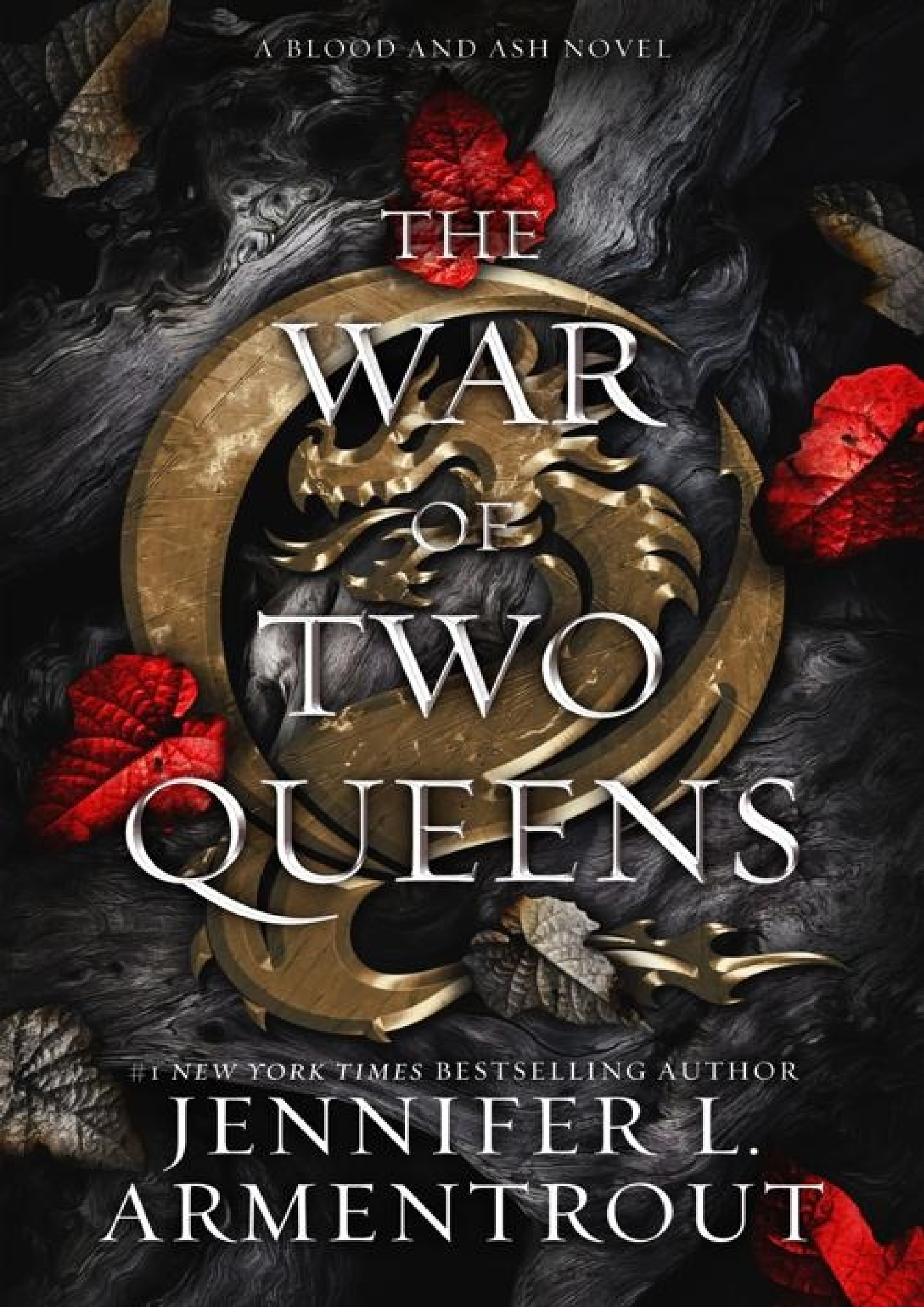


A BLOOD AND ASH NOVEL

THE
WAR
OF
TWO
QUEENS



#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER L.
ARMENTROUT

THE
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The War of Two Queens
A Blood and Ash Novel
By Jennifer L. Armentrout

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Book Description

THE WAR OF TWO QUEENS

A Blood and Ash Novel

By Jennifer L. Armentrout

War is only the beginning...

From #1 New York Times bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout comes book four in her Blood and Ash series.

From the desperation of golden crowns...

Casteel Da'Neer knows all too well that very few are as cunning or vicious as the Blood Queen, but no one, not even him, could've prepared for the staggering revelations. The magnitude of what the Blood Queen has done is almost unthinkable.

