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ST. CLAIR

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OF
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BLOOD

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BLOOD

SCARLETT ST. CLAIR

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*To Ashley
Who loved this book
before it was even written.*





One

There was an army of vampires encamped on the outskirts of my father's kingdom. The black tops of their tents looked like an ocean of sharp waves and seemed to stretch for miles, melding with a red horizon that was the sky that extended over Revekka, the Empire of the Vampire. It had been that color since I was born. It was said to be cursed by Dis, the goddess of spirit, to warn of the evil that was birthed there—the evil that began with the Blood King. Unfortunately for Cordova, the red sky did not follow evil, so there was no warning when the vampires began their invasion.

They had manifested west of the border last night, as if they'd traveled with the shadows. Since then, everything had been quiet and still. It was like their presence had stolen life; not even the wind stirred. Unease crept through my chest like a cold frost, settling deep in my stomach as I stood between the trees, only a few feet from the first row of tents. I could not shake the feeling that this was the end. It loomed behind me, long fingers gripping my shoulders.

Rumors had preceded their arrival. Rumors of how their leader—I hated to even *think* his name—Adrian Aleksandr Vasiliev had leveled Jola, ravished Elin, conquered Siva, and burned Lita. One by one, the Nine Houses of Cordova were falling. Now the vampires were on my doorstep, and instead of calling arms, my father, King Henri, had asked for a meeting.

He wanted to reason with the Blood King.

My father's decision had been met with mixed emotions. Some wished to fight rather than succumb to this monster's reign. Others were uncertain—

had my father traded death on the battlefield for another kind?

At least in battle, there were truths. You either survived the day or died.

Under the rule of a monster, there were no truths.

“I should not have allowed you to come so late or get this close.”

Commander Alec Killian stood too near, just a hair behind me, shoulder brushing my back. If it were any other day, I would have excused his proximity, attributing it to his dedication as my escort, but I knew otherwise.

The commander was trying to make amends.

I took a step away, turning slightly, both to cast him a sullen look and to create distance. Alec—or Killian, as I preferred to call him—was commander of the Royal Guard, having inherited the position when his father, whose name he also shared, passed unexpectedly three years ago.

He returned my gaze, gray eyes both steely and somehow gentle. I think I’d have preferred only the steel, because the tenderness made me want to take two more steps back. It meant he had feelings for me, and any excitement I’d once had at catching his attention had now evaporated.

Outwardly, he was everything I thought I’d wanted in a man—ruggedly handsome with a body forged by hours of training. His uniform, a tailored navy tunic and trousers with gold embellishments and a ridiculously dramatic gold cape, served to accentuate his presence. He had a crown of thick, dark hair, and I’d spent a few too many nights with those strands wrapped around my fingers, body warmed, but not alight with the passion I’d really longed for. In the end, Commander Killian was a mediocre lover. It had not helped that I did not like his beard, which was long and covered the bottom half of his face. It made it impossible to detect the shape of his jaw, but I guessed he had a strong one that matched his presence—which was beginning to grate on my nerves.

“I outrank you, Commander. It is not within your power to tell me what to do.”

“No, but it is within your father’s.”

Another flush of irritation blasted up my spine, and I ground my teeth. When Killian did not feel like he could *handle* me, he defaulted to using the threat of my father. And he wondered why I did not want to sleep with him anymore.

Instead of acknowledging my anger, Killian smirked, pleased that he'd hit a nerve.

He nodded toward the camp. "We should attack in the daylight while they sleep."

"Except you would be defying Father's orders for peace," I said.

Once, I would have agreed with him—why *not* slaughter the vampires while they slept? The sunlight, after all, was their weakness. Except that Theodoric, king of Jola, had ordered his soldiers to do the very same, and before they could even launch their attack, the entire army was vanquished by something the people were calling the blood plague. Those who had come down with the disease bled from every orifice of their body until death, including King Theodoric and his wife, who now left a two-year-old to inherit the throne under the rule of the Blood King.

As it turned out, sunlight did not stop magic.

"Will they have as much respect for us when night falls?" Killian countered. The commander had not been shy about expressing his opinion about the Blood King and his invasion of Cordova. I understood his hatred.

"Have faith in the soldiers you trained, Commander. Have you not prepared for this?"

