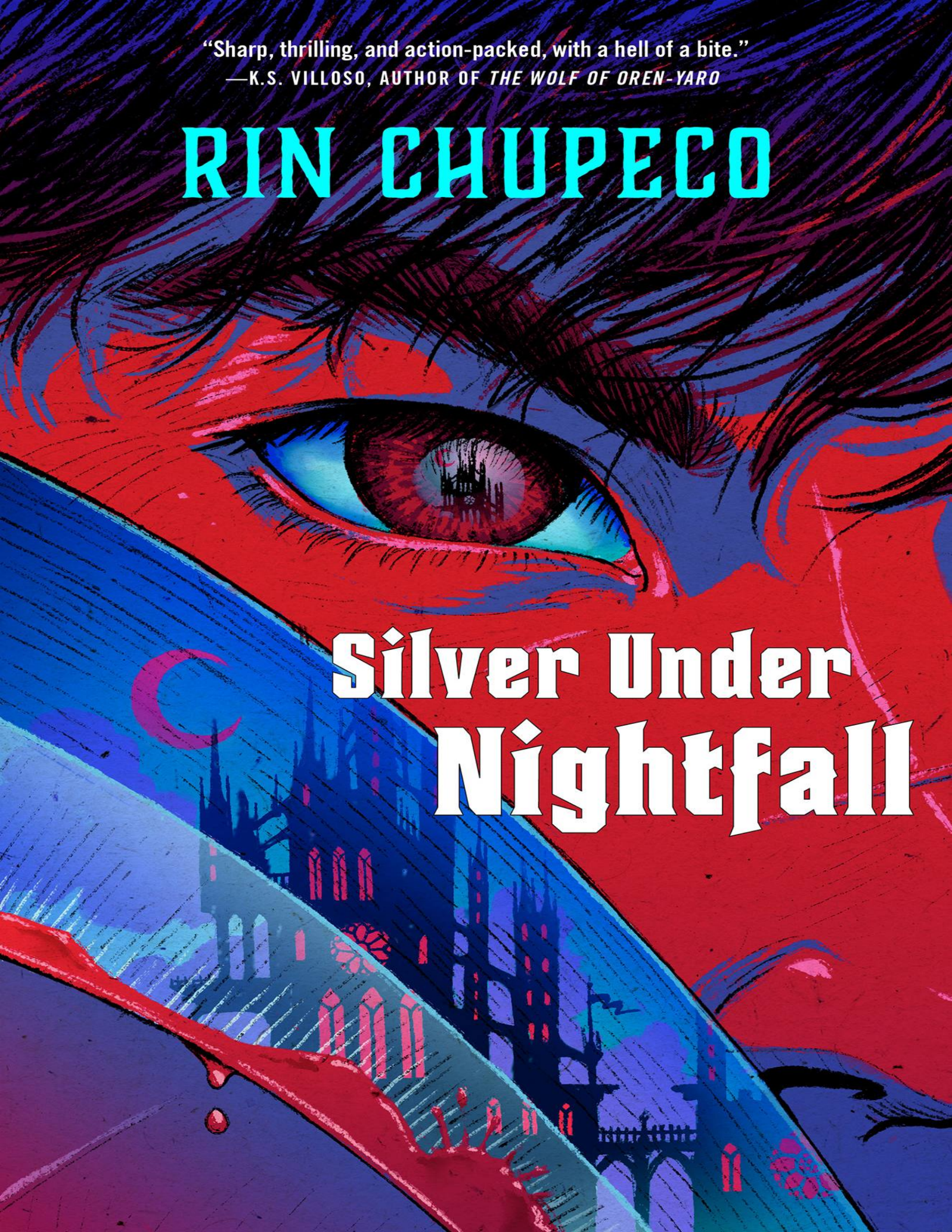


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RIN CHUPECO

Silver Under Nightfall



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RIN CHUPECO

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*For Tam—
for pulling me out of the gutter*



THE FOREST OF FANGS

They never tell you it's the girls that are hardest to kill.

He would've liked nothing more than to forget every ball he'd ever been forced to attend, but the mind is a funny bastard, one he'd trained to retain information on the off chance it could save his life. And so he remembered. He remembered *her*.

