

BONUS: CHAPTER ONE IN ADRIAN'S POV

Behind me, the village of Lita burned, but those flames did not draw its king, Fredrich, from Castle Ammon, which was positioned behind a twelve-pointed star of bastion fortifications and towers. The walls themselves would have been near impossible for mortals to scale not only due to their height, but because streams of boiling water were now being poured over the edge.

As if that would deter me, a monster.

I admired the strategy, no matter how futile.

I was inevitable.

I bent, my weight pressing into my heels, and pushed off the ground, vaulting into the sky. My soldiers followed like a murder of crows determined to keep their formation, as we came to land on the other side of the fortress walls. A shocked quiet descended as men dressed in tarnished armor stared back, buckets of boiling water poised to empty.

I unsheathed my blade which seemed to bring the

mortals out of their hypnosis. Some bared their teeth and raised their weapons.

One shouted.

“Bastard of Dis! Leave this blessed land!”

My lips curled. “You think this land is blessed?”

I looked to my left and right at my soldiers who flanked me, while fire consumed acre after acre behind us.

“It looks cursed to me.”

“You should not indulge them,” Daroc, my second-in-command, said. I could feel his tension. I was never sure if he was more eager for a fight or to get it over with. Either way, he was not one to taunt. He’d rather slit throats before words were exchanged. It made him a fast and efficient assassin.

“What is the harm?” asked Sorin, who was my third and the complete opposite of Daroc. Sorin teased and tortured. He made warfare a game and was almost gleeful about his kills. Their differences made them a good team, and according to Sorin, better lovers. “Let them believe their goddess will save them. They fight harder when they believe.”

I noted the look of annoyance on Daroc’s face before focusing my attention on the soldiers. Despite their name calling, none had moved to attack.

“Where is your king?” I said.

None of them spoke, and only one moved—a young, slight man whose face dripped with sweat. His eyes darted upward toward a high terrace and watchtower. I pointed to him.

“Spare him. Kill the rest,” I said and lunged, tearing through the air as I rose high above the porch. I saw Fredrich stumble back from the ledge where he’d leered,

more than likely preparing to watch the start of the slaughter of his people. He had even come dressed in all his finery.

He was not prepared for battle. He had assumed he would not have to fight, and I supposed he was right because I was less like Sorin and more like Daroc when it came to execution. When I landed, I swung, and the only sound that escaped the king’s lips was a strangled cry before his head slid from his neck to the ground at his feet. His body followed.

I picked up his head by his graying hair and the crown that had fallen off. I leapt higher, to the top of the watchtower where the flag of Lita flew, and I tore it from its place, replacing it with Fredrich’s head and crown—food for flies.

When I was finished, I dropped to the ground amid the slaughter wrought by my soldiers and approached the mortal who remained. He shook as I approached.

“Your name,” I said.

“V-Velimir,” he said.

“Velimir,” I said. “Welcome to my kingdom.”

I led my army away from the still-burning remains of Lita, the fourth House to fall to my rule. Once a thriving village of mariners, fisherman, and boatbuilders, a forest of woodsmen and blacksmiths, and farmers who worked fields of wheat and barley, now reduced to ash.

We would rebuild, and it would thrive again, though I had wished to avoid blood and flame altogether. It had been too much to hope for a peaceful surrender from Fredrich, who had proclaimed to embody his House symbol, the

antelope, a representation of peace and harmony, until my arrival. I had to give him credit, he had planned. Though, he had more time than the other three kings.

In the end, it did not matter how long the remaining Houses had to prepare for my arrival. I would take as much as they took from me—everything.

The smell of burning flesh was still singed into my nose, into the very air I breathed. Even now as I filled my lungs, it was with flesh, fire, blood, and pine, but I was used to the scent. It was there at my birth; on the night I was turned, and it had been there since.

It was an odor I could not escape, but it was no fault of mine.

This was reckoning—the fate earned by the mortals who murdered the one who held my heart, who captured my soul, the one whose love was worth more than the stars in the sky. They insisted she burn for false crimes, and so I insisted they burn for real crimes.

