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First two chapters

# A Vow of Blood and Sap

## Chapter One

Valia Martevi stared out the window at the drizzling rain. The colors of the mountains and trees outside, usually a vibrant green, seemed muted, like someone had smudged a wet sponge across the landscape. The colorful buildings of Avania's capital, Wyra, were equally dimmed.

Valia couldn't blame the rain, though. Even the colors inside her chamber were faded. Even since Valia's mother and sisters had been killed in the latest raid, nothing had been the same – not the bright tapestries in her chamber, nor the rich food the chefs prepared, nor even Valia's father.

"Princess?" One of Valia's chambermaids, a pretty girl of around thirteen, Kaleen, poked her head around the door. "The king is calling you for dinner."

"Tell him I don't feel well." Valia pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the window and turned her gaze away. At first, Valia had hoped she and her father could take solace in each other as the last two surviving members of the Martev family, but that dream had quickly evaporated. All the king wanted to do now was talk about Valia's mother and sisters. He asked Valia to repeat the story of their deaths again and again and analyzed how, if she'd acted just a little faster, they might have lived.

It was too painful.

"Okay, Princess." The chambermaid retreated, leaving Valia alone again. The wind from the door closing swept the flame away from Valia's candle and she sighed.

Usually, Valia would have pricked her finger and recited a seed spell, the kind of magic she'd been using since she was a child. The candle would have sputtered to life across the room without her getting to her feet.

Yet now, Valia's magic seemed to have deserted her, too. She couldn't count the number of times she'd tried to use a spell, even a simple one, since her family's deaths to no avail.

Valia got to her feet and pattered across the chamber. The flagstones were chilled beneath her feet, despite the fire in the hearth. As she walked, she passed the mirror on her wall, which showed a woman who looked more tired and worn than Valia had ever seen herself before. Her usually springy dark curls were flattened, her blue eyes were empty, and her cheeks, usually pink, were pale and drawn. Ignoring her reflection, Valia bent forward and struck a match, but it sputtered out with the breeze of the door opening again.

Valia whirled, slightly annoyed now, but it wasn't one of her chamber maids standing in the doorway this time. It was a man. A strange man.

Valia froze. The man looked ordinary enough – he was tall and muscular, with the black clothes and short hair of a hunter – but the edges of his frame seemed blurred somehow. *Is he using a disguise cantrip?*

“Princess?” The man's eyes widened and he stepped closer. Instinctively, Valia took a large step back, her hands raising to casting position even though she wasn't certain her powers could help her.

“Who are you?”

“We have to get you out of here.” The man took another step and reached for Valia's wrist. She pulled away, but not fast enough. His long, strong fingers closed around her, sending a shiver up Valia's arm. His hand was... warm? Solid?

“Let go of me.” Valia tried to yank his hand away, but he was far stronger than she was. “Who are you?”

“I'm here to save you.” He pulled her towards the door. “We have to hurry. You are in an illusion. I'll explain everything, but we have to get out of here.”

Valia tried to yank her hand away again. As she did so, she reached into her mind for the words to a spell that would knock this intruder back, sound an alarm for help, *anything*. A spell like that would need more than a drop of blood, but Valia was ready to pay the price. Yet the words wouldn't come to her.

“Stop fighting. I'll explain everything once we're safe, but they'll be here any moment.” The intruder sounded genuinely annoyed that Valia had a problem with him dragging her out of her bedchamber. Speaking of which, where were her guards? The man was right that they should be here by now.

“Princess, your father sent me.”

At that, Valia let out a very unladylike snort. “My father is down the hall right this moment. He didn't send you.” Anyway, King Aran had told her last night that he wished one of her sisters or her mother had survived instead of her. He didn't care about Valia anymore.

“Your father isn't down the hall. The man tugged more forcefully on her arm. “Can't you—” The door flew open. Behind it stood one of Valia's guards, a drawn sword in his hand. *Finally*.

“Princess, get back!”

Valia ducked as the guard lunged forward, sword extended. The man pivoted out of the way, but he had to release Valia's hand to do so. She tripped backwards and made it to the safety of her windowsill as the guard turned towards the man again. From the safety of her windowsill, Valia watched as the intruder grasped a long whip that had been secured to his back.

The intruder was good. He pivoted away from another blow, then struck with the grace and skill of someone who'd trained for more than a few years. The whip flicked through the air, reminding Valia of the prehensile tail of a wyvern, and clipped the guard on the hand. Wincing, the guard lost his

grip on his sword at it clattered to the ground. The intruder pressed his advantage, swinging the whip in another graceful arch, but the guard rolled away and the whip swung wide.