First-year debutantes tended to flee from him once the introductions were over, which was only a shade politer than those in their second and third years, who needn't bother speaking to him at all. But she was sixteen years old and a willowy little thing, all dolled up in pink lace; stammering and nervous at first, but braver than she let on. She'd stayed and smiled and talked to him like he wasn't a pariah among the aristocracy, like she wasn't risking her reputation over a conversation with him. She had lovely green eyes and smelled like jasmine.

She'd called him *Armiger*; not *Lord* or *Lady*, but a neutral title he felt was more in keeping with who he was. She hadn't mocked him like so many others had.

The bar for empathy was on the ground as far as the nobility was concerned, but when you were used to eating dirt, being thrown a bone felt like kindness.

And so it had hurt, in an unexpected, bewildering way, when he'd received the order to execute her.

Like most of the damned, she was beautiful. She'd always been breathtaking, but death had a curious way of remolding her features, shaping them into an artificial

perfection that mere mortals could never reach. He was reminded of his old school lessons; of chameleons who changed their colors for camouflage, of butterflies that mimicked flowers for their own protection.

But Lady Daneira's preternatural beauty was not for her protection. Lady Daneira's beauty was bait.

She stood in the small clearing with moonlight threading through the dark tresses of her hair, braiding it in softer shades of light. Her small, white fingers trembled as she undid the laces of her gown, deliberate in their clumsiness.

"Come to me," she crooned.

He approached her. His eyes were not on her face, nor were they on her now-exposed bodice. They were on her lips, which were stained in a scarlet hue darker than any rouge could achieve. She smiled at him then, and he could almost—almost—see traces of the girl she once was, even as her arms wound themselves around his neck, her breath light against the base of his throat.

"Please," she whispered, and her mouth opened—wide.

She was quick, but he was quicker.

She shoved him away with a screech and stumbled back as blood pooled down her chin. He'd stabbed a wooden stake right through the flesh, exiting at the back of her head. She wrenched the weapon free, leaving an ugly, gaping hole between her upper cheek and lower jaw, injuries she ignored as she flung away the stake and focused on his face, her lips twisting and fangs protruding farther when she realized what he was.

"Reaper," she snarled, and leaped.

She blurred from view, reappeared behind him, then disappeared again as he spun around until she was surrounding him from all sides simultaneously. A neat trick for someone only two weeks dead. He drew out Breaker from where it lay strapped across his back, the thick handle a bludgeon all on its own. His thumb moved across a hidden switch, and concealed twin scythe blades snapped outward at the farthest end like ram horns, curved downward and sharp.

She was too fast, though, and he was still mortal. The problem with carrying something that was essentially five weapons in one was that it weighed the sum of its parts.

Gauging a vampire's movements with human eyes was pointless and often fatal. So he concentrated on his sixteen years of training—sixteen years of getting bled out and stabbed and maimed so badly that his sharpened senses could pinpoint exactly where she was about to attack based on which part of his body was already phantom-aching.

His left side throbbed. He turned to deflect, the steel slamming against fingernails that could tear through bark. She flickered away and came after him from a different direction, only to be frustrated once again.

“Why won't you let me kill you?” she cried out as petulantly as a child. A vessel had been severed somewhere behind her right iris, and from that eye, blood cried down, hardened, and clotted.

He had no energy to spare for talking, and when she came at him a third time, he deflected the blow and mounted his first real offensive. She drew back to avoid the downward slash, Breaker's edge missing her neck by a precious inch. Her wounds were ugly, buttered in a permanent splotch across her face, half of which was drenched in sticky, already congealing blood, but even confronted with this proof of her true nature, he hesitated.

If he'd been smart and staked her through the heart right from the beginning, as he'd done countless times to countless creatures of the night for countless other bounties, the fight would have already been over. *Short, quick, brutal* was the basic tenet of Reaper training.

But he'd never been known for his intelligence. The three days spent hunting down Lady Daneira had been three days of hoping not to find her. That the witnesses were mistaken. That it was some other corpse they'd seen haunting Tennyfair lands. That it wasn't someone he'd known, however brief the acquaintance and however light her jasmine scent.

He could almost hear his father now. *You've always been a soft-hearted fool, Son. You got that from your mother.*

Lady Daneira was freshly turned, but still a freshly turned novice, even if that made her a thousand times deadlier than the average fighter. She wasn't used to her food fighting back so early in her undead life, and her untethered rage at his rejection left her open to reprisal. In that moment, staring down at her mad, lovely eyes, he accepted that she was lost. Drawing out the battle would be the cruelest thing he could do.