And born of mortal flesh...

Nothing will stop Poppy from freeing her King and destroying everything the Blood Crown stands for. With the strength of the Primal of Life's guards behind her, and the support of the wolvern, Poppy must convince the Atlantian generals to make war her way—because there can be no retreat this time. Not if she has any hope of building a future where both kingdoms can reside in peace.

A great primal power rises...

Together, Poppy and Casteel must embrace traditions old and new to safeguard those they hold dear—to protect those who cannot defend themselves. But war is only the beginning. Ancient primal powers have already stirred, revealing the horror of what began eons ago. To end what the Blood Queen has begun, Poppy might have to become what she has been prophesied to be—what she fears the most.

As the Harbinger of Death and Destruction.

About Jennifer L. Armentrout

#1 *New York Times* and #1 International Bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout lives in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. All the rumors you've heard about her state aren't true. When she's not hard at work writing, she spends her time reading, watching really bad zombie movies, pretending to write, hanging out with her husband, her Border Jack—Apollo, Border Collie—Artemis, six judgmental alpacas, two rude goats, and five fluffy sheep. In early 2015, Jennifer was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a group of rare genetic disorders that involve a breakdown and death of cells in the retina, eventually resulting in vision loss, among other complications. Due to this diagnosis, educating people on the varying degrees of blindness has become another passion for her, right alongside writing, which she plans to do for as long as she can.

Her dreams of becoming an author started in algebra class, where she spent most of her time writing short stories...which explains her dismal grades in math. Jennifer writes young adult, paranormal, science fiction, fantasy, and contemporary romance. She is published with Tor, HarperCollins Avon and William Morrow, Entangled Teen and Brazen, Disney/Hyperion, Harlequin Teen, and Blue Box Press; and PassionFlix recently made her Wicked series into a feature film. Jennifer has won numerous awards, including the 2020 Goodreads Choice Award in Romance for her adult fantasy, *From Blood and Ash*. She has also written Adult and New Adult contemporary and paranormal romance under the name J. Lynn.

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Dedication

Dedicated to you, the reader.

Map



To see a full-size version of the map, visit <https://theblueboxpress.com/books/twotqmap/>

Pronunciation Guide

Characters

Aios – (a-uh-us)
Alastir – (al-as-tir)
Bele – (bell)
Casteel Da’Neer – (ca-steel) (da-near)
Delano – (dee-lay-no)
Eloana Da’Neer – (eee-lah-nah) (da-near)
Ione – (eye-on)
Isbeth – (is-bith)
Jasper Contou – (jas-per) (con-too)
Kieran Contou – (kee-ren) (con-too)
King Jalara – (ja-la-ra)
Kirha Contou – (k-ah-ruh) (con-too)
Kolis – (co-lis)
Malec O’Meer – (ma-leek) (o-mere)
Malik Da’Neer – (ma-lick) (da-near)
Naill – (nuh-ile)
Nektas – (nic-tas)
Nyktos – (nik-toes)
Penellaphe Balfour – (pen-nell-uh-fee) (bal-floor)
Queen Ileana (uh-lee-aaa-nuh)
Rhahar – (ruh-har)
Rhain – (rain)
Saion – (si-on)
Seraphena – (see-ra-fee-na)
Sera – (see-ra)
Valyn Da’Neer – (va-lynn) (da-near)
Vonetta Contou – (vo-net-ta) (con-too)

Places

Atlantia – (at-lan-tee-ah)
Carsodonia – (car-so-don-uh)
Dalos – (day-los)
Iliseeum – (ah-lee-see-um)
Lasania – (la-sa-nee-uh)

Masadonia – (ma-sa-don-uh)
Massene – (ma-see-nuh)
Niel Valley – (nile valley)
Padonia – (pa-doh-nee-ah)
Pensdurth – (pens-durth)
Solis – (sou-lis)

Terms

eather – (ee-thor)
notam – (no-tom)
Arae – (air-ree)
dakkai – (di-ah-kee)
graeca – (gray-cee)
kiyou- (ki-you)
meeyah Liessa – (mee-yah lee-sa)

Chapter 1



Casteel

The click and drag of claws drew closer as the weak flame above the lone candle sputtered and then went out, pitching the cell into darkness.

A thicker mass of shadows appeared in the open archway—a misshapen form on its hands and knees. It halted, sniffing as loudly as a godsdamn barrat, scenting blood.

My blood.

The smooth bands of shadowstone tightened around my throat and ankles as I shifted, bracing myself. The damn stone was unbreakable, but it did come in handy.

A low-pitched wail came from the creature.

