

## Phase 4.

# RISE AND FALL

*But see, amid the mimic rout,  
A crawling shape intrude!  
A blood-red thing that writhes from out  
The scenic solitude!  
It writhes! — it writhes! — with mortal pangs  
The mimes become its food,  
And seraphs sob at vermin fangs  
In human gore imbued.  
~ Edgar Allan Poe*

The problem was that Finn, still a teenager, was not old enough to be the alpha of a pack and take care of his family, especially after everything they had gone through.

After the rebuilding of the main house was complete, Max and the last living Lazaars tried to go on with life as normal. They tried to take a page out of the Viteri handbook and recruit lone wolves to join their pack, but no one wanted to. They had all heard the rumors.

Dorian had been slipping further and further into what Max could only describe as total insanity as the months passed. She could hear him in his room late at night, breaking things or screaming or crying. Sometimes, Max would sit outside his door and wait until the noise stopped, until she could hear his breath steadying, before slipping down the hallway to bed. If he'd known she was out there, he would not have been happy, but Max couldn't help worrying about Dorian.

A *normal teenage experience* was something neither Max nor Finn had ever dreamed of living, but it was what they were attempting to do now. With no pack and no Alpha, and with Dorian insufferable to be around, the two decided to enroll themselves in high school. They started making friends, though they were never stupid enough to bring them home, and they started to feel like they truly belonged to the world. Things were getting better every day, though it wouldn't stay that way forever.

On the Fourth of July, when Max was almost eighteen years old, everything she and Finn had worked for would be taken away from them. Everything they'd hoped for in a future would be crushed, and the fate of the Lazaar bloodline would be put at risk. But in the early spring, just months before the end of their world as they knew it, Max and Finn were blissful in their unknowing as they mingled with their friends at the popular pizza joint in town.

One particular friend was the tall, pale, mysterious Killian Kearny, who seemed to have a magnetic interest in Max. He'd gone to Mt. Laguna Max already felt as though she had known Killian her whole life. Of course, this was completely infuriating to Finn, who had grown increasingly protective over Max as she blossomed into a dazzling young woman. She was beautiful and strong, and she wielded those powers only when she had to.

Finn, who really *had* known Maxima Viteri-Lazaar her whole entire life, had barely spent any time with her since Killian had come to town. Finn just didn't like the guy; there was something about him that sent Finn's werewolf senses on the fritz. They were positive that he was something supernatural, but neither Max nor Finn thought that he was just another werewolf.

As two more weeks passed, Max found herself at home less, and with Killian much more. And although she missed Finn, and knew that he missed her, too, they both knew she was better off staying as far away from Dorian as possible.

At the end of the school year, Max and Finn graduated together, along with Killian and a few of their other friends. After one year of public high school under their belts, neither Max nor Finn was sure if they were ready for college, but Max knew they both knew they needed to get out of Mt. Laguna and away from Dorian.

"Congratulations."

A chill ran up Max's spine. She was leaned over a newspaper, her back turned toward Dorian as he entered the kitchen. It was the day after graduation, and Max was scouring the papers for a job.

"Thanks," she replied without looking.

Her body tensed as she heard his footsteps crossing the room, coming closer to her. Finally, she spun to face him. Dorian stood with his hand outstretched, holding a small black box the size of his fist.

"What's that?" said Max.

Dorian blinked. "A gift." His eyes were bloodshot, his face pale and gaunt. Max wondered if he'd been eating. She knew he hadn't seen the sun in days, maybe weeks.

She took the box and, inside, was a large, rough rock. Max frowned. "It's a piece of the earth," said Dorian. "Before the fire." They made eye contact for a moment, then Max looked back to the brownish stone in her hand.

"Why did you give me this?"

"I thought you'd like to have it. A piece of home, of a better time. Maybe it will give you happier memories whenever you look back and think about home. Don't let all that's happened since the fire spoil the good memories."

Max just stared at him. She wasn't sure if she was going to scream or if Dorian was going to cry.

"I know you're going to leave this place," Dorian said. "And I hate that when you do, you'll remember me as I am now instead of who I was then."

"Dorian..."

"Please," he said, "just listen. I don't have many... lucid... moments and I'm not sure how long this one will last, Maxima."

She swallowed hard, fighting the urge to run away, and the urge to hug him. She wished he would just tell her what was wrong. Then, maybe she would be able to fix him.