So when she came after him again, he'd steeled his resolve, asked her quietly for forgiveness, and struck from below, altering the angle of his slash to catch her unaware.

He kept Breaker nice and sharp. As far as beheadings went, it was a clean one.

He dropped to his knees afterward, holding her. Her eyes were wide and staring, mouth slightly parted in shock. Her gaze fluttered to his, and in their depths he saw stray bits of humanity returning.

"Armiger Remy," she whispered in newfound recognition. And then, one final time: "Please."

Still cradling her head carefully against his arm, he reached over and picked up the discarded stake. Her eyes followed his movements as he crouched over her fallen body.

"I'm sorry." The words always felt hollow, but he said them every time. She was lucid—they sometimes were, near the end, but never for long.

Now her smile was exactly as he remembered it. "Send me to heaven, Armiger."

And this time, Remy didn't hesitate.

He sat with her awhile. He'd never understood the point of administering final rites, mainly because he was shit at it. But undead or not, the Duke of Tennyfair had been adamant Remy bring his daughter's body back intact so they could inter her on family grounds. Reaper law demanded that he cremate her, but his father had told him to make an exception this time.

Gently, he placed her head against the crook of her arm and breathed a small prayer over the body, as he'd always done and was expected to do, though the words brought him little comfort and even less peace.

Then he rose to his feet.

"I really do not have the bloody time for this," Remy said.

He only had a second to feel a pinch of warning in his right arm, because this attack was swift, more calculated and precise than any of Lady Daneira's attempts. He countered it all the same and blocked another pair of hands right before they could shove through his back and exit his chest with a fistful of vertebrae. His attacker snarled, fangs bared and fingers satisfactorily mangled by the abruptness of Breaker's steel, before retreating when Remy swung his weapon again.

Eight vampires surrounded him; ethereal and inhuman, dressed in dark, albeit expensive, linens and silks—all an unnecessary, *ridiculous* show of intimidation that

would surely impress the owls and squirrels who'd come to watch. More glaring than the suits was the condescending, mocking insufferability radiating off them like cheap cologne.

"You got one lucky shot in, Hunter," one of them jeered—a boy who looked no older than he was, with carefully primed hair and a cold smile. He wore his arrogance like a second coat. Remy wanted to punch him. "You won't get another."

"Which of you turned her?" There were no coincidences when vampires were involved. His stomach churned at what they must have done, at what her final hours had been like at their hands, and his blood was up, exhilarated, ready to let. He hadn't wanted to kill Lady Daneira, but now he was itching for a massacre.

"Do you always take that tone with your betters, fresh blood?"

"Only with the ones that piss me off."

The vampire laughed. "And what will you do about it? Who would they believe—a noble, or some commoner who's just slayed a duke's daughter in the woods?"

Remy said nothing. The vampire glided closer, emboldened by his silence and their numbers. "What's one more dead, then? Who's to say that we didn't stumble upon a depraved hunter assaulting a sweet young girl out here and took justice into our own hands? The Summer Lords and the humans are on the verge of an alliance now, aren't they? We've got a moral obligation to report crimes, don't we? And you *did* kill her. Where's the lie in that?"

"Tell me who turned her."

"Does it matter?" another of the vampires asked—an older one with rougher features at odds with his primed clothes, and a full beard. "You make for better entertainment than she ever did. Kill him. Leave his body as a present for the humans. Let them believe the poor little girl eviscerated him as her final act of spite."

A compartment from within the base of Breaker's handle slid free, a thick chain springing out. A straight blade no longer than his forearm but equally as sharp as the scythes' had been soldered onto the end, and Remy swung it in a wide arc. It caught two of the vampires in their stomachs. They hit the ground flailing, hands grasping at suddenly exposed entrails.

The chain made a second pass. Blood sprayed, and they stopped twitching.

“Witch’s teats, Naji,” one of the others gasped. “Look at that thing! He’s not just a hunter, he’s the damned Butcher’s get!”

That revelation did not cause an immediate retreat, as one might expect. Remy could smell their desperation. There were more problems to be had with the son of *the* infamous Reaper than an unknown hunter trying to make his bones off bounties. Better credibility and a more plausible testimony, for starters.

