

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

ALI HAZELWOOD

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



HOT for
SLAYER

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Chapter 1

The last time Lazlo Enyedi and I made this much physical contact with each other, the Berlin Wall was falling.

Literally.

As the crowd energetically chiseled chunks of graffitied concrete off the sections surrounding the wall's checkpoints, Lazlo's body pressed so close to mine that his heat nearly melded us together.

That was, of course, over thirty years ago. But for someone who's been around as long as I have, three decades is little more than a shooting star flitting across the night sky, and I remember that moment well. It was history in the making. A watershed hour for the revolution. A shift in the paradigm that led to portentous sea changes in the tides of civilization, and drew people—people like *me*—from all over the world.

Although, to be truthful, I only went to Germany because I was hungry.

Careful research had indicated that a very bad man was prowling around Berlin, doing very bad things to innocent people. Since someone needed to stop him, and since I hadn't fed properly in a few weeks, I decided to pay him a visit and kill two birds with one stone.

Except, it wasn't *fowl* that I killed.

Afterward, I licked my chops, adjusted the shoulder pads of my blazer, and took a stroll through the bustling droves of humans celebrating the epoch-making night.

The thing about creatures of my ilk is, we've seen it all happen already, over and over again. We understand that time is a flat circle. We have witnessed civilizations rise, plateau, fall, then plateau again on their way back up. Rationally, we know better than to get too invested in the affairs of mortals. Still, there is something deliciously sustaining about the energy that surges through a crowd during a landmark event. All that transformative,

life-changing power is like a current coursing through our veins, and a luscious juxtaposition to the fixed immutability of our own existence.

All of this is to say: I was hanging out in Berlin and having a pretty good time—until I spotted Lazlo Enyedi. My least yet most favorite slayer. Or maybe just the only one I could have picked out of a lineup.

My familiarity with Enyedi was expected, considering that the Hällsing Guild had specifically tasked him with eradicating my bloodline. Still, most vampire slayers came and went, usually done in by a moment of distraction or by their own reckless, hateful hubris. Enyedi, though, had been around since the early Middle Ages.

Probably because he was irritatingly skilled at his job.

I didn't wonder how he knew that I'd be in Berlin, because there was no point. Tracking me down was a special talent of his, just like simultaneously patting my head and rubbing my belly was mine. Everyone was gifted in their own special way. Enyedi's skills just happened to be useful.

"Vampire," he whispered the second our eyes met across the festive mob. There were several million decibels and the equivalent of an Olympic-size pool between us, but I could hear him as clearly as if he dwelled inside my head.

I studied him for a split second. Took in the colorful tattoos that climbed around his neck to curl under his jawline. His dark hair and amber eyes. The towering stillness of his shoulders as people walked around him, instinctively stepping out of his way.

"Slayer." I sighed.

And then, as was my habit and sole option when faced with Enyedi, I began to run. I wove through the crowd fast enough to lose him but slow enough not to raise suspicions among the celebrants. I ducked under trenches, dodged the hammers and megaphones that were being waved about, and I probably would have vanished into the night—if a sobbing child hadn't materialized right in front of my eyes.

I skidded to a halt. Stared at the clump of reddened cheeks, snot, and inconsolable tears blubbing at my feet. Waited for the toddler to take a

breathing break from the bawling to stammer, “Are you, um, okay?”

He—she?—*they* were not. They were desperately looking for their *Mutter*, and even an archetypal monster such as myself couldn’t *not* help the brat. “*Entschuldigung?*” I asked, frantically glancing around for a motherly-looking human. Once the *Mutter* in question was located, I scrambled again, but I’d lost too much of my advantage, and . . .

Well. That’s how I found myself close enough to Enyedi that I could feel his heart beating against my chest. Pressed between him and the brick side of a house, to be precise.

This kind of shit, I mentally informed the universe, *does not incentivize good deeds*.

The universe didn’t reply, probably because it was too scared of Lazlo Enyedi to speak over him as he said, “Aethelthryth. At last, we meet again.”

I beamed up, hoping that it would irritate him. “Hey, friend.”

