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THE SERPENT & THE WINGS OF NIGHT

A CROWNS OF NYAXIA NOVEL

The Nightborn Duet
BOOK ONE

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PROLOGUE

The king did not know then that his greatest love would also be his ruination—nor that either would come in the form of a tiny, helpless human child.

She was a lone flutter of life in an endless expanse of decay, the only living mortal for a hundred miles. The child was perhaps four, perhaps eight—it was hard to tell, because she was so, so small, even by human standards. Just a frail little creature with slick black hair that curtained wide gray eyes.

Somewhere, buried beneath charred beams and crumbled stone, the girl's family likely lay crushed beyond recognition. Or perhaps their ravaged bodies had been left out in the night, taken by predators just like the ones that stalked the child now, looking down at her with the interest that a hawk afforded a rabbit.

The humans, of course, were nothing more than that in this world—prey, pests, or often both.

The three winged men landed before her, smiling at their luck. Immediately, the little girl struggled against the debris that pinned her. She recognized what they were—recognized their pointed teeth and black, featherless wings, and perhaps she even recognized the uniforms they wore, the deep purple of the Hiaj Night-born King. Perhaps the men who had burned her home had worn uniforms just like these.

But she could not run. Her clothing was torn and hopelessly tangled in the ruins around her. She was too small to shift the stones.

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"Look at this. A little lamb." The men approached. As one of them reached out for her, she snarled at him, catching his fingertips between small, blunt teeth.

The soldier hissed and yanked his hand away, while his companions laughed.

"A lamb? More like a viper."

"Or a garden snake," another scoffed.

The bitten soldier rubbed his hand, wiping away a few droplets of crimson-black. He started for the child. "Doesn't matter," he grumbled. "They taste the same. And I don't know about you bastards, but I'm hungry after such a long night."

But then a shadow fell over them all.

The men stilled. They lowered heads in reverent bows. The cool air shivered, the darkness twisting around their faces and wings like a blade caressing a throat.

The Hiaj king did not utter a single word. He did not need to. The moment he made his presence known, all of his warriors fell into silence.

He was not the physically strongest vampire. He was not the fiercest warrior nor the wisest sage. But they said he was blessed by the goddess Nyaxia herself, and anyone who had ever met him would swear it to be true. Power seeped from his every pore, and death stained his every breath.

His soldiers said nothing as he stepped over the wreckage of the little home.

"The Rishan have been eradicated from the area," one of them chanced, after several long moments. "The rest of our men have traveled north and—"

The king lifted his hand, and the warrior went quiet.

He kneeled down before the little girl, who glowered at him. So young, he thought. Her life, a mere handful of years, was nothing compared to his centuries of existence. And yet, she drew upon such intense hatred as she glared at him, her eyes as bright and silver as the moon.

"She was found here?" the king asked.

"Yes, sire."

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"Is she the reason for the blood on your hand?"

A wave of poorly suppressed snickers from the other soldiers.

"Yes, sire." The answer was slightly bashful.

They thought he was mocking them. No. This had nothing to do with them.

He reached for the girl, and she snapped at him. He let her bite—did not move his hand, even as her teeth, tiny as they were, sank deep into his bony index finger.

She looked him straight in the eye, unblinking, and he returned that stare with mounting interest.

This was not the stare of a panicked child who didn't know what she was doing.

This was the stare of a creature who understood she was confronting death itself, and still chose to spit in its face.

"A little serpent," he murmured.

The men behind him laughed. He ignored them. It was not a joke.

"Are you all alone?" he said softly.

The girl did not answer. She could not speak with her teeth clamped around his flesh.

"If you release me," he said, "I will not hurt you."

The girl did no such thing, still glaring at him as black blood dribbled down her chin.

The corner of the king's lips curled. "Good. You should not trust me."

He pried his finger free, then carefully extracted the girl from the wreckage as she thrashed. Even in the throes of her violent resistance, she was utterly silent. And it was only once he picked her up—Goddess, she was so light, he could have held her with a single hand—that he realized how injured she was, her torn clothing soaked with blood. The sweet scent of it permeated his nostrils as he tucked her against his chest. She teetered on the precipice of unconsciousness, but she resisted it, her entire body tense.