I knew he did not like my reply. I could *feel* his frown at my back, because we both knew if the vampires decided to attack, we were dead. It took five of our own to bring down one of them. We simply had to trust that the Blood King's word to my father was worth our people's lives.

"No one can prepare for monsters, Princess," Killian said. I broke from his gaze and focused on the king's tent, distinct with its crimson and gold details, as he added, "I doubt even the goddess Dis knew what would become of her curse."

It was said Adrian angered Dis, goddess of spirit, and as a result, she cursed him to crave blood. Her curse spread—some humans survived the transformation to vampire while others did not. Since their incarnation, the world had not known peace. Their presence had bred other monsters—all kinds that fed on blood, on life. While I had never known anything different, our elders did. They remembered a world without high walls and gates

around every village. They remembered what it was like not to fear wandering beneath the stars as darkness fell.

I did not fear the dark.

I did not fear the monsters.

I did not even fear the Blood King.

But I did fear for my father, for my people, for my culture.

Because Adrian Aleksandr Vasiliev was inevitable.

“You presume to know how a goddess thinks?” I asked.

“You keep challenging me. Did I do something wrong?”

“Did you expect complacency because we fucked?”

He flinched, and his brows slammed down over his eyes. *Finally*, I thought. *Anger*.

“So you’re upset,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I’m upset. You convinced my father I needed an escort.”

“You sneak out of your bedroom at night!”

I had no idea that sleeping with Killian would mean unannounced visits to my bedroom. Except, like always, he overstepped one night and found my room empty. He’d woken the whole castle, had an entire army searching the surrounding forest for me. All I’d wanted to do was watch the stars, and I’d done so for years atop the rolling hills of Lara. But all that ended a week ago. After I was found, my father had summoned me to his study. He’d lectured me on the state of the world and the importance of watchfulness and had given me guards and a curfew.

I’d protested. I was well trained, a warrior, just as competent as Killian. I could protect myself, at least within the borders of Lara.

Don’t, my father had snapped. The word was so harsh and sudden, I jumped. After a quiet moment and a breath, he had added, *You are too important, Issi*.

And in that moment, he’d looked so broken, I hadn’t been able to utter another word—not to him, not to Killian.

A week later, and I was feeling trapped.

“Since you are so keen to spill my secrets, Commander, did you admit to fucking me too?”

“*Stop using that word.*”

He spoke with clenched teeth.

At least he was passionate about something, I thought. Still, his order only served to provoke me.

“And what word should I use?” I hissed. “*Make love?* Hardly.” I was being unkind, but when I was angry, I wanted the recipient of my wrath to *feel* it, and I knew Killian did. It was a trait I’d adopted from my mother, given that my father rarely expressed his frustration. “You seem to think what happened between us means something more.”

It was like he thought he was suddenly entitled to me, and I hated it.

“Am I so terrible?” he asked, his voice quiet.

My fists clenched, and there was a moment when guilt clutched at my chest. I shook it off quickly. “Stop trying to manipulate my words.”

“I’m not trying to manipulate you, but you cannot say you did not enjoy our time together.”

“I enjoy sex, Alec,” I said flatly. “But it doesn’t mean anything.”

They were sloppy words, but I meant them. I’d only chosen to sleep with Killian because he’d been there, and I’d wanted release. That had been my first mistake. Because it made me ignore other warnings, like his tendency to keep my father aware of my every move.

“You don’t mean that,” he said.

“Killian.” His name slipped from my mouth, a warning. He wasn’t listening, and if there was one thing I hated, it was a man convinced that I didn’t know my own mind. “When will you learn? I *always* say what I mean.”

I started to step around him, and Killian reached for my hand. I wrenched free and punched him in the stomach. He groaned and fell to his knees as I turned on my heels.

“Isolde!” he huffed. “Where are you going?”

I kept walking into the thick wood; the leaves were soft beneath my feet, still wet from morning dew. I wished it were the middle of spring, when the trees were lush and green. I could disappear much easier then. Instead, I

walked between pale, skeletal trunks, beneath a canopy of interlaced limbs. Still, I was certain I could lose Killian. I knew these woods like I knew my heart. I would make it back to the castle without him, much as I had intended to do before he followed me to the border.

“Idiot,” I breathed.

My jaw ached from clenching my teeth. I did not hate Killian, but I would not accept being caged. I was well aware of the dangers in the world, and I’d been raised to fight every manner of monster, even vampires. Though I was no match for them, at least I knew it. If it were up to Killian, our armies would be battling the vampires right now, and likely, many of our people would be dead.