Dorian continued. "Please remember me when I was well. When we were young and the world wasn't so ugly. Remember how I... how much I cared for you. You have to know how sorry I am for everything I've become."

Max shook her head. Her hands were beginning to tremble so she crossed her arms and said, "Stop. You know I'll always remember who you were, and the bond we used to share. I'll never forget how much I loved you."

The faintest smile tweaked the corner of Dorian's mouth and Max saw a familiar twinkle in his eye. Her stomach turned.

"But I'll also never forget how you hurt me." Max felt her own strength returning with the more recent memories of her relationship with Dorian. She unfolded her arms. "I'll always remember the look in your eye right before you broke my jaw, and the evil in your voice every time you attacked Finn. I'll never forget how you always put his life in my hands when I was just a child. You made me in charge of protecting the precious heir to the Lazaar throne and you're the one who's putting Finn

in danger now. Oh, and I'll never forget that I'm not *really* a Lazaar, because I have Viteri blood; something you never failed to remind me. And no matter how hard I try, I will never be able to close my eyes without remembering the look on your face before you tried to *kill me*."

Dorian seemed as though he'd shrunk considerably, then. His eyes met the floor and he tucked his hands into his pockets. Max knew he was sorry, knew that he was sick and, sometimes, couldn't control himself. She didn't care.

"I will always remember the good times, Dorian," said Max. "If I didn't, I would have killed you by now." She dropped the rock onto the ground and brushed past him, her breath shaking as she walked away as quickly as she could.

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*It was three months ago that Dorian's inner turmoil and mental torture finally reached its peak. His rage had been out of control, his temper shorter and shorter as the days passed, until finally he snapped.*

*Max had come home from a run to find Dorian pinning Finn to the wall by his throat. It took every ounce of strength she had to pull the two apart and, when she did, Dorian hit her so hard she soared across the room and smashed into the wall. She'd hit her head and lost consciousness.*

*When Max woke up, Finn was taking care of her. Dorian, he'd said, was out in the woods getting some air.*

*The next day, Dorian cornered her. "I know you despise me now."*

*"Stop," she said. "Why don't you try apologizing first?"*

*"You know I wouldn't hurt you," said Dorian. "I didn't mean to do it. You must know how sorry I feel."*

*"I just don't believe that you won't do it again." Max looked into his eyes and saw nothing familiar in them. She had loved Dorian her entire life. But he'd hurt her and she was smart enough to know that it wouldn't be the last time he would try to do that. She had to protect herself.*

*Later, she went to Killian and asked for his help. He vowed to protect her with his life, to always be there for her whenever she needed him.*

*"I have to tell you," said Killian. "I have more than just feelings of friendship for you, Maxima. It scares the shit out of me. And I know we're just teenagers but I really feel like I'm falling in love with you. So, hear me and know that I'm telling you the truth when I say that I will never let Dorian hurt you again. If he tries, I will kill him myself."*

*Although Max was not ready to return his love, Killian promised to remain true to his vow. "I will wait," he said. "As long as I have to. Until then, if you ever need me, please... just come to me."*

*When Max got home that night, Dorian had been waiting for her. His eyes were red and his hands were torn and bleeding.*

*"Where is Finn?" she asked.*

*"Asleep," Dorian replied. "Where have you been?"*

*"With a friend."*

*Dorian shook his head. "And you didn't think it wise to call home?"*

*"I don't have to answer to you, Dorian, and I don't have to check in with you. You're not my father." She walked toward the house.*

*"No." Dorian spoke through gritted teeth. "Your father is dead."*

*Max stopped and shot him a look. She felt the sharpness in his words pierce her heart. "Watch your mouth."*

*Dorian glared. "Don't you tell me." He stood before her with squared shoulders.*

*Max could sense the rage rising in him and darted toward the door, but he followed right behind her. She wrenched the front door open but Dorian grabbed her by the wrist and threw her backward.*

*"Finn!" she screamed. She knew he would hear her. Even if he were dead asleep, Finn would hear her.*

*"Don't bring the little Prince into this," Dorian growled.*

*He leapt at her as she scrambled to her feet, tackling her back to the ground. Dorian climbed on top of her and wrapped his hands around her throat. When Max swung out at him, scratching his face with her claws, he pulled back and punched her hard in the face. She heard the crunching in her jaw and her vision went white and fuzzy. Her ears rang loudly and her body went into a pain-induced shock. Dorian leaned over her with hatred in his empty eyes, then he wasn't there anymore. Max felt Dorian's body being lifted from hers, and then she passed out.*

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Killian's house was an hour drive from the Lazaar compound, but Max could run there in twenty minutes. And she did so often. After her conversation with Dorian, Max had left the house, with no intentions of going back until nightfall.