They leaped for him.

Remy bisected the bearded vampire first, then sank one of his scythe blades straight through his heart for good measure. His opponent crumbled immediately, nothing of him left but ash sweeping through the wind.

He took out one more with the double blades while he jerked at his chain, the knife attached to it gutting a second creature behind him. He used its swinging, looping momentum to slice up a third across their kneecaps, then across their lungs when they dove at him from above. The group’s bratty ringleader snarled and persisted despite their losses, avoiding the deadly combination of Reaper blades even as his last companion made a fatal mistake, jerking into the chain’s path while he struggled to evade the scythe. The knifechain shucked his skull open, exposing brain and bone shards.

To his credit, the snot-faced kindred was a better fighter than the rest of his stooges. The arrogant boy kept clear of Breaker, but his mounting frustrations were evident at his inability to draw near enough for a fatal strike.

The vampire doubled his speed until he was nearly a blur, invisible to most other humans. Remy switched to a more staggered defense, using his oversized pipe of a weapon like a shield to batter the lightning-quick slashes away, eschewing his own quickness for an economy of movement. Finally, the undead youth leaned harder into his upswing than was needed, and Remy promptly relaxed his arms like he’d given up. At the same time, his fingers dug into the faint, barely discernible grooves on either side of Breaker where twin daggers lay hidden, so perfectly carved into the steel that they might have been part of its design. He yanked them free. Before the vampire could crow about his victory, he had already driven one into his pale white throat.

The youth gargled, blood pouring out of his mouth like a bubbling, stuttering waterfall. He tried to back away, but Remy dogged his steps and trapped him against the nearest tree with the blade.

“*Who turned her?*” Remy’s voice was a snarl. He pressed the second dagger against the vampire’s chest. He needed to know. He could do little for Lady Daneira now. But he *could* pry the confession out of this fuck-arsed dumbwit, even if Remy had to reach past his overstarched suit and into his chest to yank out the truth.

The smug, malicious confidence the boy had once strapped on like armor had dissolved. He could only jerk his head slightly, garble something incoherently from around the blade still wedged through his vocal cords.

“*Who turned her*, you deceased little prick?”

“We didn’t turn her,” the boy warbled through a mouthful of red. “We didn’t!”

“That’s enough bloodshed for today, Reaper.”

Remy took his second dagger from the vampire’s chest, but kept his first buried in the youth’s throat out of principle. Breaker was still a few feet away; too far for a successful lunge. He took a step toward it anyway as he braced for an incoming attack, then added another when none was immediately forthcoming.

He was expecting the newcomer to be yet another dramatic brat. He was only partially correct. The stranger had *dramatic* stapled to him, but it was the kind of dramatic that attached itself, unwanted, like a very glamorous leech, and demanded attention on behalf of its owner whether it was warranted or not.

And the stranger was made to be looked at. He was exceedingly handsome, even by vampiric standards. He was darker than those in the band Remy had just annihilated, with suggestions of kohl about the eyes, and had a strong chin covered by a five-o’clock shadow that would have hinted at a three-day drunken binge on Remy but gave the intruder the respectability of a warlord fresh from battle sitting down for a portrait to commemorate his misdeeds. His hair was long, tied carelessly about the nape of his neck, and somehow still looked impeccably groomed.

Remy hated him already. By contrast, he was bloody. He was dirty. He stank of several days’ worth of back roads and petrichor. He smelled like the farthest thing from flowers.

And there was something about the noble—because there was no bloody way in hell that he wasn’t one—that set off warning bells in Remy’s head the way Lady Daneira and the vampire youths had not.

Had the stranger attacked, Remy would have been dead on the ground by now. Should have been.

The man took in the bodies with neither anger nor surprise. They could have been livestock for all the interest he gave them; he looked bored more than anything else. “I am here to collect my foolish brother,” he said, clearly offering no apology. “You can be certain that he will be punished for his role in this.”

The youth still impaled against the trunk winced.

“By whom?” Remy was still raw, still seeking an outlet for his rage. Lady Daneira’s blood was still on him, still seeping into his clothes. “You? And what punishment *will* you deem worthy, *milord*? A slap on the wrist? A temporary limit on his monthly allowances?”