“Mother—” The thing exploded out of the archway, scurrying forward, its keening moan becoming an ear-piercing screech. “—*fucker.*”

I waited until its stench of decay reached me and then pressed my back against the wall, lifting my legs. The length of the chain between my ankles was only about half a foot, and the shackles wouldn’t give an inch, but it was enough. Planting my bare feet into the creature’s shoulders, I got a good, most unfortunate look at the thing as its foul breath blasted me in the face.

Man, the Craven was not a fresh one.

Patches of gray flesh clung to its hairless skull, and half of its nose was gone. One entire cheekbone was exposed, eyes burning like hot coals. Lips torn and mangled—

The Craven twisted its head down, sinking its fangs into my calf. Its teeth tore through the breeches and into flesh and muscle. Air hissed between my gritted teeth as fiery pain burned its way up my leg.

Worth it.

The pain was more than worth it.

I would spend an eternity taking these bites if that meant *she* was safe. That it wasn’t *her* in this cell. That *she* wasn’t the one in pain.

Shaking the Craven free, I dragged the short chain over the thing's neck as I crossed my feet. I twisted at the waist, pulling the dull bone chain tight across its throat, ending the Craven's screams. The shackle clamped down on my throat as I kept turning, cutting off my air as the chain dug into the Craven's neck. Its arms flailed on the floor as I jerked my legs in the opposite direction, snapping the creature's spine. The spasming became more of a twitching as I hauled it within reach of my bound hands. The chain between my wrists, connected to the shackle at my throat, was much shorter—but long enough.

I grasped the Craven's cold, clammy jowls and brought its head down hard, slamming it against the stone floor by my knees. Flesh gave way, spraying rotting blood over my stomach and chest. Bone split open with a wet-sounding crack. The Craven went limp. I knew it wouldn't stay down, but it bought me some time.

Lungs burning, I unwound the chain and kicked the creature away from me. It landed by the archway in a tangled mess of limbs as I relaxed my muscles. The band around my neck was slow to loosen, eventually allowing air into my burning lungs.

I stared at the Craven's body. At any other time, I would've kicked the bastard into the hall like usual, but I was weakening.

I was losing too much blood.

Already.

Not a good sign.

Breathing heavily, I looked down. Just below the shadowstone bands, shallow slices ran up the insides of my arms, past both elbows and over the veins. I counted them. Again. Just to be sure.

Thirteen.

Thirteen days had passed since the first time the Handmaidens swarmed this cell, dressed in black and as quiet as a tomb. They came once a day to cut into my flesh, siphoning my blood as if I were a damn barrel of fine wine.

A tight, savage smile twisted my mouth. I'd managed to take out three of them in the beginning. Ripped their throats out when they got too close, which was why they'd shortened the chain between my wrists. Only one of them actually *stayed* dead, though. The damn throats of the other two had stitched themselves closed within minutes—impressive and also infuriating to witness.

Learned something valuable, though.

Not all of the Blood Queen's Handmaidens were Revenants.

I wasn't sure how I could use that information yet, but I guessed they

were using my blood to make brand-spanking-new Revs. Or using it as a dessert for the lucky.

Tipping back my head against the wall, I tried not to breathe too deeply. If the stench of the downed Craven didn't choke me, the damn shadowstone around my throat would.

I closed my eyes. There had been more days before the Handmaidens showed the first time. How many? I wasn't exactly sure. Two days? A week? Or—?

I stopped myself there. *Shut it the fuck down.*

I couldn't go down that road. I wouldn't. I'd done that the last time, trying to clock the days and weeks until there came a point when time simply ceased to move. Hours became days. Weeks became years. And my mind became as rotten as the blood seeping from the Craven's ruined head.

But things were different in the here and now.

The cell was larger, with no barred entrance. Not that there needed to be one with the shadowstone and the chains. They were a mix of iron and deity bone, connected to a hook in the wall and then to a pulley system to lengthen or shorten them. I could sit up and move a little, but that was about it. However, the cell was windowless like before, and the dank, musty smell told me they once again held me underground. The freely roaming Craven were also a new addition.

My eyes opened to thin slits. The fuck by the archway had to be the sixth or seventh one that had found its way into the cell, drawn by the scent of blood. Their appearance made me think there was one hell of a Craven problem aboveground.

I'd heard of Craven attacks inside the Rise surrounding Carsodonia before. Something the Blood Crown blamed on Atlantia and angry gods. I'd always assumed it was due to an Ascended getting greedy and leaving mortals they'd fed on to turn. Now, I was beginning to think the Craven were possibly being kept down here. Wherever *here* was. And if that were the case, and they could get out and get aboveground, so could I.