"Rest, little serpent. No harm will come to you."

He stroked her cheek, and she tried to bite again, but a spark of magic trailed his fingertips. With that whisper of night came a dreamless sleep too heavy for even this vicious little thing to fight.

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"What do you want us to do with her?" one of the soldiers asked.

The king strode past them. "Nothing. I will take her."

A beat of silence. Though he could not see them, the king knew they were exchanging confused glances.

"Where?" one asked, at last.

"Home," the king replied.

The child slept, one hand clenched tight around the silk fabric of the king's shirt—fighting still, in this small way, even in sleep.

Home. He would take her home.

Because the king of the Hiaj vampires—conqueror of the House of Night, blessed of the goddess Nyaxia, and one of the most powerful men to have walked this realm or the next—saw a fragment of himself in this child. And there, right beneath the clenched fist of her palm, something warm and bittersweet stirred in his chest at the sight of her. Something more dangerous than hunger.

Hundreds of years later, historians and scholars would look back upon this moment. This decision that, one day, would topple an empire.

What a strange choice, they would whisper. *Why would he do this?*

Why, indeed.

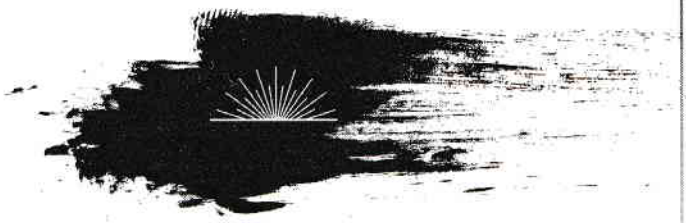
After all, vampires know better than anyone how important it is to protect their hearts.

And love, understand, is sharper than any stake.

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CHAPTER ONE

It started as practice. Just a little game, a little exercise. Something I needed to prove to myself. I wasn't sure when it had evolved into sport—my shameful, secret rebellion.

Some might find it stupid for me, a human, to hunt at night, when I was at a considerable disadvantage compared to my prey. But the night was when they acted, and so it was when I did, too.

I pressed to the wall, the dagger clenched tight in my hands. The night was warm, the kind when the sun's heat clung to the steamy humidity of the air long after sunset. The smell hung in a thick, rotten cloud—rancid food from the trash in the alleys, yes, but also decaying meat and sour blood. The vampires didn't care to clean up after themselves here, in the human districts of the House of Night.

Humans were supposed to be safe here, within the walls of the kingdom—citizens, if inferior ones, weaker than the Nightborn in every way. But that second truth too often rendered the first irrelevant.

The man was a Hiaj, his wings tucked in close to his back. Apparently he wasn't much of a magic user, because he didn't spirit them away for easier hunting. Or maybe he just enjoyed the effect that they had on his prey. Some of them were showy like that. They liked to be feared.

From the rooftop, I watched the man stalk his target—a little boy, perhaps ten, though small from obvious malnourishment. The boy was in the fenced-in dirt yard of a clay house, bouncing a ball

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against the dust over and over again, oblivious to death creeping up on him.

It was so, so stupid for this boy to be out at night alone. But then again, I knew better than anyone how growing up in constant danger could wear upon a person. Maybe this family had kept their children inside after dark every single day of the last ten years. It only took one lapse, one distracted mother who forgot to call him back, one grumpy child who wasn't ready to come inside for dinner. Just one night in a lifetime.

It happened so often.

But it wouldn't happen tonight.

When the vampire moved, so did I.

I dropped from the rooftop down to the cobblestones. I was quiet, but vampire hearing was impeccable. The man turned, greeting me with icy eyes and a curled lip that revealed a glint of sharp ivory.

Did he recognize me? Sometimes they did. I didn't give this one the chance.

It was practically routine, by now. A system I'd honed to perfection on hundreds of nights just like this one.

Wings first. Two slashes, one through each—enough to keep him from flying. With Hiaj vampires, that was easy. The membranous skin was delicate as paper. Sometimes I would catch Rishan vampires instead, and that was a bit more challenging—their feathered wings were harder to puncture—but I had refined the technique. This step was important, and that was why it came first. I needed to keep them here on the ground with me. I made the mistake of skipping it once, and almost didn't survive to learn the lesson.