“That is no concern of yours.”

“It is every concern of mine!” Remy shouted. “Your brother was responsible for a girl’s murder! For no reason other than his own entertainment!”

“My brother made no such confession. In fact, he protested his innocence quite vehemently.” The vampire plucked the dagger out from his sibling’s throat, as graceful as such an action could ever be, and tossed it back at Remy, who caught it by the handle. “Come, Naji.”

Clutching his neck, the other boy shot an angry, if slightly fearful, look back at Remy, then scrambled to the lord’s side.

“You have my word that my brother shall never harm the people of Tennyfair ever again, and my word is—”

Remy dropped his daggers, snatched up Breaker in three quick steps, and charged at him.

The noble avoided his blows, exerting the least possible energy to deflect and keep out of range, and Remy knew mockery when he saw it. He redoubled his efforts, but always seemed half a second too slow, the vampire lord no longer where he expected him to be when his scythe blades swooped down to slash. Remy wished he’d made the time to gulp down another fresh vial of bloodwaker; one dose would not be enough for this fight.

He spun the knifechain, sending it into a deadly, whirring arc above his head.

The vampire grabbed at the links and snapped them with a deft twist. With nothing else to keep it moored, the knife flew on, disappearing swiftly into the darkness.

And then the noble was on him. They hurtled into another tree, Remy taking the full brunt as he slammed hard into the trunk, breath leaving him in one long, drawn-out gasp,

blooms of pain popping up everywhere. Thorns and rough bark clawed at his back, but he was in no position to shift free. The man kept him trapped, with nothing but Breaker between them.

The lord's hand was wrapped around one of the scythes' blades. Remy knew it was digging into the man's skin, judging by the flow of blood gushing down his wrist. He knew it must have hurt like hell, because he wore at least one whetstone out on Breaker every month for easier stabbage, had nicked himself on it enough times.

The stranger seemed incapable of pain, but he was more than capable of fury. The dark eyes on him promised a thousand cutting deaths more excruciating than any Remy's scythes could deliver.

This was, quite frankly, a common reflex among vampires whenever Remy was within murdering range. Vampires threatened all sorts of atrocities on him with alarming frequency. But the noble was also looking at him with more than just that—there was a spark of sudden interest in that coal-black gaze, the amber highlights within it making him look all the more arresting. He was staring at Remy like he'd only just realized he was there.

And then the lord smiled with a rapacious, predatory hunger that had nothing to do with Remy's attempt to kill him, and *that* made Remy's hands dampen with sweat.

"I understand that you had to do what was necessary to restrain my brother, even if it meant delivering him serious injury," the lord said, the words whisper-soft and low. "That fight has been settled, with you the victor. But if you wish to continue, it is I you shall be facing next. And *this* battle, my pet, you will not win."

The vampire was far too strong. Far too close. Remy's daggers were on the ground, and he had little room to move his scythes. "There will be no justice until he is punished according to the law," he found himself growling.

"The law? Whose laws, Reaper? Your human laws, which seek to kill my kind with extreme prejudice? What would your version of human punishment be? To have my brother while away his life in your gaols? Stake him? You will gain nothing but our ire, and your lords now do everything to prevent that. What is one woman worth, after all?"

"Her life is worth just as much as a man's, vampire or otherwise."

Their gazes locked. Remy was suddenly too aware of the stranger's startling heat. There was no reason he should ever be this warm.

The vampire took the tip of his chin between his own thumb and forefinger like his face was a butterfly specimen he'd freshly plucked from air, and Remy froze.

"Was she your lover? Is that why her death causes you such anguish?" The fresh intensity in the lord's eyes had only increased, and it made Remy feel... uncomfortable. Vulnerable.

"No," he managed through gritted teeth. "But she didn't deserve this."

The man grinned, exposing long, elegant fangs, white as ivory in the dim light. Remy tensed, his mind seeking out other weapons, other alternatives. The vampire bastard knew this wasn't a fair fight. He had the strength of thirty men, of at least five Remys. He looked capable of punching through the moon if he jumped high enough. All Remy had was a limited drug supply and a cylinder full of spent knives.

"An admirable trait, for a human—death wish notwithstanding." His knuckles pressed deeper against the scythe's edge, taunting. "I have fought this weapon before. I know who your father is. They say you are not completely human. A mooncalf. A cambion."