"You really need to get out of there," said Killian. He stood over an electric grill, making grilled cheese sandwiches. "For good, I mean."

“Yeah?” Max laughed. “And just where am I supposed to go? Mt. Laguna is my home. The Lazaar compound is the only home I know, now.”

“But you’re a Viteri,” said Killian. He set a sandwich in front of her and slid her a glass of water. “You were born to travel and explore. Why stay? Why continue to suffer in the same place as always? What’s keeping you here?”

Max shrugged, but she knew the answer. She would never, could never, leave Finn behind. No matter how much she resented the fact that Dorian had always put Finn’s life in her hands, Max loved and cared for Finn as if he were blood. He was the only brother she would ever know, and there was no way she could leave him alone with Dorian. She would never be able to abandon Finn.

She spent the rest of the night at Killian’s and, although he begged her to sleep over (offering, like a true gentleman, to take the couch while she occupied his bed), she was looking forward to the solitary walk home that night. She needed to clear her head.

“Are you sure?” Killian asked. He was clearly worried about her. But there was something else, too. Something about Killian that kept Max from fully trusting him. She knew that he was keeping a secret from her but had no idea what it might be. Max didn’t think he would ever hurt her, not the way Dorian sometimes did, but still there was something that prickled at the back of her neck whenever he came too close or looked into her eyes for too long.

Max nodded. “Don’t worry about me.” She kissed him lightly on the cheek and went out the door.

Back at home, Max tiptoed quietly through the house and upstairs, her eyes adjusting to the darkness. She hoped no one was still awake. It was nearly three o’clock in the morning, and there was no doubt that Dorian would be furious if she woke him up. But when she reached the top of the stairs and turned into her dark bedroom, it became clear that waking Dorian was the least of her worries, because he was already awake, perched on the end of her bed.

“You scared me,” she said. She pretended to laugh it off but, inside, she felt a hurricane of fear. “What are you doing up?”

Dorian glared at her for a moment. “I was worried about you, Maxima. It’s late. And you...” He sniffed at the air and his face crumpled in disgust. “Where have you been? What were you doing?” He stood from the bed, then, and came toward her, instantly angry.

Max backed away from him, out the door, until her back met the hallway wall. "I was at a friend's house," she stammered. "Why are you so angry?"

Dorian was directly before her, his face inches from hers as he stood seething, his eyes rimmed in red, blue veins protruding from his neck and forehead, thinner ones trailing near his temples. He looked ill, if not possessed.

"Who?" It was as if it hurt him to speak. His teeth were clenched so tightly together that Max thought they might shatter. "Who were you with?"

"K-killian," she said, then mentally cursed herself for letting her fear show. Max tried to square her shoulders and stand up tall, but Dorian towered over her with a ferocious rage enveloping every inch of his body and face. "Just a friend from school."

Dorian pushed away from the wall and Max took an easy breath. But he spun around again and pressed her shoulders hard against the wall. When he spoke, the words rumbled through her like an electric jolt, rattling her ear drums and organs; he spoke in a roar.

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOUR FRIEND IS?"

Max fought back the tears that welled up behind her eyes as she shook her head and whimpered, "No."

The door at the other end of the hallway creaked open and Finn stepped out. He looked tired, but shockingly alert. He stared at Dorian with a frown, surveying his uncle's aggressive position in front of Max.

"Get away from her," said Finn.

"Finn," Max said, "don't."

"Did you know, nephew?" Dorian growled. "Did you know that our little Max has been colluding with the bloodsuckers?"

Max felt her stomach turn as she watched Finn's expression change from fear and anger to a look of shocking realization. They stared at each other for a moment before Max whispered, "Killian is a vampire?"

Dorian said, "Yes," as if he'd never been so disappointed in his life.

"That's impossible," said Finn. But it wasn't, really. They hadn't seen vampires up close since they were children, when the Mystic War was in full swing and the vamps were the enemies. They surrounded themselves with other werewolves and clueless humans but had never really stumbled upon anyone from another group of supernatural creatures.

Max and Finn were both dumbfounded. She'd always thought that he was just a werewolf who didn't have enough of the gene to shift. That's

what he'd always smelled like to her, anyway. Then again, she'd never smelled a vampire before. At least not since she was very young.