We weren’t *friends*, not by any correct meaning of the word. But, as much as it pained me to admit it, I did have a bit of a parasocial relationship going on with him, despite us having exchanged a grand total of two dozen words, most of which were some variation of *die*, *monster*, and *no*, you *die first*. Not that I enjoy relentless harassment, but what’s a girl to do when the only constant presence during the last millennium of her life has been a guy who’s contractually mandated to murder her?

“How long has it been?” I asked, batting my eyes. “At least since the early eighties. I hope you’re still using sunscreen, because those crow’s-feet around your eyes don’t— *Shit*.” I grunted as a dagger sank into my stomach, pinning me to the brick wall.

It wasn’t a big deal. The only surefire way to kill a vampire was to drag them kicking and screaming into the sun, which Lazlo knew very well. Still, being skewered fucking *hurt*.

“Nice t-to see you, t-too,” I sputtered between coughs, trying to hold my smile in place. A mix of phlegm and blood squirted out of my throat and landed on his button-down, but I didn’t feel bad at all.

Fuck him and his dry-cleaning bill.

“Look at you,” he murmured in his faded Eastern European accent, those yellow animal eyes raking down my skin. “Flushed and plump and beautiful. You just fed, didn’t you?”

“Beautiful? Aww, Lazlo, I didn’t know you had a crush on—*Motherfucker*.” He jockeyed the blade back and forth in my belly, which, *ouch*. On the plus side, it gave me the opportunity to jerk in his arms and fake a seizure-like movement, which I used to retrieve my own dagger from my hip.

Which I then plunged into his flank with relish.

The grunt that rose to his chest was like a whole symphonic orchestra to my ears. “Now we’re even,” I gritted out.

“Are we?” Lazlo’s expression did not give me the satisfaction of changing a single millimeter. Slayers, too, were unlikely to make a big fuss over some light stabbing. “What about when the sun rises? I have you pinned.”

I scoffed, ignoring the dribble of blood trickling out of the corner of my mouth. “Dawn is in six hours. I hope you have some fun ideas for how to pass the time.”

His lips twitched. “We could reminisce. Thankfully, we share many memories.”

“Thankfully. Like that time you tried to kill me in Constantinople. Or the time you tried to kill me in Lampang. Or the time you tried to kill me in a courtyard in Venice. Or the time in Saskatoon, where—and you may start to notice a pattern—you *also* tried to—”

“Hush, Aethelthryth.” His tone was harsh, even through the warmth of his small smile. He was bleeding profusely, and the scent of it wafted up, strong, metallic, *divine*. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and I wondered how I could feel such hunger while my internal organs were being minced into meat loaf.

How the hell did a slayer’s blood get to smell this *good*? “You’re going to have to knock me out if you want me to shut up until sunrise.”

“And deprive myself of your company?” He clicked his tongue. “Never.”

“Really? Well, allow me to point out that if you get your way, you’re going to be deprived of my company for a hell of a lot longer than—”

“Excuse me, you two?”

We turned, startled—both by the British-sounding voice addressing us and by the fact that, in the process, my forehead brushed against Lazlo’s lips, a gesture too similar to a kiss for comfort.

A shiver ran down my spine.

“We are with the BBC, and overheard you speaking English—would it be possible to interview you about your perspective on tonight’s events?”

Lazlo and I stared at the journalists idling in the dimly lit side street, speechless.

“Sir? Ma’am? You do speak English, right?”

Behind him, a woman was carrying a handheld camera, and an idea light-bulbed its way into my brain.

“We sure do,” I said with a dazzling grin. I freed my hand from where it was trapped between my and Lazlo’s torsos, wiped the blood off my mouth, then gently pushed against his shoulder. “*Baby*, will you get off me for a second?” I schooled my features into a pout, enjoying his clenching jaw *immensely*. “I wanna talk with the BBC. I wanna be on TV.”

“That’s great, ma’am. Will you move to that corner with us? The lighting is much better over there.”

One fun thing about the slayers was they had a governing body. And rumor had it that the Hällsing Guild didn’t love public displays of murder, especially not those caught on camera. Humans, after all, were fragile little souls—I had the right to say that, because I used to be one—and they couldn’t be trusted with finding out that vampires and slayers walked among them. Their reaction would have likely involved running to the grocery store, buying all the canned goods and toilet paper, and then never leaving the house again—they’d cause way too much of a fuss and disrupt the supply chain.