Undeterred, the man leapt back and swung the whip again in a whistling arc. The pointed tip connected with the guard's arm and blood spurted out, though in the candlelight, Valia could almost have sworn that the blood was dark blue, almost black. The guard stumbled back. The whip recoiled and the man tossed it effortlessly to his other hand as he drew a dagger from his boot. He lunged, the dagger slashing, and another bloom of dark blood rose through the guard's coat.

For a moment, Valia thought that the intruder might win. She pricked her thumb, ready to fight if she needed to, but before she could cast three more guards poured into the room. The intruder pivoted from the guard on the ground, exchanged the whip and dagger again, and struck at the second guard. Dark blood bloomed from a gash on the guard's face, which seemed to twist like melted candlewax. Valia stared, horrified, but it must have been a trick of the light, because he looked normal moments later.

As good as he was, though, the intruder was no match for three guards. As he fought two of them, his whip whistling and striking quickly and accurately, the third circled him and struck from behind. He knocked the man across the back of the head with the hilt of his sword, and the intruder slumped to the ground, unconscious.

"Who is that?" Valia asked. One of the guards raised his hooded head.

"This man murdered your father," he said. His eyes were like two dark pools, devoid of any warmth. "King Aran was asleep in his room when this man attacked. We can only assume he was trying to kill you next."

"My father?" Valia's heart began to race. Even though they hadn't been on good terms recently, her father was the only remaining member of her family. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be.

Yet, when Valia looked at the unconscious man again, she saw that his hands were covered in red blood. It seemed impossible she hadn't noticed that before, but the blood was definitely there now. Valia felt like she was missing something important. It reminded her of being a child and learning to cast, when the spells she'd needed had felt like slippery eels in the shadows of her mind, just out of reach.

"It's alright, princess." One of the guards crossed the room to her and laid his hand on her wrist. "We'll keep you safe. You're the last living member of the royal family, after all."

But Valia could hardly understand his words. She only felt his hand on her wrist, just where the intruder had touched her. Where the man's hand had been warm and solid, the guard's hand felt cold and insubstantial. There had been that fuzziness around the man's outline, too. Again, Valia felt like she was trying to grasp something that she couldn't quite catch.

And the blood. The man's hands hadn't been bloody when he'd taken her wrist – or there would be blood on her dress. Valia looked down and saw that her white nightgown was as pristine as it had been a few moments ago.

The guard's blood hadn't seemed right either. Yet when Valia looked at the spot where blood had dripped from the cut on his arm onto the floor, there was nothing there at all.

Something wasn't right.

Valia watched in silence as the guards hauled the man's immobile form out of the room and closed the door behind them. Then her mind returned from the mystery of the blood to what the guards had said. Was her father truly dead?

Her heart in her throat, Valia rushed down the hallway and up the stairs to King Aran's chambers. The further she ran from her room, the more her heart pounded and the colder it grew. Yet when she flung open the doors to her father's rooms, there was nothing there. She hesitated at the doorway as she looked around at the neatly made bed. Her father wasn't asleep in it, either living or not.

And hadn't her maid said that King Aran was waiting for her at dinner, anyway?

## Chapter Two

The next morning, Avania fell into mourning for its lost king. When she woke, Valia's handmaid, Kaleen, dressed her in black and escorted her to the traditional ceremonies to mark the death of a monarch. As they walked towards the gardens, where the death rights would be read, Valia's mind replayed the scenes from the night before over and over.

"Kaleen."

"Yes, princess?"

"I went to find my father last night." Valia bit her lip. "I went to his bedchamber, where the guards said he'd been murdered. But he wasn't there."

"Oh, princess." Kaleen laid a cold hand on Valia's shoulder and brought her to a stop. "This kind of thing is normal after a tragedy. Your mind plays tricks on you. Your father was murdered at the dinner table, not in his chambers."

"Oh." Valia shook her head slightly. "I... I must have misheard."

"Yes, princess." Kaleen nodded. "Now, focus on the ceremonies today. As the last living member of the royal family, it's your duty to be strong for the whole kingdom."

"Of course."