I couldn't be stronger than them, so I had to be more precise. No time for mistakes.

The vampire let out a sound between a gasp of pain and a snarl of rage. My heartbeat had become a rapid thrum, blood close to the surface of my skin. I wondered if he smelled it. I had spent my entire life trying to hide the flush of my blood, but right now, I was glad for it. It made them stupid. This fool wasn't even armed, yet he still threw himself at me without a care in the world.

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I loved it—really, truly loved it—when they underestimated me.

A blade to the side, beneath the ribs. Another to the throat. Not enough to kill. Enough to make him falter.

I pushed him against the wall, one blade skewering him to keep him still. I'd coated the edges with Dhaivinth—a fast-acting paralytic, potent though short-lived. It would only work for a few minutes, but that was all I needed.

He only managed a couple scratches across my cheek with razor-tipped fingers before his movements began to weaken. And just when I saw his eyes blink fast, like he was trying to wake himself up, I struck.

You have to push hard to make it through the breastbone.

I did—hard enough to crack the bone, to open the passage to his heart. Vampires were stronger than me in every way—their bodies more muscular, movements swifter, teeth sharper.

But their hearts were just as soft.

The moment my blade punctured their chests, I always heard my father's voice.

Don't look away, little serpent, Vincent whispered in my ear.

I didn't. Not then, and not now. Because I knew what I'd see there in the darkness. I knew I'd see the beautiful face of a boy I once loved very much, and exactly how it looked when my knife slid into his chest.

Vampires were the children of the goddess of death. So it was a bit funny to me that they feared it just as much as humans did. I watched them every time, and I saw the terror settle over their faces as they realized it was coming for them.

At least in this, we were the same. At least we're all fucking cowards in the end.

Vampire blood was darker than human blood. Almost black, as if darkened layer over layer by human and animal blood consumed over the course of centuries. Once I let the vampire fall, I was covered in it.

I stepped back from the body. It was only then that I saw the family staring at me—I was quiet, but not quiet enough to avoid notice when I was practically on their doorstep. The boy was now

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clutched tight in his mother's arms. A man was with them, too, and another child, a younger girl. They were thin, their clothes plain and threadbare, stained from long days of work. All four of them stood in the doorway, eyes locked on me.

I froze, like a stag caught by a tracker in the forest.

Strange, that it was these starving humans, not the vampire, that turned me from the hunter to the hunted.

Maybe it was because when I was with vampires, I knew what I was. But when I looked at these humans, the lines grew blurry and ill-defined—like I was observing a twisted reflection of myself.

Or maybe I was the reflection.

They were like me. And yet, I could find nothing in common between us. I imagined that if I opened my mouth to speak to them, we wouldn't even understand the noises each other made. They looked like animals to me.

The ugly truth was that perhaps a part of me was disgusted by them, the same way I was disgusted by all my own human flaws. And yet another part of me—maybe the part that remembered I had once lived in a house just like this one—longed to venture closer.

I wouldn't, of course.

No, I wasn't a vampire. That much was abundantly clear, every second of every day. But I wasn't one of them, either.

A shock of cold struck my cheek. I touched it and my fingers came back wet. Rain.

The drops disrupted our breathless silence. The woman stepped forward, as if to say something, but I had already slipped back into the shadows.



I COULDN'T RESIST the detour. Normally, I would have scaled the castle directly to my room in the western towers. Instead, I climbed east, jumping the garden walls and heading to the servants' quarters. I slipped in through the window, which overlooked an overgrown bush of indigo blue blossoms that flushed silver in the

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moonlight. As soon as my feet touched the floor, I cursed, nearly toppling over as what felt like a pile of liquid fabric slid beneath my boots over the smooth wood.

The laugh sounded like the caw of a crow, devolving quickly into a cacophony of coughs.

"Silk," the old woman croaked. "The best trap for little burglars."

"This place is a fucking disaster, Ilana."

"Bah." She rounded the corner and peered at me through narrowed eyes, drawing in a deep, rattling inhale of her cigar and letting the smoke out through her nose. She was dressed in cascading chiffon dyed in waves of color. Black-and-gray-streaked hair piled atop her head with admirable volume. Gold pendants dangled from each earlobe, and her wrinkled eyes were painted with shades of gray-blue and a generous lining of kohl.

