

## Chapter 900 Need a drink?

Ilea perked up slightly when she felt a strong presence of blood magic in the air. She didn't react beyond a quick glance to Erik.

"You feel it, don't you," Berrick said. "Perceptive, for someone at your level."

At this point it sounded encouraging rather than suspicious.

"What is it?" Ilea asked. It felt like an aura to her. A powerful one. Constant and all present. As if the very air was permeated with blood magic.

"The circle of Marrindayne, gift of the First Vampire, and the most powerful of rituals lain upon our cities," Berrick said.

"What does it do?" Ilea asked. She could feel some of it already, within the two people sitting near her. The vampires seemed more alert, their eyes clearer, muscles more tense, magic more potent. *A proximity based spell that makes them stronger?*

"Many things. You need not fear it, human. It is merely to protect our cities. Our homes. And our peoples," Berrick spoke.

"You mentioned a First Vampire," Erik said.

"I did," Berrick said.

"Is he still around? Your ruler?" Ilea asked.

"He more... oversees, than rules," Berrick said. "He imposed the Four Rules. Millennia past. And it is thanks to him, that our lands have remained largely peaceful."

"So he's still around? After thousands of years? He must be a dust riddled skeleton by now, no?" Ilea said and gave a side glance to Erik, who coughed in turn.

"We do not age, like low leveled humans," Berrick said.

"That's beneficial. So you're an entirely different species?" Ilea asked. "You two do look kind of like humans. I hope that's not offensive."

"It is not," Berrick spoke. "But the questions you ask, I cannot answer. I don't know you well enough yet."

"That's fair," Ilea said. "How strong is the First Vampire? Think he could kill a dragon?"

"A dragon?" Berrick asked.

"Yeah, I saw one from a distance, in the northernmost part of the north that we visited," she spoke. "It was massive. Like a mountain itself."

"I can believe that," Berrick spoke. "But I cannot make a comment on such a battle. A lot would be destroyed. Many would die. That is what I know."

"I think he could beat anything," Isidelia spoke. "If the battle is close to Marrindayne. And if he drinks potent blood before... he would be unstoppable." She bit her lip.

Ilea couldn't help but grin.

"Do you know his level?" she asked.

Isidelia held up three fingers.

"Three question marks?" Ilea asked.

She smiled and nodded.

*Well that's disappointing.*

*Wait. Maybe he's using a spell to hide his true level.*

"That's crazy," she said, in a deadpan voice.

Berrik grunted, giving Isidelia a pointed look.

"Yeah, yeah," the vampress said and waved him off.

The carriage slowed and finally halted.

Isidelia glanced out the window after opening her umbrella.

"Are all vampires bothered by the sunlight?" Ilea asked, looking at Berrik.

"Are you looking for weaknesses?" he asked.

"Not really," Ilea said. "Your driver doesn't seem bothered."

"He is. But the helmet helps," the vampire said.

"Come, humans, you should see it from here," Isidelia said and opened the carriage door. She jumped out a moment later.

Ilea glanced at Erik, the man gesturing for her to go.

She smiled and took a step, the carriage buckling slightly. *Shit.* Ilea made sure to focus on the next few steps, finally walking out without further disruption. She didn't look back at Berrik. *He must've noticed. Guess it's going to depend on his level of suspicion, and Erik's illusion.*

Her thoughts ground to a halt when her gaze followed that of Isidelia.

The road led down into what looked like a basin filled with stars. A sprawling city built not against a single mountain but an entire range of mountains in the vague form of a crescent. A high reaching wall protected the front of the city and the part at the bottom of the basin. Forested areas were visible throughout, small sections carefully placed. Trees lined the distant streets with massive cathedrals, aqueducts, and high reaching towers. The central mountain at the back looked to be split in two, castles built with pointed arches and broad spires into and on top of the steep cliffs. Ten thousand windows glittered with differing colors in the now dim light of the suns, only half of the massive city still illuminated.

"Marrindayne," Isidelia exclaimed, her voice proud. She moved closer and put an arm around Ilea's shoulder. She opened her mouth, then paused. "You... you smell strange..." she said, her eyes growing cloudy. "In... toxicating... what is this?"

Ilea pushed her back slightly. "Isidelia?"