In the garden, a crowd of Avanian citizens had gathered. Kaleen led Valia to the front, where her father lay in a casket surrounded by flowers, as was the custom. Valia knew that she should be in mourning. She should be focused only on the tragedy of losing her father. But some part of her mind clung to the idea that something was off. Perhaps someone was lying to her, or perhaps she was just imagining things, but Valia needed to believe that her father might still be alive.

And if there was some chance that he was, the intruder seemed like the key. After all, things had started feeling strange after he'd arrived.

Even as Valia read her father's funeral rights, she kept thinking of the intruder. She needed to see him again. At the very least, she would ask him why he had killed King Aran. And at the most, perhaps he had a clue as to why everything had been so strange lately – a clue that would give her hope about her father.

"I want to see the man," she said, late on the night of the third day since her father had been murdered.

"Who?" Kaleen looked up from the brush she'd been running through Valia's hair.

"The man. The intruder."

"The man who murdered your father?"

Valia nodded. "Exactly. I need to see him again. I need to talk to him."

“Princess.” Kaleen rested a cold, insubstantial hand on Valia’s shoulder and met her eyes in the mirror with an expression of utmost sympathy. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Especially since, if you’d gone to dinner with your father, you might have been there to save him. If your magic was working, of course.”

Valia’s mouth fell open as the words hit her like a blow to the chest. Kaleen had always been kind to her, but now, at her weakest moment, she said this. “How can you say that to me?”

“Princess.” Kaleen smiled a little too wide. “I’m just trying to warn you. Don’t do anything you’ll regret. You can’t meet that murderer. You just can’t.”

But the handmaid’s words only made Valia more determined. They were another thing that didn’t add up – all Valia’s handmaids had always been friendly, even deferential, especially Kaleen, who had worked for her for several years.

So, that night, after Kaleen had stoked the fire and helped Valia into her nightgown, Valia got up again. She pulled on a jacket over her nightdress and slipped out of her room. The guard in the hallway held up a hand to stop her, though his movement was slow. He must be tired.

“Princess, what are you doing out of bed?”

“I need to see the intruder.” She straightened up to her full height. “Take me to him.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can. I’m the only surviving royal. You have to do what I said.”

“If only someone had lived other than you...” The guard shook his head. “I don’t think you’ll like what you find.”

“Take me to him. Now.”

But the guard just guided Valia back into her bedchamber with cold, insubstantial hands. “Sleep, princess.”

The more she was told no, the more Valia was determined to find the man. She waited until the candle in the hallway went out, then tried again. This time, the guard was asleep. She left her slippers in her bedchamber, ignoring the cold of the stone floor beneath her bare feet, and tiptoed down the hallway.

Strangely, as Valia slipped through the palace with the lightness of a ghost, every guard she came across was sleeping. That didn’t quite add up, either. The palace was always protected, especially at night, and she’d never known the guards to sleep on the job.

Although she’d rarely been there before, Valia knew where the man was being held. The dungeons beneath the palace were a bleak place, inhabited only by the kingdom’s worst criminals awaiting execution. Other criminals were generally exiled or hired by the crown for tasks no one else was willing to do.

Valia tiptoed down the stairs into the dungeons. The hallway was lit only by flickering candles in wall sconces. Chill radiated from the stone walls and seeped into Valia’s bones.

“Princess?”

The voice drew Valia’s attention to a cell in the corner and she hurried towards it. There the man was. He’d been sitting in the corner of the cell, but as she approached he leapt to his feet with the agility of a griffin.

“You.” Valia crossed her arms across her stomach and stepped hesitantly closer. She hadn’t imagined what she’d seen the night the intruder had come to her room. The man’s outline really was flickering. “Are you using a spell?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like you aren’t quite here.” Valia approached until she stood just outside the bars.

“I’m not using any spell.” The man ran a hand through his tousled hair and stepped closer. Though separated by the bars, they were close enough that Valia could feel the heat radiating from his body. She had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes, which were a steely gray. “You aren’t thinking clearly. The dji—”

“Did you kill my father?”

“No. Your father is alive, Princess.”

“I saw him. I saw him in his coffin.”

“No. You saw an illusion of him in a coffin.” The man ran a hand through his hair again until it stuck almost straight up. It was a striking juxtaposition to the rest of his hard, military appearance.

“An illusion?” Valia’s voice sounded unsure to her own ears. “What do you mean, an illusion? Did someone cast a spell on me?” Surely, the magic needed to operate a spell like this would be deadly to the caster. Valia couldn’t imagine why anyone would give their life just to make her believe something.