As much as the smell inspired my hatred, it also triggered memories of *her*, and I felt as though my sternum had been cracked and ripped open. I had no control over the suddenness with which I was taken back to her, and it was as if she had never burned before my eyes.

She lay against me, every soft curve touching ever edge of mine, and she smelled like jasmine and sage. Her head rested on my chest, her hair spilled over my skin like silk, thick and dark. She lifted her gaze to mine, and once again I was struck by how much I loved her. I felt it deep in my soul, a connection I could not explain and had never really wanted, made worse by the knowledge that I would lose her.

She traced my lips.

“I will take you far from here one day,” I told her. “We can live on a farm at the base of a mountain, and you can practice magic the way you’ve always dreamed.”

She only ever wished to teach, and at first, High Coven had seemed like a dream. She would be part of a group of witches who hoped to share peaceful magic, but as the kings of Cordova became involved, it slowly turned into a nightmare that had ended in mass death.

She smiled and it was sad, and I had not understood it then, but knew now she’d already seen her end. Still, she indulged me.

“And will we have children?”

I swallowed something thick and sharp in my throat. “I will give you as many as you wish for.”

“I have names,” she whispered.

I raised my brows. “Oh?”

“Cora, for a girl,” she answered. “And Alek for a boy.”

I had to grin. “After me?”

Aleksandr was my middle name.

“Yes,” she said. “Because he will have your heart. Fierce. Undying. Loyal.”

I pressed my lips to hers, and as I kissed her, I gripped her to me because I thought I could prevent what happened next...but the vision always ended the same way, with her being ripped from my arms and tied so tight to the beam upon which she would die; her skin bubbled between the ropes. Her hair was matted with blood, her body scarred from the whip, but her dark eyes were clear.

She was prophesizing.

I’d wanted her to fight, but I knew it was over when she met my gaze as the flames licked her feet.

You are destined for this world, she had said, though those words were far prettier than the reality. I was a plague upon this world, and I intended to continue as such. I wondered if this was what she had seen in those moments before her death—did she know I would ravage the world in her name?

Yésenia.

A harsh caw grounded me in the present and drew my attention skyward where Sorin circled in the form of a falcon. He was a trusted tracker, messenger, and spy. He landed on the trail in front of us and shifted just as we came to a halt.

“I have news from Lara,” Sorin said.

I waited, anticipation tightening my body—it was the hope that at least one of these ill-fated kings would learn there was only one way to survive me.

Maybe that would be Henri de Lara, who was next in line for conquest.

“King Henri has requested a meeting,” Sorin said.

I traded a look with Daroc. I already knew he was suspicious—I’d heard one word erupt from his mind like a whip.

Trap.

“Perhaps,” I acknowledged aloud. “But nevertheless, futile.”

Sorin approached and mounted his horse which was to my right.

“He invites you to Castle Fiora tomorrow night at sunset to discuss terms for surrender.”

I wondered what he hoped to bargain in exchange for my rule. What would the mortal king ask for beyond what I planned to offer, which was nothing more than

what he already had, save that King Henri would no longer rule sovereign.

We continued until we were on the border of Lara before the sun had risen over the horizon. The camp had already been prepared by a party of soldiers sent ahead, and black tent after black tent peppered the area, made to protect us against the burning rays of the sun—a sun I’d once spent hours beneath, training and fighting for a king I would later murder.

My army dispersed, retiring to their tents to feed from their vassals—mortals who offered their blood—and rest. Though, if King Henri held to his promise of surrender, or at least talk of it, they would be resting longer than usual.

I dismounted Shadow outside my tent, but instead of going in, I walked to the middle distance between it at what would be the boundary of Lara. The trees were leafless and silvery, and though the morning was getting lighter by the second, darkness still lingered in deep pockets of the forest.

I was being watched.

I knew because I could hear the thoughts of those who saw me, tinged with fear and rage.