No, thank you.

So, starting with the twentieth century, the Guild had cracked down on slayers killing us in front of witnesses. And by doing so, they saved my life.

“Come on, baby,” I said sweetly, my eyes meeting the cut glass of Lazlo’s. “We can make out later, no?”

Lazlo’s *yes* was a deliciously disgruntled growl. I tried not to wince as he angled our bodies to hide the slide of his dagger out of my abdomen. I did the same with my knife and then glanced down to make sure that the blood wasn’t visible against the dark fabric of my shirt.

Meanwhile, the camera kept filming.

“I know you hate being in the spotlight, *honey pie*. Why don’t you wait here while I do my interview?” Lazlo’s shirt was lighter than mine, and what a poor choice of attire for a hunt. He was in no position to follow us to a place with better illumination, and he knew it.

“Until the next time, then,” he said with a deep frown.

“Right. That might be a while. Sorry!”

“As long as you don’t let anyone get to you before I do, Aethelthryth.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll *always* save myself for you.”

And that’s how I got away from Lazlo Enyedi on the night of November 9, 1989. As I walked side by side with the journalists, I did look back at Lazlo, once, mostly to treat him to my smuggest, most insufferable grin. He was where I’d left him, still scowling down at his dagger. When he noticed my eyes on him, he lifted the blade up to his face. And with a smile that did not *feel* like a smile, he began to lick it clean of my blood.

It was . . .

Well. It just *was*.

A lot of things, among which the last time we were so close. I’ve caught glimpses of Lazlo a few times since—at a year 2000 celebration in LA, in the early aughts in Southeast Asia, after that Lilith Fair revival in 2010—but never had as close a call as it was in Berlin, and I always managed to slip away before he could get near.

Until now.

Today, nearly thirty-six years after that night in Germany, his arms wrap tight around me, his body is a heavy blanket above mine, and his only purpose seems to be shielding me from the sunlight.

Today, Lazlo Enyedi saved my life.

Chapter 2

My mother didn't raise a quitter.

Well, my mother didn't raise me *at all*. She dropped me off at the abbey once my brother came into the world, after promising to Saint Fursey that if my father begat the male heir he so ardently wished for, she would dedicate her eldest daughter's life to piety and labor. Dear Mommy was very generous with her pledges, especially when they involved sacrificing *other* people.

It was unfortunate for me, the eldest daughter in question—and, let's be honest, even more unfortunate for the abbess—that my disposition wasn't quite monastic material. Not that I was a rebel or a miscreant. That would have required scheming, hard work, or well-organized defiance, and Little Aethelthryth was too much of an absent-minded, stargazing dreamer for that.

Of course, that was an issue in and of itself, because I constantly wished for things that weren't compatible with my destiny. I wished to travel. I wished to laugh. I wished for ballads and dances and tales. I wished for a life that I couldn't have, which was, apparently, my greatest flaw. Despite being compelled by the Benedictine Rule to pray eight times a day, the abbess still found time to remind me that if I kept coveting a future that didn't belong to me, I would end up in freezing water for eternity, and my bones would rot inside my body. Her credibility may have been slightly undercut by the fact that she also believed in putting the livestock on trial for misbehaving, and in plucking off the entirety of her eyebrows. (Regrettably, I cannot recommend growing up in a small nunnery located in eighth-century East Anglia.) Still, she wasn't wrong about me: I want things that do not belong to me *all the time*. Chief of which: companionship.

My favorite part of being in the convent, of course, was the taste of sisterhood it gifted me. The women I lived with, they were my people. My

family. My community. They taught me the beauty of sharing a life, and I naively assumed that this kind of fellowship would forever be within my reach.

Then my vampire maker yanked it away, and I have been aching for it ever since.

The problem lies with the disposition of my kind. A lot of legends assume that we like to stick together. They speak of clans and nests and hives, where vampires gather to join forces in preparation for our nefarious deeds. They imply that we form a structured society, that we do meal trains, that we date and bang it out and have cute little vampiric children. But that couldn't be further from the truth. Most vampires are extremely territorial. They cannot stand close proximity with others, crave competition even when natural resources abound, and are more likely to murder each other than to extend a dinner invitation.