Her apartment was just as colorful and chaotic as she was—clothing and jewels and bright paint strewn about every surface. I had come in through her living room window, which I now pulled closed against the rain. The place was tiny, but far nicer than the clay, crumbling slums in the human district.

She looked me up and down, rubbing her neck. "I take no criticisms from a drowned rat like you."

I glanced down at myself and blanched. Only now, in the warm lantern light, did I realize what a mess I was.

"You'd never guess you were pretty under all of that, Oraya," she went on. "Dead set on making yourself look as unappealing as possible. Which reminds me! I have something for you. Here."

With knobby, arthritic hands, she fished through a crumpled pile beside her, then tossed a fistful of fabric across the room to me. "Catch."

I caught it in my fist, then unfolded it. The band of silk was nearly as long as I was tall, and a stunning deep violet with edges embroidered in gold.

"Made me think of you." Ilana leaned against the doorframe and took another puff of her cigar.

I didn't ask where she had gotten something like this. Age had not made her fingers any less deft—or sticky.

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"You should keep it. I don't wear this sort of stuff. You know that."

Day to day, I wore only black, plain clothing that attracted little attention and allowed me free range of movement. I didn't ever wear anything bright (as it would draw unwanted eyes), flowing (as it would allow someone to grab me), or restrictive (as it would impede my ability to fight, or flee). I wore my leathers most of the time, even in the oppressive heat of the summer. They were protective and unobtrusive.

Sure, maybe I admired pretty things just as much as any other. But I was surrounded by predators. Vanity came second to survival.

Ilana scoffed. "I know that you love the fineries too, rat. Even if you're too afraid to wear 'em. Damned shame. Youth is wasted on the young. Beauty, too. It's a good color for you. Dance around naked in your bedroom with it for all I care."

My brow quirked as I eyed her hoard of colors. "Is that what you do with yours?"

She winked. "All that and more. And don't pretend you don't, too."

Ilana had never been to my room, and yet she knew me well enough to know that I did, indeed, have a single drawer stuffed with little, colorful trinkets that I had collected over the years. Things that were too pointlessly ostentatious to wear in this life, but that, perhaps, I could dream of wearing in another.

No matter how much I tried to explain it to her, Ilana didn't understand my caution. She'd made it clear many times over that she was done—*"Done!"* she proclaimed—with caution.

I honestly didn't know how the old bat had survived this long, but I was grateful for it. The humans I had seen in the slums this morning were nothing like me, and the vampires that surrounded me even less so. Only Ilana lingered somewhere in between, just like I did.

Albeit for very different reasons.

I had been raised in this world, but Ilana had joined it of her

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own volition ten years ago. As a young teenager, I had been fascinated by her. I had met few other humans. I didn't realize then that Ilana was, even among humans, somewhat . . . unique.

Ilana touched her neck again. I realized the cloth clenched in her fist wasn't red, or at least, it hadn't started that way. I stepped closer and noticed the wounds on her throat—three sets of two. Then the bandage on her wrist, which covered up Nyaxia knew how many more.

My face must have changed, because she hacked another laugh.

"A big dinner tonight," she said. "I was paid well for it. Paid, to have handsome men suck on my neck all night. My younger self would be thrilled."

I couldn't bring myself to even crack a smile.

Yes, I had no idea how Ilana had survived this long. Most voluntary human blood vendors—of which there were few—were killed within a year of starting work. I knew too well exactly how little self-control vampires had when hunger was involved.

Some things Ilana and I would never agree on.

"I won't be around for a while," I said, changing the subject. "I just wanted to let you know, so you don't worry."

Ilana's face went still. Even in the dim light, I saw her pale two shades. "That bastard. You're doing it."

I didn't want to have this conversation, even though I knew it was coming.

"You should think about leaving the inner city temporarily," I went on. "Going to the districts. I know you hate it, but at least there—"

"Fuck that."

"It's the Kejari, Ilana. It's not safe here for you. For any human outside the protected district."

"'*Protected district.*' Those *slums*. There's a reason why I left. They reek of misery." Her nose wrinkled. "Misery and piss."

"It's safe."

I didn't miss the irony of saying this when I was covered in blood after returning from that place.