carry with her for the rest of her days.

“Now remember, child,” Mistress Alma said as they reached the doors to the dining parlour—a much smaller space than the banquet hall that was used for more official events. “Princesses are always gracious hosts.”

And with that, the tutor gave Delucia a nudge through the doorway, leaving her to continue forward on her own.

She was late—Alma hadn't been wrong about that. All eyes swung her way as she walked towards the table filled with food, the smell reaching her nose and causing her stomach to growl. But at the same time, that very stomach was also clenching with dread at what was before her—at *who* was before her.

Head high, back straight, eyes forward. Delucia mentally chanted Alma's repeated teachings as she placed one foot in front of the other, determined not to reveal that she was shaking on the inside. Rage, hurt, betrayal, humiliation—everything she'd felt five years ago had returned to the forefront of her mind. She couldn't even look at him—at the person responsible for all that she was feeling. Instead, she focused on her parents, both seated at the head of the table.

“Mother, Father,” Delucia said as she approached. “I apologise for my tardiness.”

Such formality was normally overlooked during their daily breakfasts. They were a family—they didn't stand on ceremony when it was just the three of them. But since they weren't alone today, Delucia knew that she wasn't only their daughter this morning; she was the princess of Medora. And she had a role to play.

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Gritting her teeth, she moved her gaze to the two others seated at the table. The first wasn't that hard to look at.

"Lady Nerita, I trust you slept well?"

The High Court judge of Harovell offered Delucia a small smile, her blond hair catching a ray of sunlight streaming in from the overhead windows, resulting in an almost angelic effect. "Indeed, I did, Princess. Thank you."

Delucia offered a short dip of her chin before summoning the courage to turn to the boy seated to Nerita's left.

"And you as well, Lord Maxton?"

It took every iota of diplomacy within Delucia to resist reaching for the water jug and tipping it over Maxton's smug head when his lips curved up in a hateful smirk. He knew exactly how hard it was for her to maintain any level of civility while in his presence, yet he was determined to make it even more challenging for her.

"I could have slept better," he drawled. "There's a draught in my room."

Delucia dug her fingernails into her palms, careful to keep her reaction out of sight. If they were alone, she would tell him that it was the middle of summer and any lack of warmth he felt was merely due to his own cold heart. But since they were in company, her response had to be much more courteous.

"I'm sure we can have you moved to a new room." The kennels, perhaps, so he could be amongst his own kind. Though, Delucia wouldn't wish his presence upon the poor dogs. No one deserved such miserable company.

"No need, Princess," Maxton said, the smirk still on his face. "We're only here for the rest of the week. I'll find a way to endure it."

Delucia was already counting down to the end of his visit. Inwardly, she prayed that the next seven days would fly by. Outwardly, she pasted a smile on her face and dipped her head

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again, before taking the seat to her father's right—a position that was, unfortunately, directly opposite Maxton.

Sharing the same light hair colour as his mother, along with her blue eyes, it was easy to note the resemblance between the two. But while Nerita's features were filled with kindness, her son's expression held nothing but thinly veiled contempt. It was easy to miss—Delucia was certain he had everyone else fooled.

Just like he'd had *her* fooled.

Everything about him portrayed the poster child of perfection. The doting son, the generous friend, the person everyone wanted to spend time with.

It was all a lie.

But five years ago, Delucia hadn't known that. And within seconds of meeting him, she'd fallen completely under his spell.

For the first eight years of her life, she'd never had any real friends. She'd grown up a princess, her closest companions being the stern Mistress Alma and the passionate Master Ying. There were very few children who visited the palace, and those who did—blood relations of the servants, advisors, counsellors and military leaders—all treated Delucia with the respect owed to her station. She wasn't a girl to them, she was a princess. It made forming personal relationships all but impossible.

There were, of course, the maids who attended her, but they came and went as often as the weather turned. Delucia had only ever managed to grow close to two of them—Annelyse and Bahrati—but that hadn't... ended well. And once they'd left the palace, Delucia had been careful to maintain distance from any of her new maids, knowing they would only leave when their tenure was up and never look back.

Eight years was a long time to go without having a true confidante outside of her family, so when Delucia heard that a boy her age was coming to stay at the palace for a number of weeks, she'd begged her parents to keep her identity a secret.