"You," Dorian continued, "have put us all in danger."

"Me?" Max nearly gasped. She hadn't expected that to actually come out of her mouth, but now it was out there, and more words were following before she could stop them. "You're the dangerous one. You're the one we need protection from, not Killian. He's a good person, a good friend, and you're... you're a sick, twisted monster!"

"Vampires killed your family," said Dorian. "Vampires killed all of our families. They tried to kill you!"

"Killian isn't one of them. He wasn't there, Dorian. He would never hurt me. All my life, you've made sure that I was there to protect your nephew, but no one was protecting me. Well, Killian protects me now. He protects me from you."

Max's shoulders heaved up and down and she tried to catch her breath. The fire in Dorian's eyes blazed, then, and she knew that she'd made a mistake. Before she could turn to run from him, he reached out to grab the front of her shirt and used his free hand to slap her across the face.

"Stop!" Finn yelled as he came barreling down the hallway. He tackled Dorian and Max scrambled to her feet, darting down the hallway.

Dorian kicked out at Finn and launched the younger werewolf into the wall before leaping after Max and knocking her to the ground. The air flew out of her lungs as she hit the floor. Black stars swam before her eyes as she gasped for more oxygen, and then Dorian was hovering over her and his fist was connecting with her face again. She tasted blood. Her vision went watery as he hit her again.

Dorian lifted her to her feet. Finn came surging down the hallway and speared himself through the air at his uncle. Max was knocked to the floor again and the other two were wrestling back and forth down the hallway. They rolled over and over one another, coming closer and closer to the top of the steps.

"Dorian!" Max screamed. "Please, stop!"

There was a blur of flailing flesh and then something went *crack* and blood sprayed the wall. Finn's body went limp and Dorian tossed him down the stairs. He rolled and landed at the bottom with a sickening series of thuds. Max bit back a cry and felt the stirring of the wolf inside of her.

Dorian gazed down the steps at his nephew's broken body crumpled at the foot of the stairs, but there was nothing in his eyes. No emotion, no



guilt, no regret... Just pure, sick, monstrous rage. He turned back to face Max.

Her eyes glowed and her mouth ached, and she could feel her teeth sharpening, her nails lengthening into lethal claws, her ears twitched and tickled. She peered at Dorian with her wolf eyes and growled.

“So,” he said, “this is it. You and me.”

Max watched as he began to change, too, his eyes burning red and his skin stretching and tearing. She waited for him to stop, to halt the shift half-way as she did – as they always did, because of how dangerous it was for a wolf to shift fully without the power of the full moon. But he didn’t stop.

Dorian fell to his hands and knees and Max knew that this was her only chance to get away. If she didn’t run now, he would tear her to shreds, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

She burst forward and ran past him and, in mid-shift, he clawed out at her, sending her toppling down the steps after Finn. At the bottom she blinked up at the horrendous scene above; Dorian tearing away sheets of his flesh to reveal the blood-soaked fur of the wolf underneath.

Max groaned and clamored to her feet, gasping for breath and blinking to adjust her vision. Every inch of her body was sore, but she pushed forward, running toward the door. Her hand gripped the cold steel of the knob and turned it, just as the giant wolf leapt down from the top of the stairs.

Max screamed and burst outside, tripping down the front porch steps and falling directly into the arms of Killian Kearny. She took a few seconds to right herself and looked up at him, unsure of whether to be grateful or afraid. But those few seconds were all they had, and Dorian’s beastly wolf form exploded out the front door after her.

Killian thrust Max to the side and she fell to the ground. By the time she’d spun around in the dirt and looked up, she stopped. Killian stood strong, his hands gripping Dorian tightly, holding his jaws open as if he were expending no strength at all. His eyes were white orbs glowing from his face and fangs sprang from his mouth. The wolf tried to flail, but Killian’s grip was too tight, and the beast began to whimper.

Finally, the thing went still. Killian took the wolf by the throat and slammed it to the ground. The whites of his eyes faded back and his natural hazel eye color returned.

Max slowly got to her feet and watched in awe as the wolf crumpled and twitched and shifted back into a human. Dorian lay there in fetal position, naked, unconscious.

"What did you do?" Max asked.

Killian looked at her, his face no longer emanating supernatural power, just the sweet gentleness Max had always seen when she looked at Killian. What was he? Those white eyes were like nothing Max had ever seen before, on a vampire or otherwise.