That must be the Blood King...ugly bastard.

King Henri is a coward. We should let the sun cook these motherfuckers.

The princess will want to see this.

The last thought had me curious—the princess? Who was King Henri’s daughter?

“King Henri may have agreed to a truce, but will his people obey?” Daroc asked as he strolled up beside me.

“They may not,” I said. “But King Henri cannot take

responsibility for a few rogue attackers, just as I cannot be responsible for killing them.”

I turned to Daroc. “You need to relax. Shall I inform Sorin?”

My general narrowed his eyes. “I can take care of Sorin.”

“Probably,” I reasoned. “But do you need to?”

He raised a brow. “If you wish to discuss love lives, then perhaps you would be better off moving on from Yesenia.”

The blow was meant to wound, and there was a part of me that knew Daroc meant what he said, but he had never lost the love of his life. Sorin had been with him for over two hundred years. They had been mortal together and now they were immortal together.

Since Yesenia died, I’d been alone, even when my bed was occupied because I’d been waiting for the day when she would reincarnate. And until I found her, I would never rest.

“Adrian, even if you find her, she won’t remember you,” Daroc said.

This wasn’t the first time he’d tried to remind me of this.

I looked away, clenching my jaw. She would remember me eventually, if she trusted me enough. If she let me drink her blood.

“We can fall in love again,” I said through my teeth. “Her soul will call to mine.”

“Adrian—”

“Good night, Daroc,” I snapped, no longer wishing to speak. I stepped past him and headed into my tent, annoyed to find I wasn’t alone.

“Safira,” I said.

The blond vassal stood before the brazier, warming her hands. Her dress was thin, and as she turned to me, I could see her nipples pebbled against the fabric, and a nest of dark curls at the apex of her thighs.

She wanted to fuck.

She always wanted to fuck.

It wasn’t that I didn’t think she was beautiful. It wasn’t that I was opposed to fucking her either, but I would only feed from and fuck my soulmate, and Yesenia had yet to incarnate.

Safira had made her choice, and while she’d hoped to become more to me, she never would.

“My king,” she said and curtsied, pressing her hand to her breast, which succeeded in drawing my attention. As she rose, she drew her hair to the side, exposing the hollow of her neck. “Hungry?”

Her tone was low, almost smokey. It wasn’t usual, and I found myself annoyed more than aroused as I think she had intended.

“No, I’m not,” I said. “You should return to your tent before sunrise.”

She froze, her eyes widening a little. “Even if you aren’t hungry, you should eat. You need to keep up your strength.”

“I appreciate your concern, Safira,” I said. She took that as an invitation to touch me, planting her hand upon my chest. I took her wrist and pushed her hand away. “But I do not require your blood tonight.”

I moved past her, farther into my tent. She lingered.

“Perhaps...I could help you in other ways,” she suggested.

I looked at her. “You want to suck my cock?”

Her eyes flashed, and she drew her bottom lip between her teeth. “I am very skilled.”

“As I have no doubt. I, too, am skilled...with my hand. As it is, I’d rather its company than yours.”

A viciousness crept into her features, and for the first time since I’d entered my tent, I saw the real Safira. She lifted her head just an inch, jaw tight.

“Good night, Your Majesty.”

She turned on her heels and left.

Thank fuck.

I was finally alone.

I sank into a chair near my desk, cradling my head in one hand.

I was frustrated. I was angry. I was exhausted.

“You work too much,” Yesenia said, and I inhaled a painful breath.

“Come,” she coaxed. Her lips touched my ear, then her teeth, and I let her take my hand and guide me to the bed. She hovered over me, body draped in a shift that dipped low enough for me to watch her breasts as her lips pressed kisses down my chest, over my stomach. And when she came to the bulge of my cock, which pressed heavily against the fabric of my trousers, she covered it with her mouth as she unlaced them.

I let out a slow breath and groaned as she took me into her hand, flesh against flesh.

“Relaxed?” she asked.