She was lonely—so lonely—and she'd wanted just one chance to make a real friend, someone who would treat her like a normal girl. Of course, she'd known he would learn the truth eventually, but she'd only wanted a few days, certain that was all it would take, and then her royal status wouldn't matter. They'd be friends by then, true friends—*best* friends—and her being a princess wouldn't change that.

In the end, she was right. It wasn't her title that changed anything.

Because Maxton had known all along who she was.

And he'd played her, from the very beginning.

He'd earned her trust, earned her adoration. And then he'd used it all against her, betraying her in the worst possible way.

"It's such a beautiful day," Queen Osmada said, her gentle tone easing the tension Delucia felt bunching at her shoulders. At least, until the queen added, "Perhaps Maxton would like to go riding through the gardens with Delucia after breakfast? She goes every morning in the summer—if she had her way, I'm convinced she would choose to live in the stables."

Nerita chuckled softly along with the queen, but dread was filling Delucia, like a vice wrapping around her chest.

"Actually, Mother," she said quickly before anyone else could speak, "I already have company for today's ride." She managed to summon what she hoped looked like an apologetic smile when she turned to Maxton and said, "Perhaps another morning."

That morning would never come, if she had anything to say about it. She'd lie through her teeth if it meant avoiding him as much as possible for the next seven days. Then he'd be gone, and she could breathe freely again.

"Such a shame," Maxton drawled, reaching for a cinnamon roll and tearing it apart with his fingers. There was a mean

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spark in his eyes when he added, “We both know how much I enjoy visiting the stables and spending time with the horses.”

Delucia couldn’t stand to look at him anymore. Her hands were shaking as she reached for her fork and stabbed the metal into the omelette on her plate, using considerably more force than was necessary. She winced at the scrape of steel against porcelain, hoping no one else noticed.

“I’ve no doubt that my son will be able to entertain himself, just as he has the last three days,” Nerita said, sipping from her teacup. Her words held no accusation, but they still caused both the king and queen to look at Delucia with disapproval.

She knew the reason for their censure. Mistress Alma’s final words hadn’t been a reminder—they’d been a warning: *‘Princesses are always gracious hosts.’*

Delucia had been anything but gracious to Maxton since his arrival.

Upon first laying eyes on him three days earlier, she’d refused to offer a single word of greeting, ignoring the pointed looks from her parents. Duty had required that she maintain an air of cordiality, especially given Nerita’s importance as a High Court judge. But seeing Maxton’s arrogant smirk had raised her hackles enough that she’d had to spin on her heel and storm from the room lest she follow through on her overwhelming desire to slap the smug look right off his face.

The two days since then had seen little improvement to her disposition, though she’d managed to sit through both tension-filled breakfasts much as she was today, only doing so by remaining as silent as possible and focusing on her meal.

She knew her parents were concerned by her behaviour. Her mother had sought her out after supper last night, and Delucia had offered a vague excuse about clashing personalities. Osmada, however, had seen through the lie to the pain underneath, yet she’d thankfully not pressed for further details. Instead, she’d

gathered her daughter into her arms, her physical touch soothing Delucia more than any words ever would. When the king had joined them soon afterwards, he'd asked no questions, simply wrapping his arms around Delucia and holding her close.

Despite the comfort her mother and father offered freely in private, she knew she was expected to step into her princess shoes and offer companionship to Maxton as a guest of the palace. Her parents didn't know why it was so difficult for her, why she didn't want to be anywhere near him. If she told them, she knew they'd understand. But she was too ashamed to share. The hurt and the betrayal—five years later and it had barely faded. If anything, it had only increased, along with the walls of stone around her heart.

“Lord Maxton might want to consider a trip into the city today,” Delucia suggested to no one in particular while cutting into her side of bacon. “The markets are always enjoyable at this time of the year.”

“Indeed, they are,” King Aurileous said, pouring a glass of juice and handing it to Delucia before turning to Maxton. “It's easy enough to organise a Warden escort if you'd like to venture out for the day?”

In response, Maxton raised a haughty eyebrow at Delucia and said, “Perhaps I'll wait until the princess is free to accompany me.”

Having just taken a mouthful of juice, Delucia barely managed to keep from spraying it all over the table. She quickly swallowed, prompting a coughing fit—which gave her the time she needed to think of a suitable reply. Preferably one that didn't involve launching over the dishes and stabbing Maxton with her butter knife.

She had no idea what in the name of Medora he was thinking, saying something like that. She knew he despised her—she'd heard the truth from his own lips five years ago.