If only I could get these damn chains to loosen. I'd spent an ungodly amount of time pulling on the hook. In all those attempts, it may have slipped a half-inch from the wall—if that.

But that wasn't the only thing different about this time. Other than the Craven, I'd only seen the Handmaidens. I didn't know what to think about that. I'd figured it'd be like the last time. Too-frequent visits from the Blood Crown and their cronies, where they spent their time taunting and inflicting pain, feeding, and doing whatever they wanted.

Of course, my last go-around with this captivity bullshit hadn't started that way. The Blood Queen had tried to *open my eyes* first, coax me to her side. Turn me against my family and my kingdom. When that hadn't worked, the real fun had begun.

Was that what had happened to Malik? Did he refuse to play along, so they broke him like they had been so very close to doing with me? I swallowed dryly. I didn't know. I hadn't seen my brother, either, but they must have done something to him. They'd had him for far longer, and I knew what they were capable of. I knew what the desperation and hopelessness was like. What it felt like to breathe and taste the knowledge that you had no control. No sense of self. Even if they never laid a hand on him, being kept like this, as a captive and mostly in isolation, preyed on the mind after a while. And *a while* was a shorter span of time than one might believe. Made you think things. *Believe* things.

Drawing my throbbing leg up as far as I could, I looked down at my hands resting in my lap. In the darkness, I almost couldn't see the shimmer of the golden swirl across my left palm.

Poppy.

I closed my fingers over the imprint, squeezing my hand tight as if I could somehow conjure up anything but the sound of her screams. Erase the image of her beautiful face contorted in pain. I didn't want to see that. I wanted to see her as she'd been on the ship, face flushed, and those stunning green eyes with their faint silver glow behind the pupils eager and wanting. I wanted memories of cheeks pink with either lust or annoyance, the latter usually occurring when she was silently—or very loudly—debating whether stabbing me would be considered inappropriate. I wanted to see her lush lips parted, and her skin shining as she touched my flesh and healed me in ways she would never know or understand. My eyes closed once more. And damn it, all I saw was blood seeping from her ears, her nose, as her body writhed in my arms.

Gods, I was going to rip that bitch Queen into pieces when I got free.

And I would.

One way or another, I would get free and make sure she felt everything she had *ever* inflicted upon Poppy. Tenfold.

My eyes snapped open at the faint sound of footsteps. Muscles tensed in my neck as I slowly eased my leg straight. This wasn't normal. Only a few hours could've passed since the last time the Handmaidens had done the whole bloodletting thing. Unless I was already beginning to lose track of time.

An unsteadiness rose in my chest as I concentrated on the sound of the

footfalls. There were many, but one was heavier. Boots. My jaw locked as I lifted my gaze to the entryway.

A Handmaiden entered first, nearly blending in with the darkness. She said nothing as her skirts glided past the fallen Craven. With a strike of steel against flint, a flame caught the wick on the candle on the wall, where the other had burned out. Four more Handmaidens entered as the first lit several more candles, the females' features obscured behind winged, black paint.

I wondered the same thing I did every time I saw them. What the fuck was up with the facial paint?

I'd asked a dozen times. Never got an answer.

They stood on either side of the archway, joined by the first, and I knew in my gut who was coming. My stare fixed on the opening between them. The scent of rose and vanilla reached me. Rage, hot and unending, poured into my chest.

Then she walked in, appearing as the utter opposite of her Handmaidens.

White. The monster wore a skintight gown that was a pristine, nearly transparent white and left very little to the imagination. Disgust curled my lip. Other than the reddish-brown hair reaching a cinched, narrow waist, she looked nothing like Poppy.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

That there was no hint of familiarity in the set of her features—the shape of her eyes, the straight line of her ruby-pierced nose, or the full, expressive mouth.

It didn't fucking matter.

Poppy was *nothing* like her.

The Blood Queen. Ileana. *Isbeth*. Better known as one soon-to-be-dead bitch.

She drew closer, and I still had no idea how I hadn't realized that she wasn't Ascended. Those eyes were dark and bottomless but not as opaque as a vampy's. Her touch...hell, it had blended with the others over the years. But while it had been cold, it hadn't been icy and bloodless. Then again, why would I or anyone else ever consider the possibility that she was something other than what she claimed?

Anyone but my parents.

They must have known the truth about the Blood Queen—about who she really was. And they hadn't told us. Hadn't warned us.

Biting, stinging anger gnawed. The knowledge might not have changed this outcome, but it would've affected every aspect of how we approached