The vampress shook her head and took in a sharp hissing breath. “W... what, oh. Right. Marrindayne. I thought you humans would enjoy the sight with some sunlight. But it really shines at night,” she said with a fanged grin.

*“Her senses got through my illusion,” Erik sent as he stepped up to Ilea. “Or your power seeped through. I wonder what would happen, if she drank your blood.”*

“You said it was a bad idea,” Ilea sent.

*“I didn’t say you should do it. Just that I’m wondering,” Erik sent and grinned ever so slightly. “It’s grown since last time I’ve been here. They dug deeper into the mountain.”*

“I can’t wait to see its streets,” Ilea said out loud and smiled.

“Onward then,” Isidelia said, walking back to the carriage before she stopped. “You two. If you wish, I would like for you to join and watch, when I explain to Glain Warrington, exactly how badly, he failed to perceive reality.”

*“Do we have time for that?” Ilea sent to Erik.*

“It would be an honor,” Erik said. “If you want to join, Valery?”

“Sounds fun,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Splendid,” Isidelia spoke.

They returned into the carriage, Ilea not missing the strange look Berrick gave her when she entered, though he didn’t comment, shaking his head as if to get rid of a stray thought.

“You mentioned weaponsmiths?” Ilea asked.

“Don’t miss it, or I’ll suck you dry,” Isidelia spoke and closed the curtains, the oxen moving towards the pointed arch of the massive city gate, the dark metal doors thrumming with magic before they opened up slowly. Muffled chatter and occasional shouts resounded from inside.

Ilea and Erik were left outside as the carriages moved past, no other travelers present as the armored guards watched from atop the walls, two of them vanishing in a mist of red before they appeared a few meters away.

They were clad in black half plate, glittering with enchantments and engravings, helmets each adorned with differing designs covering their heads. The guards wore no visible weapons but moved with lithe precision, one focused on the two outsiders and the other scanning the dense forests behind.

The dirt road was quiet, the gates open still, leading onto a street of stone behind. Not cobbled but flat. A few people walking by checked to see who was outside, though none of them stopped for longer than a moment.

“Humans from the east,” the first guard spoke.

***[Blood Mage – lvl 306]***

*Are they all this high leveled? Or did we just get lucky?*

She checked the other one.

**[Blood Mage – lvl 246]**

Ilea nodded in response.

“You know the Four?” the guard asked.

“No killing, no taking freedom, no being uncivilized... what was the last one?” Ilea said and glanced at Erik.

“You contribute,” Erik said and summoned two pieces of gold.

The vampire looked at him. “You contribute.” He gave them both a long look, then took the coins and vanished, the other one following a moment later.

“*Quite a steep price to enter a city,*” Ilea sent as they walked towards the gate.

“*They like to ask for a blood contribution. Especially from newcomers. This was safer,*” Erik sent.

“*Right,*” Ilea said, hands behind her head as she walked past the broad walls, dozens of enchantments washing over her. And not just that. By now she could feel just as many blood magic spells permeating everything. Atop the most powerful one. The muffled chatter became louder as she saw hundreds of people participating in a market. Dwarven and human looking merchants, people clad in high quality armor, favoring black and red. She even saw orcs and a few supposed Dark Ones selling their wares. The stalls themselves looked permanent. Small booths made with wood or stone, advertising with colorful lettering, some even with engraved metals. She saw glittering jewels, beautiful swords and spears, clothing made of colored silk, a hat maker showing a customer the different feathers they could buy as attachments.

“*I can see why you liked this place,*” Ilea said, trying to see beyond the market where a square pool of water resided, trees with white bark and red leaves lining the entire length for over a hundred meters. She saw glimpses of restaurants and stores to the side, set between the larger buildings and gated mansions. The light was dim, the sunlight no longer reaching the market itself. It smelled of sweat and blood.

She turned to Erik and nodded, then went back to focus on the blood magic that permeated everything.

“*Circles was it?*”

“*Yes. A combination of blood magic rituals and runes, so deeply ingrained into these peoples and their magic, it may as well be a part of them,*” Erik sent. “*You get used to it.*”

“*Already am,*” Ilea said as she identified a few nearby people. All of them were blood mages. “*Is everyone here a vampire?*”

“*No, though many aspire to become one,*” he said.