"Basically," he said, "I pressed reset. But he won't be out for long. We have to go, now. Pack your bags."

"What?" Max shook her head. "No." She rushed toward the house and called over her shoulder to him. "Finn's hurt."

She heard Killian's footsteps pounding after her. Inside, she found Finn, still on the floor but, to her pleasant surprise, he was conscious. He sat up slowly, with Max's help, and leaned against the wall. Glancing upward, he nodded at Killian.

"Hey, vampire," he said.

"Vampire?" Killian said.

"Not now, Finn," said Max. "We have to go. Dorian is knocked out, but not for long. Come on, I'll help you pack."

"Pack?" Finn said. He frowned at her as if she'd said the most insulting thing he had ever heard. "Leave? What are you talking about?" His eyes darted from Max to Killian. "You're going to leave with this guy?"

Max glanced at Killian. She couldn't believe it, either, but Dorian had put them in danger too many times and they couldn't just stick around and wait for him to succeed in killing them.

"Yeah," she said. "I guess I am. But not without you."

Finn gazed up at her for what felt like an eternity. "I'm not going anywhere, Maxima. This is my home. This is my family's land. This is where I'm meant to lead my own pack someday. I can't just pick up and go."

"Finn..."

"No." He stood up, wincing, and headed for the front door. Max and Killian followed. "I understand that you have to leave. I don't blame you. But I can't."

"What are you going to do?" Max asked. "He'll kill you."

Finn shook his head. They all stopped, staring at Dorian's pale form lying in the dirt. It was the most peaceful he'd looked in a decade.

"I'll take care of him," said Finn.

Dorian began to stir, then, and they each took a few steps back. They watched, eyes wide, unable to move, as he slowly sat up and looked around, as if he were an alien who'd just crash-landed on a new planet.

He turned to face them and Max thought, for a moment, that she saw a flash of the old Dorian in his eyes. But she knew better than that.

"Max?" Dorian whispered. His voice was dry and broken.

She shook her head.

Finn went toward him, taking off his sweatshirt and wrapping it over Dorian's waist.

"Are you alright?" Finn asked.

Dorian frowned up at him. "I didn't kill you?" And then, to everyone's surprise, tears came bubbling out of his eyes and he fell forward, sobbing into Finn's t-shirt.

Killian leaned over toward Max and whispered, "Let's get out of here."

She frowned up at him. "But he... he looks fine. Better."

"It's a show," he said. "He's still the same person, Max. He wants you to feel pity, to give him another chance. If you fall for this, he wins."

She stared up at him, at his trustworthy eyes and caring face. He could be right, she thought. Max had seen Dorian do this before; pretend to be okay, pretend to be better, and then it all goes back to the same as before after a few days. It wasn't a risk she could afford to take again.

"Okay," she said. "Let's go."

She could hear Dorian calling her name as she scurried through the house, packing clothes and sentimental items and weapons into a backpack. She could hear him yelling that he was sorry, that he would never hurt her again. He screamed that he was better now, that whatever had been wrong with him was fixed. He begged for her forgiveness, for her to just look at him, to talk to him, to at least say goodbye.

But she pushed it all out of her mind as she stepped into her boots and threw on her favorite jacket. She hoisted her bag over her shoulder, grabbed her skateboard from the closet, and leapt down the stairs two at a time.

She had reached the kitchen and couldn't hear Dorian anymore. Finn stood there with a strange expression, as if he might be happy to see her get out of there. She wished he would come with her but knew there was nothing she could say to change his mind.

"Be careful out there," said Finn.

They hugged, and he held on tightly. Max kept him close, not letting go for a long while, remembering the way he smelled and what the curves of his shoulders felt like. She tousled his hair and turned away to hide a tear that dripped from the corner of her eye.

"I love you, Finn," she said.

"I love you too, Max," said Finn. You can always come back, you know. Anytime."

She smiled at him over her shoulder. "Thanks."

Killian was waiting for her with his car and she threw her bag in the trunk now as she slid into the front seat. Out the window, she took one last look at her home and wondered, only for a moment, where Dorian was. Finn had taken him somewhere to calm down. She hadn't wanted to tell him goodbye.

She watched Finn wave from the front porch and turn back inside as the car pulled away down the dark street. Max buckled her seatbelt and grinned at Killian. He patted her knee comfortingly.

"Everything is going to be fine," he said. "You'll see."  
Max nodded and, as she watched the shadowed trees whip by, the mountains dusty and foggy in the distance, she actually believed him.