“What do you remember about the day your mother and sisters died?” The man asked. Valia bit her lip.

“We were... we were on a picnic.” She closed her eyes, forcing herself to go back to that terrible day. She’d been with her mother and sisters beside a river. The sun had been warm on her face and her oldest sister had sung along with the birds in the trees until they made fun of her. They’d picnicked on fresh flatbread and tomatoes from the palace garden. It had been an almost perfect day.

And then they’d heard it – the distinctively, high-pitched screech of a dragon. Valia’s training had kicked in and she’d leapt to her feet, going back-to-back with her sisters and her mother. She’d been ready, protective and defensive spells spilling over her lips as she pledged sacrifices to the flora.

Then – darkness. And she’d woken up in her bedchamber.

“I don’t remember much,” Valia admitted. “Just the dragons attacking. Then nothing.”

“That’s because you weren’t attacked by dragons.” The man leaned closer, the intensity in those steely eyes burning into Valia. “It was djinn. They killed your family, but it was you they wanted.”

“Djinn...” Valia shook her head. “No. It was dragons. It was definitely dragons.”

“No.” The man shook his head firmly. “It was djinn. This whole palace, your father dying, everything – it’s an illusion. The djinn feed on suffering. The greater the magic of their captive, the more sustenance they gain from their pain.”

“No.” Valia shook her head and took a step back. Something was off, but her mind rebelled against the idea of djinn. Djinn hadn’t been seen in Avania for over a century. It had been so long since anyone had encountered one that they were more legend than anything, like unicorns or ice walkers. “You’re lying. You did kill my father.”

She took another step back, but the man’s hand shot out between the bars and grabbed her wrist again. He pulled her closer, until she was pressed against the bars, flipped her hand, and ran one rough thumb over the soft skin at the inside of Valia’s wrist. She shivered as warmth bloomed from the spot he’d touched.

“Do you feel that?” The man asked, his voice low. Valia nodded.

“What are you doing?” She was trying for a righteously indignant tone – who was this man to touch a princess in such an intimate way, anyway? – but her voice came out softer than she’d intended.

“You need to wake up. You need to break this illusion so that we can get out of here. They’re going to execute me tomorrow – I don’t think that’s part of the illusion.”

The illusion. Valia closed her eyes and thought back on the last few days – no, the last few weeks. Months? She wasn’t sure how long had passed.

There was the fact that the man’s touch felt so different from everyone else’s and that he didn’t quite seem to fit into the scene around him. Plus, there was everything else – the people who’d been unnecessarily mean, including her father when he’d forced her to relive her mother and sisters’ deaths. There were all the things that hadn’t quite added up, from the faded colors to the muted sounds to the way everything felt just a little bit unreal. There was the blood that had appeared on his hands and the strange blood that had spilled from the guard’s arm. There was the fact that no one seemed able to agree on where her father had died.

“Break the illusion,” Valia whispered. “How?”

“How should I know?” The man released her wrist and ran a hand through his hair. Valia felt the absence of his warmth. “I’m a monster hunter, not a researcher. If I could just fight them, one at a time...”

“Focus.” Valia squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated. She reached for the magic that had always come so easily to her, but grasped only empty air.

“What are you doing?” the man asked. “Are you casting a spell?”

“My magic doesn’t work here.” Valia let out a puff of air and opened her eyes. The man was still very close. “At least I’m trying something. How exactly are you helping?”



“I’m saving you.”

“Great job you’re doing.” Valia gestured at the cell. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“Like I said, the king sent me. We had a bit of a... misunderstanding.” The man flashed a white-toothed smile that was so incongruous with the dark, dingy dungeon that Valia had to do a double-take. “He offered me a few options to repay my debts to the crown, and I choose the option of finding you. Which I’ve done. But it’ll be no use if I’m dead tomorrow.”

“Why would they actually kill you?” Valia asked. “You said that they draw energy from suffering. Shouldn’t they just make you suffer?”

“I suppose I’m not as powerful as you.” It was almost amusing to hear such a statement from a man who was so much stronger than her that he’d repeatedly been able to capture her by the wrist, but Valia knew what he meant. “My being here is making you suspicious, which isn’t worth it. They decided today to just execute me.”

“Maybe that’s the key.” Valia leaned against the bars again. “I can tell that you aren’t quite part of the illusion. As I said, I see... flickers.” She gestured to the edge of the man’s arm, which blurred slightly against the dungeon wall behind him.