“*I suppose I get the allure,*” Ilea mused, though she was glad to have found a way to virtual immortality and ridiculous power without giving up sunlight exposure.

Erik walked over to a stall selling shirts, looking through them.

Ilea instead looked around for something to eat. “There’s no food...”

“Oh,” Erik said and looked at her, his eyes wide. He smiled and touched her shoulder. “Promise you won’t get mad?”

Ilea looked at him and squinted. “What?”

“They... drink,” he said, then paused, then mimed himself drinking from a cup.

“Oh.”

“But!” he slightly shook her shoulder. “Great smoothies.”

“Like... blood smoothies?” Ilea asked.

“Some, but not all of them,” he said and got close to whisper. “I don’t think they can digest solids. There are plenty of restaurants though, for non vampires. Just not in this area of town.”

Ilea nodded. “I see.” She shook her head. “What a horrible fate.”

“Their physical attributes are enhanced greatly however. Night vision, powerful blood magic, the ability to heal and empower oneself from blood. Blood which can be stored. Blood which can be taken from an enemy. And I believe they’re virtually immortal when it comes to aging.”

“What a horrible fate,” Ilea repeated. “No solids.”

A bell sounded.

No more sunlight reached the city, only the distant peaks still colored in a light shade of red.

Streetlamps all around hummed with magic, a dull red color shining from the strange crystal like bulbs placed within the dark metal casings.

The people in the market didn’t seem concerned, continuing with whatever they were doing.

“I imagine light magic is a good counter,” Ilea said in a dry tone, glad for all her sight enhancements. Even with the added streetlamps, it wasn’t particularly bright.

“You get used to it,” Erik said, walking along the stands until he found another stall with clothes.

Ilea caught a glimpse of four young men clad in black leathers appearing on the street nearby, one atop the branches of a tree. “Let’s hunt!” one of them said and sped off, the rest following.

Ilea turned her head to see two other beings chasing each other over the high buildings. Humanoid but monstrous to a degree, hissing in strange giggling sounds as they rushed over the rooftops with ridiculous speeds.

A carriage turned onto the main road, heading towards the city gates.

“What are they hunting?” Ilea asked.

“Who?” Erik asked, more focused on the leather coats.

“Those four,” Ilea said, nodding in the direction of the figures disappearing into a gloomy side street, steam exiting from an angled window obscuring them a moment later.

A small woman with fangs and red eyes smiled at her. “Holed up all day. What do you think they hunt?”

Ilea turned her head to see two men passionately making out right next to a stall, already halfway out of their clothes. She could hear muffled moans from behind the still closed shutters in the first

floor of the buildings behind. She glanced back to the two men, both now biting each other. Nobody else reacted much, except for two young women whispering and giggling.

“Right,” she said. “Looking for a cloak?” she asked Erik.

“Yes. They’re really well made,” he said absentmindedly. “Oxen leather,” he said, as if to clarify. Someone above reached their climax, or it sounded as such.

“May I taste your blood?” the small woman asked, looking up at Ilea. “If it’s tasty, I’ll add in a hat to your next purchase.”

“I’m not super big on hats, thank you,” Ilea said and summoned her notebook. “But maybe you can help with something else.

The stall owner gave them detailed instructions on how to reach the store Gerrik had recommended. The walk took them closer to the ascending parts of the city built against the side of the crescent mountain range.

“She thought we wouldn’t be able to afford anything there? Or are only vampires allowed?” Ilea asked as they covered a set of broad stone stairs. Many of the houses here were downright castles, with their own walls and towers, some even with small moats. The curtains and windows were the main thing that differed greatly between the buildings, though there seemed to be competition as well when it came to vegetation. Luscious gardens housing a dozen vibrant colors versus dark, gloomy and overgrown walls with ivy or dried out plants.

Erik looked between the metal fence of a mansion before he turned to look at her. “Do not take or restrict the freedom of another,” he said. “Not selling to anyone would be a direct violation of one of the Four Rules. If there is no good reason at least. This Glarkson you wish to see will do his own evaluation, I assume.”

“Who enforces the rules? The First Vampire? Does he have some kind of all seeing magic going on?”