As humans, we had no cure to fight their diseases, no ability to outrun them, no way to counter their magic or the monsters they’d awakened. We were lesser, and we would always be unless one of the goddesses answered the many and varied prayers offered by the devout—which was unlikely.

The goddesses had abandoned us long ago, and sometimes I felt like the only person who knew it.

My pace lessened as the smell of decay permeated the air. At first, it was faint, and for a brief moment, I thought I was imagining things.

Then, the cold crept up my back, and I stopped.

A strzyga was near.

Strzyga were humans who had died from the blood plague and risen from the dead. They were horrifying creatures with little intellect, save for their desire to eat human flesh.

The smell grew in potency, and I flexed my hand, turning slowly to face the desiccated monster.

It stood on the edge of the clearing, back bent, staring with hollow eyes and cheeks. Its sparse hair clung to blood spattered on its near-skeletal face. It stared at me and then sniffed the air, a growl erupting from its throat as its lips curled back to show elongated teeth. Then it gave an eerie cry as it fell on all fours and raced toward me.

I spread my feet apart, preparing for the impact of its blow. It launched itself at me, and as it neared, I shoved my hand toward it, deploying a knife I kept sheathed in a brace around my wrist. It sank easily between the

creature's ribs. Just as quickly, I pushed away, retracting my blade. Blood splattered my face as the strzyga staggered back, screaming at me, angry and anguished.

The blow would only wound.

To kill a strzyga, its head must be separated from its body then burned.

Now that the monster was weakened, I drew my sword. As the sharp metal sang against my sheath, the creature hissed its hatred before throwing itself at me again. It sank upon my blade, clawed hand slashing, tearing at my dress and skin. I gave a guttural cry as the pain registered, but it was soon overtaken by anger and adrenaline. I withdrew the sword and swung. The edge was sharp but resisted, lodging in the bone of the strzyga's neck. I shoved my foot against its chest and jerked my blade free. As the strzyga fell, I sliced through its neck again, and when the body hit the ground, its head landed a few feet away.

I stood for a moment, breathing hard, my chest burning where the creature had shredded my skin. I needed to get to the medics. Infection set in quickly with strzyga wounds. Before I began my trek, I kicked the strzyga's head, sending it rolling to the tree line of the clearing.

Returning to the castle injured would not bode well for me and my independence.

The air changed suddenly, and I twisted, lifting my blade once more, only to have it connect with another.

The impact surprised me, because I stood face-to-face with a man. He was beautiful, striking, but in a harsh way. His features were angled—high cheekbones, sharp jawline, a straight nose, all framed by blond hair that fell in soft waves past his shoulders. His lips were full and pillowy, and his eyes were hooded by defined brows. It was those strange eyes—blue, rimmed with white—that held mine as he tilted his head and spoke.

“What are you doing all the way out here?” His voice hinted at intrigue, silky in its delivery, and the sound made my stomach clench.

My brows lowered at his words, and I studied him further. He wore a black tunic secured with gold buckles and a surcoat of the same color. The edges were stitched with gold thread. It was fine work, but it was not made by my people—our designs were far more intricate.

I narrowed my eyes. "Who are you?" I asked.

The man dropped his sword, as if he no longer perceived me as a threat, which made me want to be a threat, except that I dropped my arm too, my fingers loose around the hilt. I tried to tighten my hold but couldn't.

"I am many things," he said. "Man, monster, lover."

This time when he spoke, I detected a faint accent—a slight clip I couldn't place.

"That's not an answer," I said.

"I think what you mean is that's not the answer you want."

"You are toying with me."

His smile stretched, and he looked wicked in a sinful way, in a way I wanted to taste and feel. Those thoughts made my skin prick, and I felt myself growing warmer beneath his gaze.

"What is it you want from me?" he asked. His voice was low, a purr that coaxed a shiver from the depths of my stomach.

I swallowed hard. "I want to know why you're here."

"I was tracking the strzyga when it changed course." His eyes lowered to my chest. "I see why."

Self-consciously, I lifted my hand and hissed at the sting of my shredded skin. The sudden flare of pain made me feel light-headed.

"I killed it," I managed to say, though my tongue felt thick in my mouth.