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‘... worthless, gullible, snooty little princess. No wonder she doesn’t have any friends—who would want to be stuck spending time with that spoiled royal brat? No one, that’s who.’

She could still hear his mocking laughter ringing in her ears, just as she could hear the laughter of those he’d been entertaining with his stories—her young maids, Annelise and Bahrati amongst them, as well as a plethora of stable and kitchen hands, and other children born to the palace servants. All of them were kids she had tried to befriend at one point or another, with none but Annelise and Bahrati ever making her think she had a chance of friendship with them. And those two... well, in that moment, Delucia had understood that she’d never had a chance with them, either, since Maxton had already claimed their attention. His charisma, his magnetism—people *wanted* to be close to him. Delucia hadn’t been able to dredge up any blame towards the two girls, not when she herself had fallen into the same trap. And that trap—that desire for Maxton’s companionship—had left her wide open for the hateful things he’d said that day, and for the hurtful responses from those listening.

The laughter—she would never forget their laughter as they’d listened to Maxton explain that Delucia had believed he was her best friend, how she had shared things with him that she’d never told anyone else. Her hopes, her dreams, her very heart—he knew it all. She’d laid herself bare to him. *For* him.

And it was all true. Because Maxton had been everything to her, filling the gaping hole of loneliness she’d felt all her life.

At least, until that day, that moment, when his words and laughter had smashed her vulnerable eight-year-old heart to pieces.

She never would have known if she hadn’t arrived at the stables early, excited for their ride together that morning. She never would have known if she hadn’t searched for Annelise and

Bahrati beforehand, only to find them keeping company with her supposed best friend. She never would have known if she hadn't paused upon the sound of voices and raucous laughter, only to hear the hideous, *hideous* things being said—about *her*.

Sometimes she wondered how long Maxton would have let his ruse of friendship continue if she hadn't discovered him first. But the moment she'd stepped out of the shadows with tears in her eyes and he'd realised he'd been caught, he hadn't so much as tried to feign an apology. Annelise and Bahrati—they'd at least looked ashamed, and within a week, the two maids had left the palace of their own accord. But Maxton... he'd just smirked that awful smirk—one she'd never seen before that day—and she'd known. None of it had been real for him. Everything they'd shared had been fake.

"Sadly, my week is rather full," Delucia lied smoothly, her voice slightly hoarse from having just coughed up her tonsils—and from the emotion she was fighting to keep contained as the memories threatened to overwhelm her. "If you wish to see the markets before you leave, you'll be better off planning a trip without me."

"Sweetheart, surely you can find some time for Lord Maxton?" King Aurileous said, a gentle reprimand in his tone.

Delucia couldn't keep from shooting pleading eyes towards her mother.

Osmada was no fool—she read the panic on Delucia's face and placed a hand on Aurileous's forearm. Her kind eyes moved from her daughter to her husband and then to their guests before she fibbed, "Unfortunately, Delucia's schedule is indeed demanding over the next few days. Mistress Alma likes to keep her busy during the summer months to ward off boredom." She then offered to Maxton, "Should you visit again, we'll make sure to set some time aside for you to enjoy the pleasure of each other's company."

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Delucia wondered if her omelette was going to make a reappearance, such was the sick feeling in her stomach at the very thought of having to endure another visit. And yet, she kept her features serene, mirroring the slight smile her mother offered, while hoping her face wasn't as green as she felt it surely must be.

"I'll look forward to our return, then," Maxton said, his tone laced with dark humour.

Delucia didn't need to look at him to know he was deliberately trying to rile her. To her shame, it was working. But she needed only to get through this breakfast—and seven more—before he was gone. And if she ever dreamed of his coming again, on the off chance that it just *might* come true, she'd be sure to disappear from the palace or claim an illness so as to never see him again.

If nothing else, her experience with Maxton had taught her a valuable life lesson, one that she was grateful for, in hindsight. Annelise and Bahrati had driven the point home, but it was Maxton to whom Delucia gave credit for what she had discovered.

Thanks to them—thanks to *him*—she'd learned the truth: that she could trust no one.

For eight years, all she'd wanted was a true friend. And when she'd thought she'd finally made one, he'd shown her exactly why she was better off on her own. Friends were nothing more than people with the power to hurt those whom they were meant to protect. And that day in the stables, Delucia had learned that once and for all.

Never again would she let anyone into her heart. Because people did nothing but let each other down.

Delucia had her family. She needed no one else.

She *wanted* no one else.

Not anymore.

And never again.