Remy summoned up his last reserves and hurtled forward. It did shit-all, because he was slammed back again, and now his wrist was imprisoned above his head, a forceful hand pinning it down. The stranger bent toward him, mouth a hair's breadth away from his own.

"There are many things we suffer through that we never deserve, and that is true whether you are dead or living. I will offer what compensation I can to her family, to the best of my ability. Seven deaths to pay for one woman's is a generous offer. I suggest you take it."

He let go, and in the blink of an eye vanished, reappearing on the other side of the forest and calmly straightening his collar. Only then did Remy notice the curved sword at his hip, at the sheer arrogance of the man not having used it at all.

The younger vampire, Naji, at least had the wisdom to remain where he was throughout the fight, though the faint smirk on his face faded when his elder brother shot a dark glance his way.

"This is not over!" Remy yelled after him, rather uselessly given the aftermath, suddenly aware of the cold the vampire had left in his wake.

The lord smiled. You could hammer at the diamonds of those dark eyes for years and never make a dent. “I very much hope not, Pendergast,” he said.

He turned and walked away without another look back. Naji scurried after him.

Remy waited until they were truly gone before succumbing to numbness. His legs buckled, and he landed hard on his rear as his feet skidded out underneath him. He’d made it through three consecutive fights and was somehow still breathing. It was understandable to feel weak now.

But he’d lost. He’d never lost before. On top of that, it had been quick.

His eyes flicked toward his scythe blades, still dripping with the vampire lord’s blood. Breaker was made almost completely of silver. It must have hurt the noble to touch it, stoic as he seemed. The man had all but opened his own vein, simply to teach him a lesson. Remy did not appreciate it.

But his father would appreciate the additional corpses. Remy had not brought enough sacks to stuff the lot in, though the wagon he’d left waiting near the side road should be enough to bring their bodies away along with Lady Daneira’s. One vampire had been ancient enough to be rendered into ashes. It explained the noble’s indifference at seeing seven of his own clan slaughtered. The rest had been new converts, not old enough to be ashed—small fry, according to their convoluted undead hierarchy.

Freshly turned vampire bodies sold well in the black markets of Aluria—a novelty item for the extremely wealthy and privileged, sources of experimentation and study for those who dabbled in the sciences. Remy didn’t like it, but his disapproval wasn’t worth bollocks in Aluria.

The man who had bested him was a Summer Lord. A Third Court vampire. His father was going to kill him.

Remy reached into his pocket for a small bloodwaker vial, unstopping it and gulping down its contents gratefully, feeling his strength return. A much more intelligent Reaper would have taken the dose before running headlong into a fight.

A much more intelligent Reaper wouldn’t have attacked a vampire lord, either. “Why the hell don’t I think these things through?” he mumbled into the gloom.

He looked at the remains of the vampires strewn around, and then at the headless body of Lady Daneira, still as peaceful as when he had first laid her out, untouched by the

carnage. The blood trickling out of her was darker than that of the other vampires, he noticed. More black than red, with hints of a darker blue to its sheen.

Lady Daneira had not smelled like anything in death. Vampires never do.

But this vampire noble had carried with him the very faintest of fragrances, as unnerving as it was unfamiliar. As keen as Remy's nose was, it was unlike anything he'd ever smelled.

More likely it was a sliver of a scent of a memory, he surmised, of what the vampire lord had been like when he'd still been human.

And, irrationally, the thought pissed Remy off even more.



FAMILY

Daylight in the kingdom of Aluria was more of a concept than an observation. The thick gray clouds looming overhead were a near-permanent fixture. Fortunately, the light rain held steady when he arrived at the manor. The only indication that he'd beaten dawn by a couple of hours was the faint lightening of what little sky could be seen. Clouds hogged sunlight in Aluria the way dragons hoarded treasure, and they made Remy's work all the more difficult for it.

The stable hands had long been familiar with his odd hours and the work that entailed; they took the reins from Remy without comment, unhitched his stallion from the cart, and guided the horse away. They ignored the heavy tarp stretched over the wagon that hid the undead from sight; they knew better than to look.

"Dr. Yost has been waiting for you, milord," one of the men, Willoughby, said, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

Remy couldn't blame him. It took courage to work at the Pendergasts' ancestral home. Triple the wages was still a pittance when they had to serve someone with the Duke of Valenbonne's temper, or when they had to ignore the corpses ferried to and from the manor at unnatural hours.