“So you want me to, what, wave my arms around?” The man raised his eyebrows as he lifted his arms in a half-hearted wave. Valia rolled her eyes, annoyance blooming in her chest. Even the feeling of annoyance was welcome – it was so different from the numbness she’d felt over the last few weeks.

“No. Just be, I don’t know, real.”

“Be real.” The man sighed in frustration and his hand raised as if to muss his hair again. This time, Valia grabbed his hand and threaded her fingers between his. His hand was warm and his palm was rough – it was the hand of a hunter, a man who could wield a sword as easily as a bow. Playing along, the man skimmed his thumb over the side of her hand and the world around them flickered, as though it was illuminated by a single, weak candle.

“What does this place really look like?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I was already under the illusion when the djinn brought me here. But I think it’s cold, damp.”

“Why did the djinn let me get down here, anyway?” Valia mused. “They must know I was suspicious.”

“Djinn are warm-blooded creatures. Now, in the darkest, coldest part of the night, they’re at their weakest and slowest. This is going to be our only chance.”

His words sent a sliver of fear into Valia’s heart. Fear – and resignation. There was a good chance she’d be stuck here, trapped in a djinn’s illusion, until her magic and her life force were sapped, and her body gave up.

As the dark thoughts rolled through Valia's mind like storm clouds, the walls around her solidified. She could make out a rat scuttling across the floor and the cracks between the flagstones, details that had been fuzzy just a moment earlier.

"The illusion draws on our fears and sadness," Valia whispered. "You said that. When I worry, the illusion grows more real."

"In that case, I have one idea."

"Anything."

"You might not like it." The man's mouth twisted in a half smile. "Princess."

Valia felt another rush of annoyance. "Just do it."

"Fine." With that, the man reached between the bars with his free hand, fisted his fingers into Valia's hair, and pulled her close. Her cheeks pressed against the bars as he captured her mouth in a fierce kiss. His lips were as warm and real as his hand and his kiss sent warmth rushing through Valia's blood. Her eyes slipped close as she lost herself in the feeling of his skin on hers, in the steely taste of his mouth, in how his hand tugged lightly on her hair.

Then, just as quickly as the kiss had begun, the man released her. Valia stumbled backwards as the walls around her flickered, morphed, then seemed to melt away. Valia's breath caught. She and the man were standing in some kind of cave. The walls were damp and covered in a soft green moss. The floor was streaked with soot and something red that must have been blood.

The cage that held the man was real, though. The bars were thick and rough and, to Valia's horror, there was no door.

"Oh flora." Valia's knees were weak. She looked down to see that she was no longer in her pressed white nightgown and jacket, but in the same blue dress she'd worn to the river with her family, now dirty and thin. That explained why she'd never been able to get warm. "There's no door."

"Run." The man approached the bars and wrapped his broad hands around them. "I'm not going to be able to get out."

"What was all that about us escaping before your execution?"

"There's no door, Valia. I thought there would be a door." The man snorted as though this were all some big joke, but his steely eyes gave away a flicker of fear. "What do you propose?"

Valia looked around the cave, but they were alone. The djinn must have been somewhere else.

"With the illusion broken, my powers might work again."

"And you think you can, what, bend metal? That's a branch spell, at best. The sacrifice would be too big."

"I have to try." Valia sank to her knees on the hard stone floor and folded her hands together. Trying to steady her breath, she flipped through the spells she knew, looking for something that would

bend or break metal. One came to mind, an old spell she'd used once to make a small metal statue of an elephant for her youngest sister. On a much larger scale, it might just work...

"Princess." There was a warning in the man's voice. "The cave is getting lighter. It must be almost morning. They're going to come for you."

"It's going to be on you to get us out of here," Valia said, raising her eyes to the man's. "I'm going to have to sacrifice something big."

"Don't do it."

Valia ignored him. Her eyes slid shut again as she offered the flora her sight for the next day. Hopefully, it would be enough. Valia pricked her finger with the small silver ring on her index finger, then pressed the drop of blood against her force ring. The words for the spell tripped over her lips merrily, as though her magic had been aching to be used.

Valia opened her eyes as the spell rushed out of her, warm and bright, and the bars began to bend. The last thing Valia saw before everything went dark and exhaustion overtook her was the man stepping through the bent bars, his hands raised in a combat stance, as a dark, shadowy creature rushed into the cave, already bristling with magic.

"Get us out of here," Valia whispered. Then she tipped over, energy spent.