“All the Courts, all the vampires. They’re very traditional, and open to invoke the Rules whenever they feel wronged in any way. If two citizens can’t find an agreement, they go to their local vampire Lord, and if they can’t decide either, the next most powerful vampire is consulted, and so on, until the First Vampire himself is consulted. But I don’t think that happens a lot,” Erik said as they rounded a corner.

Ilea looked at the dark street ahead, barely broad enough for one person to pass. No streetlights were around, and the sky was cloudy. “They’re scared of him?”

“Maybe,” Erik said, following her into the alley. “But I think it’s more to do with respecting someone else’s time. Remember, one of the rules is to not be uncivilized, and by insisting on bothering more and more powerful people and vampires, one may or may not deem you uncivilized.”

“And what happens if you break a rule? Killing isn’t allowed either, or does that not apply to the enforcers?” Ilea asked. She stopped when she saw the small metal plaque set into the stone wall, a few stairs leading down to a dark green door made of wood.

“Violent punishments, banishment, fees, and probably other more creative sentences. It’s not exactly defined.”

“You know quite a bit about their kind,” Ilea said.

“I’ve been... let’s say, a consultant. Here and there,” Erik said and laughed.

Ilea sighed and knocked on the door. Carefully.

The door unlocked, through an enchantment.

She glanced at the lock and entered, her domain spreading through the hall beyond. Everything was lit by warm and dim light, more yellowish than the red streetlights. A metal stairwell led down into a reasonably sized hall furnished with a leather sofa, an entire bar with two broad shelves of spirits, five large paintings, and a central round table equipped with two dozen small holes on the elevated wooden rim. Ilea couldn’t figure out if it was something related to sex, weapon making, or a game similar to pool. Perhaps all of it. Calm music played from an enchanted device set into the wall behind the bar.

Right when she stepped from the stairwell onto the shined parquet floor, a being appeared behind the polished bar counter. He looked male and human, the pale skin suggesting a vampire. Blue eyes and short but sleek black hair, perfectly straight. A black vest above a black shirt, his neck exposed, hands folded, he gave a welcoming nod to the two guests, his expression unreadable.

“Welcome to Glarkson’s,” he spoke, two pronounced fangs visible on his upper jaw. “Please, sit and have a drink.”

### ***[Blood Mage – lvl 312]***

Ilea glanced at Erik, then smiled and walked to one of the bar stools. She looked at it and decided to remain standing.

“Blood, alcohol, non-alcoholic?” the likely vampire asked.

“Is the blood prepared or mixed with something? Like a cocktail? Or pure?” she asked.

The corners of his mouth raised ever so slightly. Barely visible, even for her. The door above shut, and the lock clicked.

“It’s an age old question, Miss,” he said, Erik walking to one of the paintings. “If you are no vampire, perhaps blood may be upsetting to your stomach, though it depends of course on the species, and from what or whom the blood comes from, how it was stored, and yes, mixed, it can produce interesting variations.”

He looked at her, as if to question if she wanted to know more.

“There are those who claim that fresh blood on ice is unbeatable in taste, others preferring the body temperature of whatever being the blood came from, for there should be a reason why the body heats to such a degree. Are you a Vampire, Miss?”

Ilea thought it was abundantly clear that she wasn’t one, but he still asked, respectfully. “I’m not. I’m human,” she said.

“Then, I suppose it depends on how experimental you wish to try your drink. I suggest no more than eight percent blood content. I have local produce, and more exotic variations,” he said and paused.

“I’ll take your recommendation for someone inexperienced,” Ilea said and smiled.

He nodded ever so slightly and turned, smooth motions grabbing three different bottles from the shelves. A cocktail glass appeared in his hand before he poured the first liquid, then the second, and finally, the blood. Red seeped down into the two clear liquids below. “Mist of Marquez, not stirred but left standing for at least seventeen seconds.” He put away the bottles and folded his hands once more. A few seconds later, he gestured to the drink. “Enjoy.”

Ilea looked at the drink, the blood really looking like mist moving through the liquid. “I love the look of it,” she said and sipped from it. Herbal, and smokey, with a tinge of iron. A heavy and complex taste. She sipped again and smiled. “A little too smokey for me, but it’s nice.”

He gave a slight appreciative nod. “Zeriel Glarkson, Court of Healing. What may I do for you?”