Quintin Yost was the duke's physician. He'd come with excellent references from Anhelm, Ruthersgard, and Sanburkh—all lords from impeccable bloodlines. The antidotes he'd developed based on his studies of vampires, or so it was mentioned, had

helped extend old Anhelm's life for over a decade after his terminal illness had been discovered, and his father had hired the doctor to attend to him exclusively for that very reason. But his unabating eagerness for bodies to dissect had always repulsed Remy.

If Remy had had his way, he would have burned the corpses instead, would have refused so much as an ash for the doctor to take. His only consolation was that Lady Daneira would be safe, properly cremated by her family before her interment.

"Young Jack is here as well," Willoughby continued. "I told him to wait in the kitchens until you've settled things with the doctor."

"Thank you, Willoughby. I'll take it from here." Remy pressed a few coins into his hand and saw the man's mood brighten. "Send my regards to the missus for me."

Dr. Yost did not fit the stereotype of one with an unhealthy interest in the undead. He was ruddy-faced and stocky rather than thin and sallow, jovial in disposition, with a soothing bedside manner. It didn't matter; something about the physician's heartiness felt like an oversell, and it had always made Remy uncomfortable. The man held an umbrella above his head to keep dry, but when he lifted it toward Remy's direction, the latter chose the rain over the man's hospitality and stepped away.

"Well, Lord Pendergast," Dr. Yost said, circling the wagon like a vulture contemplating the choicest of the carrion on display, "seems like we've had a much more substantial haul than expected. How many of these lovelies do we have?"

"Six," Remy said shortly.

The doctor lifted the tarpaulin to peer inside, made disappointed clucking noises. "I suppose the unfortunate lady of tonight's bounty has already been delivered to her family?"

"If you mean to ask if she is safely out of your reach, then yes."

Dr. Yost took no offense to Remy's barb; he never did. "Distasteful as it may sound, young sir, it is a necessary undertaking. I am doing nothing that the fools at the Archives aren't doing themselves, and I have more brains than the lot of them put together. I am learning more with your father's health in mind, and my studies show much promise. Determining how vampire blood bonds on a cellular level, translating that into other methods of rejuvenating the human body... with more adipose tissues to extract cytokine from, the antigens should..."

But Remy was already slipping away, leaving the physician alone with his latest test subjects.

Jack's was a far more welcoming face. Remy frequently employed youths to keep a close eye on any vampire attacks within the surrounding areas, paying them for the privilege. Jack was his best informant. He told Remy where the vampires were lurking, and then Remy set out to kill them—far less complicated than most of the official reports that came out of Elouve.

“This one's gonna be a little bit different from the usual fare, Armiger,” the red-haired youth said soberly. “Old Taggart's boy this time, or what's left of him, just over at Glycespike. Two days ago.”

“What's *left* of him?”

“Body parts strewn from there over a two-mile radius they say, nearly all the way to Wyndbrook. Vampires don't eat flesh, do they? Not many animals that could tear someone limb from limb like that. But not an ounce of blood on what they could recover.” Jack had been doing this long enough that even he'd been desensitized to the violence. It was easy to be, with the reports of attacks increasing every month.

“They don't, and there aren't any. This is the worst one I've heard of so far.” Remy folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe. Seven victims, all within the span of a month. The last four had reportedly been mutilated as well, but not to this extent.

“Seen a lot, haven't you?” Jack asked with the faint, ghoulisn curiosity of one who'd never had to experience such tragedies themselves.

“I've seen enough.” Remy tossed him a small bag containing half a dozen gold coins and generous handfuls of copper. “Convey my condolences to the Taggarts, and keep me informed of other similar incidents. Tell the villagers to keep away from the borders between the two villages and, by the Light, say nothing of this to my father. I should be able to ride out in less than a fortnight.”

The boy caught the money, bowed low, and retreated silently.

It was a new day, but Remy's work was far from over. He'd been awake for nearly twenty-four hours, and while he'd like nothing better than to linger in the bath, where he could scrub his skin raw of the day's excesses before tumbling into bed, he knew his father was expecting him. Nobody kept Edgar Pendergast, Duke of Valenbonne waiting.