I nodded. The only words on the tip of my tongue were a command—*take me into your mouth*—but I’d rather she took the lead.

She drew her hand up and down my shaft only a few

times before her mouth closed over the crown of my cock, and she sucked, she licked, and she took me fully into her warm, wet mouth. When I came, it was into my hand, and I was alone.

I woke to a feeling of unease.

It stayed in my chest, claws deep, and drew me from bed.

I left my tent before the sun dipped below the horizon and crept between the trees like mist clinging to the earth. I was searching for what had caused this sensation. It was more like intuition—a feeling that something was off in the environment around me. It was a feeling Yesenia had insisted I pay attention to. *The body knows before the mind*, she would say.

I clung to that, to the knowledge that when I met her in this lifetime, she would somehow know me, and I would somehow know her.

I smelled the strzyga before I could see it, which was often the case. Strzyga were humans who had died from the blood plague, a plague my army and I could spread at will.

Since their stench often alerted their prey of their arrival, the only thing they had on their side was speed. I followed the scent. Though I did not think the creature was the thing causing me unrest, I did not mind an evening hunt. Except that when I found the monster, it had already discovered its target—and *she* was battling it.

A woman stood at the center of a clearing, facing off with the bent strzyga. I could only see her profile—a beautiful face framed with dark hair. She brandished a

blade that gleamed in the dying light. The creature was motivated only by hunger. Desperate to reach for her, it charged quickly, and as it sank upon her blade, it swiped at her with its long, curled claws.

Her cry of pain told me she had been hit.

Still, she remained in control. Withdrawing the blade and swinging. It took another chop before the strzyga's head rolled from its body. She kicked it farther with a frustrated growl.

I was desperate to look into her eyes.

To see her face.

Because I knew her.

That feeling in my chest intensified, a tangle of emotions I did not even want to acknowledge. They were desperate and painful and too hopeful to even touch. Then there was the hunger—a carnal thirst that burned my throat and dried my mouth. I wanted to partake of her blood, and I wanted to fuck her.

Suddenly I cursed myself for not taking from Safira.

Before I knew what I was doing, I had crossed the clearing to stand behind her. She turned quickly, her blade and eyes clashing with mine.

Yesenia.

I wanted to call her by her name, but it was not hers. Not anymore.

And the woman before me was also different. Beautiful beyond measure to be sure—brown skin and eyes, inviting lips that were parted as she stared back at me. A touch of pink dusted the high points of her cheeks, and I wasn't sure if she was embarrassed or cold.

My eyes shifted down to her ruined dress. Through the tears, I could see the sensitive swell of her breasts. It

was possible she was also feverish. A strzyga's claws were deadly, and infection set in quickly for mortals.

"What are you doing all the way out here?" I asked, more to myself than her, but I wanted to know everything about her, this new life she had lived. She studied me, mistrusting. She was trying to figure out where I came from. I knew because the longer she faced me and the more chaotic the energy between us became, the clearer I could hear her thoughts.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

She's used to control, I thought.

I lowered my sword and compelled her to do the same. I did not have complete mind control, and it was only possible on those who were highly emotional—which meant they were more susceptible to my abilities.

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

There were all things I had been to her when she was Yesenia, and I wanted to be again.

"That's not an answer," she scowled.

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

"You are toying with me."

I smiled, and I could not help teasing one of my fangs which was elongating behind my teeth, body still desperate to feed. Was this how it would be until she invited my bite?

"What is it you want from me?" I asked.

I could think of a lot of things I wanted her to say. I wanted her to ask for my teeth, for my bite, for my cock. I would fill her with my come and drain her of blood, and it would be the most pleasure either of us had in a long while.

She swallowed, and I was drawn to her throat. “I want to know why you’re here.”

“I was tracking the strzyga when it changed course.” Once again, my gaze dipped to her ruined dress and the flesh the creature had managed to destroy. “I see why.”

She lifted her hand to cover herself but let out a pained breath as she touched the shredded skin. I’d never wanted to heal someone so much in my life, in part to sate my thirst, but I also hated her pain. Because her thoughts were opened to me, I could feel it every time she did. I winced internally.