Vampires suck—no pun intended—and are condemned to an eternity of conflict and solitude. So, of course, a vampire is what gregarious, companionable young me was turned into. And because the abbess, the nunnery, and the fortnightly mandatory vows of fasting didn't raise a quitter—nor did they manage to beat the stubbornness out of me—even thirteen centuries into my vampiric tenure, I have yet to accept my new circumstances.

That, I fear, will be my demise.

My latest bout of misfortune started a few months ago, when a new vampire moved into a house located just a little too close to my place.

Initially, I didn't think too much of it. New York is huge, and I was by no means the only vampire living in the city. Manhattan, however, has been my personal hunting ground for the last decade or so, chiefly because of the abundance of my favorite kind of meal.

My motto is: If I have to suck someone dry every few weeks, why not make it a Goldman Sachs executive?

But all of a sudden, I was no longer alone in my seven-block radius. Which could only be interpreted as a challenge, and left me with two options: getting the hell out of the place that had been my home for the previous ten years or putting some effort into running the new vampire out of my territory.

Stubbornly, I decided to bring shame upon my species by doing neither.

I liked my cramped little apartment. How early the winter sun set in the city. The way the people walked fast until they blurred, unaware of the fragility of their short little lives, day after week after month. I enjoyed the four seasons, the museums and movie theaters, the scent of the eateries I would never step foot into. More recently, a few small raccoons seemed to have acquired me. They'd climb up the fire escape and stare into my window until I provided them with food, hiss at me while they consumed the fruits of *my* labor, and then unceremoniously scurry away, no doubt to some other idiot who'd *also* purchased a bodega rotisserie chicken just for the occasion.

The point is, I'd been having a fine time. I didn't want to spend weeks planning an ambush on some asshole who was trying to pick a fight, but I also didn't want to move. So I carved out a third option for myself: I would ignore the new guy and hope he'd do the same.

Naturally, he didn't. Instead, after a few months of uneventful coexisting that lulled me into a false sense of security, he attacked me while I was taking a nighttime stroll in Central Park.

No biggie. I thought it was shitty of him not to give me some warning before resorting to violence—a courtesy horse head in my bed, a scribbled note pinned to my door with a bloody dagger. Still, this was obviously a baby vampire. A male of just a few hundred years. Fighting him off took very little effort.

I left him unconscious under the Obelisk and thought, *Fuck this. I'm not dealing with the mood swings of an adolescent. I'm moving.*

My first mistake was not restraining him.

My second, stopping by my apartment to collect a couple of things: the bronze comb Mother had bestowed upon me before I joined the convent; the small portrait of Donna Lucia, a human who correctly guessed that I was a vampire and still traveled all over Europe with me, painted by Botticelli in the 1400s; the cassette tape of songs I composed during my shoegaze era. That kind of stuff.

Teenage Dirtbag Vampire was there, waiting for me, and this time he managed to take me by surprise, knock me out, and drag me to an abandoned building, where he tied me to a chair bolted in front of an east-facing window. I regained consciousness a little before sunrise, just long enough to ponder whether in my almost fourteen hundred years I'd left a permanent mark on the world and whether anyone was going to notice my absence.

At the very least, I thought, the raccoons will. Once they're hungry.

Sunlight began to filter through the glass, and all I could think about in my last few seconds was something that hadn't crossed my mind for at least a decade.

As long as you don't let anyone get to you before I do, Aethelthryth.

Ah, yes. Lazlo Enyedi. Hopefully, he wouldn't be too heartbroken.

If it makes you feel better, I thought fondly at him, willing the universe to pass on the message, I would have preferred it to be you.

Apparently, I would have preferred it so much, my brain produced him out of thin air. Enyedi, the worst Hällsing slayer to ever set eyes on a vampire, was standing in front of me. One last mirage before the end.

"Hey," I told him with a small, amused smile. "Couldn't bear to let someone else butcher me, huh?"

"I know what's mine," he muttered in his usual clipped tone. He moved to free my tied wrists, and his hands felt so warm and assured and uncannily *real* on my flesh, I began to suspect that maybe . . .

"Hang on. Are you *actually* here?"