The corners of his lips curled. "I see that too."

"I should go," I whispered, holding his gaze. I wanted to move my body but felt too relaxed. Perhaps it was infection, already rooted in my blood.

"You should," he agreed. "But you won't."

An alarm sounded in my head as he spoke. And as he stepped toward me, I suddenly regained my ability to move. I drove my hand toward his stomach, releasing my knife, but his hand clamped down upon my wrist. He yanked me forward, his body pressing into mine, despite my wound, despite the blood. He bent over me, grasping my head, fingers digging into my scalp, and for a moment, I feared that he would either kiss me or break my neck. Instead, he gripped me harder, eyes never leaving mine, thumb brushing my lips.

“What is your name?” he asked. His voice shivered through me, and I found myself speaking.

“I am Isolde.” The answer slipped from my mouth, at war with my mind, which raged against him.

“Who are you?”

Again, I answered not of my own accord, my voice the whisper of a lover. “I am princess of the House of Lara.”

“Isolde,” he repeated my name, a rough growl that vibrated against my chest. “My sweet.”

Then he bent, and his tongue swept across the wound on my chest. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t move, and I couldn’t speak. The worst part was that this felt *good*. It felt possessive and immoral, and I found myself no longer trying to stab him but clinging to him as he worked.

When he drew away, his full lips were stained with my blood. He swallowed, and his eyes gleamed as he studied my eyes, my lips, my throat. The stare ignited something deep inside me, and the fire spread, making me ache. I was ashamed, because I knew this man was a soldier for the Blood King, a vampire.

I jerked in his grasp and was surprised when he released me. I stumbled back, my hand going to my chest, meeting smooth skin. I was healed.

“You’re a monster.”

“I healed you,” he said, as if that made him less so.

“I didn’t ask for your help,” I snapped.

“No, but you enjoyed it.”

I glared. “You were controlling me.”

That was why I hadn’t been able to grip my sword, why my body seemed to be at odds with my mind, why I suddenly felt desperate to be crushed beneath the weight of a warm body that could fill me better than anything I’d ever had before. I was out of control.

And it was *his* fault.

“I do not control emotions.” He spoke so matter-of-factly, it was hard to accuse him of lying.

I lifted my blade, and the vampire laughed.

“Anger suits you, my sweet. I like it.”

I scowled, but my anger just made him smile wider, his lips pulling back from gleaming white teeth, no sign that he'd just feasted on my blood. My hatred for him deepened.

"It is still daylight," I said. "How are you able to walk among us?"

Vampires could only go out during the day in Revekka, where the red sky blocked the sun's rays. *Were they evolving?* The thought brought a new kind of dread into the pit of my stomach.

"It is nearly sunset," he said. "This time is not so dangerous for someone like me."

What did that mean?

I did not ask, and he did not offer an explanation. Instead, he inclined his head. "We'll meet again, Princess Isolde. I'll make sure of it."

His promise shivered through me like an oath he'd sworn to the goddesses themselves. I lifted my blade and charged, but as I swung, he vanished like mist in the morning sun.

Alone, I began to shake.

I'd survived an encounter with a vampire who had tasted my blood, and the worst part about it was that he'd been right.

I did like it.

Two

I had seen victims of vampires—humans who were on the cusp of change before their hearts were cut from their bodies and burned. I'd also seen bodies drained of blood, past the point of survival. But I'd never encountered an actual vampire.

"They look like us but are not us," Killian's father had warned during training. "They are fast. They will control your mind and drink your blood, and you will not survive. If you do, you will wish for death."

Those were the truths I'd been told about vampires.

He'd never said how they were like us—that they could be beautiful, that their touch would inspire an acute desire beyond anything I'd ever experienced. Everything inside me was wound so tight, each breath was a reminder of how desperately I wanted to be touched.

"Isolde!"

But not by him.

Killian's voice broke through the fog of my mind. He was close, and I did not want to be caught. There was too much to explain here in this clearing—the strzyga, my torn dress, the absence of blood.

I turned on my heels and fled.

The castle felt like it had doubled in distance. The walk was agonizing, and I grew frustrated, still feeling the effects of my encounter with the vampire. My body was warm, especially between my thighs, and I was hyperaware of how heavy and sensitive my breasts felt, rubbed raw by the woolen cloak I kept close. By the time I exited the tree line, I ached.