“I killed it,” she said, and I could tell she was losing her grip on consciousness.

“I see that too,” I replied, quiet, voice dropping to a languid tone. One I hoped was far more comforting.

“I should go,” she whispered but she didn’t move.

“You should,” I agreed. “But you won’t.”

She wouldn’t because she couldn’t get far in her current state. I stepped forward, and she seemed to regain her ability to move, driving toward me as she released her blade. I caught her wrist and pulled her against me. I wanted to groan with relief, to bury my head in her hair and my teeth in her neck.

But those were things I could not do—I had to know this woman first. She had to trust me, to love me, or I would never have her at all.

I held her face between my hands, studying her eyes for only a moment before dropping my gaze to her lush lips. I brushed my thumb across them, wishing more than anything to press my mouth to hers, but for now I wanted words.

“What is your name?” I asked.

She shivered against me, and I felt a fire roar to life in the pit of my stomach. I gripped her tighter.

“I am Isolde,” she answered, hushed.

“Who are you?” I asked, and when she answered, I understood the command in her presence. It was something Yesenia had not had. She had always wanted to blend in, to go unnoticed. The issue was that she burned brighter than anyone.

And she still did.

“I am Princess of the House of Lara.”

“Isolde,” I repeated her name. “My sweet.”

Her chest rose, drawing my attention, and my hunger took root. I bent and traced her wounds with my tongue, and if I had not been convinced of her identity before, it was confirmed as I tasted her blood. There were memories here of the first time I saw her in King Dragos’s great hall, the hall I would one day come to own. We had danced that night, bodies close, trading smiles and sly looks, and when she’d slipped from the room, I followed her and kissed her under the night sky. She had clung to me as she did now, her shuddering breaths felt like my own, and when I drew away, I thought I could see an ember in her eyes, a kernel of remembrance—to her, a moment of weakness.

She jerked in my grasp, as if realizing she had exposed herself and stumbled back.

“You’re a monster.”

She said it more for herself, deflecting the actual pleasure she took from my mouth. I smirked.

“I healed you,” I pointed out. The true monster was the strzyga who had harmed her in the first place, but I knew how she had been raised to think of me. This

would be far more challenging than just hoping she would love me. She would have to come back from hate.

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

Would you have rather died? I wanted to ask.

But I would never let that happen. I would never live without her again.

I’d sworn it upon the blood I spilled every day after my birth as a vampire.

“No, but you enjoyed it.”

Her eyes narrowed, gleaming angrily, and I liked the pout of her mouth. “You were controlling me.”

She wasn’t completely wrong.

“I do not control emotions.”

Her dark eyes flashed, and she lifted her blade. I almost loved that she wanted to kill me. It hinted at her passion.

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

That only made her angrier, but she was curious about me more than she feared me.

“It is still daylight. How are you able to walk among us?”

She had hope that she would eventually be able to defeat us, I could tell by her thoughts. She feared our continued evolution, and she was right to. This world would have to end for a new one to begin, and I would bring about the end.

“It is nearly sunset. This time is not so dangerous for someone like me.”

Not like it was for newer vampires.

I studied her a moment longer. I did not want to leave her, but I knew if I lingered, she would just continue to fight me, and I would just want her blood.

“We’ll meet again, Princess Isolde. I’ll make sure of it.”

I was gone from the clearing faster than she could lift her blade—but I had only gone far enough to watch her from between the trees. She stood there for a few moments, blade lifted and tense before she relaxed. Her head fell back, and she stared up at the sky.

She was confused, frustrated, and insanely aroused.

Fuck.

I left her then, because if I lingered, my cock would overtake any rational thought.

There would come a time when I could claim her, and it would be soon because I knew what I would ask King Henri for during his surrender. It would likely come as a shock to him and Daroc as well, but most of all to her—and in the end, it did not matter whether the king said yes or no.

Isolde de Lara would be my wife.