Just as a sunbeam reached the chair, he tore through my bindings and pushed me none too gently away from the light. That's when Teenage

Dirtbag, who clearly had been waiting for a pyrotechnic show from somewhere in the shade, decided that he wasn't going to let a random slayer interfere with his kill. It led to a three-way scuffle during which I lost track of who was doing what, and then to a very cinematic sequence that ended with Lazlo throwing Teenage Dirtbag off the fire escape. I wish I could have watched him burn to death, but I was busy dealing with my own pickle—more precisely, the fact that before Lazlo had gotten to him, Teenage Dirtbag had managed to tackle me and break my legs, my hip bone, and my left shoulder, making it impossible for me to move. The fractures were going to heal quickly, but not fast enough for me to escape the rapidly approaching sunshine.

This is it, I thought. The end.

That's when Enyedi sprinted to bodily push me out of the light, hit his head on a collapsing ceiling beam, and fell unconscious on top of me.

Which would be where we are at, right now.

Clearly, this slayer really wants me to die on *his* terms.

"Um," I say as his limp weight flattens me. My tendons and bones are already reknitting together. I am a vampire. I have superstrength. Still, slithering across the sunny floor while covering myself with his body is a feat, and so is dragging the both of us to a windowless hallway.

So much so, my neurons must be too fatigued to work.

What the hell am I doing, pulling Lazlo with me? Propping him up against the drywall? Running my hand through his dark hair to assess the severity of his wounds? He's a slayer. He only saved me so he could *slaughter me himself*. Now I'm stuck in an abandoned SoHo building with him, and I'll have to spend the hours until sunset *hunted* by him.

Unless I kill him first.

The thought hits me along with a tinge of guilt, which I push down incredulously. *Did the raccoons eat your prefrontal cortex, idiot? You have to kill him. Immediately.*

Yes. I do. I have to behead him. The one thing slayers can't heal from. But Dirtbag took my weapons, and I—

Lazlo must still have something sharp somewhere on his person. I throw myself into him, running my hand across an expanse of muscles that I would find more impressive if it weren't exclusively dedicated to murdering me and my bloodline. He still has four—*four!*—blades on him, hidden in a variety of places. I take the longest one from his boot, lift it to his throat . . .

And let my hands fall.

He just saved my life. And I've known him since before the 1100s. I still remember his dumb Crusade outfits.

Do you also remember when he cut off your chin with his dumb Crusade sword? It took, like, five weeks for it to grow back to the right shape.

Correct. That's why I have to do this. It's him or me, and—

"Fuck," a confused voice says.

When I glance at him, Enyedi is blinking at me, massaging the side of his head.

Kill him now. Kill. Him. Now.

But I don't. Because I'm too busy listening to the five words that change my life forever. "Who *the hell* are you?"

Chapter 3

The abbess once told me that the real problems are rarely the ones we spend our time worrying about. It was, I believe, in the context of me fretting over the pain of getting a tooth pulled—as opposed to, say, the fires of eternal damnation. At the time, I cradled my swollen cheek and rolled my eyes, but this might be the day I seriously reevaluate my centuries-deep poor opinion of her, because she was obviously right.

Lazlo doesn't remember who I am, and I'm ready to panic about it. But that's *barely* an issue, especially when confronted with an even more pressing discovery.

Lazlo doesn't remember who *he* is.

"What do you mean, you don't . . . know?" I ask. When he opened his eyes, I scurried back like the roach that I so clearly am, which means that we're sitting against opposite walls in the hallway. I hide his dagger behind my back, wondering if—no, *when*—I'll have to use it on him.

"Seems self-explanatory," Enyedi mutters in the deadpan inflection I've long learned to associate with him. He sits up straighter in a flurry of muscles, rubbing the back of his skull. When the heel of his palm comes back bloody, he stares at it for a moment, then shrugs. "Where are we?"

"Ah . . . SoHo, I think." I keep my eyes fixed on him, waiting for a pounce.

"And where's that?"

"On, um, planet Earth?" His glare tells me I zoomed out a tad too much. "US. New York City."

"I see. And who are we?"

"Do you *really* not—"

"Yes," he interrupts with a low, irritated grunt. "I really do not. I don't remember my name, yours, the reason I'm here, or the events that precipitated this moment. Moreover, I couldn't list a single person I know. In