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Opening Extract from...

Blood Feud

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Chapter 1

Logan

It had been a hell of a week.

Cleaning up after a psychotic vampire queen wasn't easy at the best of times. It was much worse when your mother was the one who'd dispatched the old queen, you and your brothers were suddenly princes, and your baby sister was being stalked by a centuries-old homicidal vampire.

Like I said, hell of a week.

At least we'd all survived, even Aunt Hyacinth, whose face was now so scarred she wouldn't lift the veil off her Victorian hat or leave her room. Helios-Ra vampire hunters did that to her—right before one of their new agents started dating my baby sister.

That's just weird.

Still, he saved her life less than two weeks ago, so we're willing to overlook a little making out.

As long as I never, ever have to know about it.

I mean, sure, Kieran's a good enough guy—but Solange is my only sister. Enough said.

"Quit brooding, Lord Byron." My brother Quinn smirked at me, shoving me with his shoulder. "There are no girls here to impress with your Prince of Darkness routine."

"As if." Quinn was the one who used the whole vampire mystique thing to get the girls. I just happened to like dressing in old frock coats and pirate shirts; that some girls liked it was incidental. Well, mostly.

"Any word yet on the Hound princess?" Quinn asked.

"Nothing yet." Dad had invited the reclusive Hound tribe to the table for negotiations now that Mom was the new vampire queen, ruler of all the disparate tribes. Sounds melodramatic and medieval, but that's a vampire for you.

"Think she's cute?"

"Aren't they all?"

Quinn grinned. "Mostly."

The royal caves behind us had been left in shambles after the battle that took out Lady Natasha. The dust of staked vampires was swept up and the shards of broken mirrors carted out in boxfuls. There were still at least a dozen left hanging on the wall. Lady Natasha had really liked looking at herself. Some of the ravens carved on her whitethorn throne were chipped, some decapitated. Everyone was busy with some task or another, cleaning, arranging, or just staring at my mother as she sat at the end of the hall scowling at my father, who wouldn't stop talking about peace treaties.

The tension vibrating the air was harder to clean out than the ashes of our dead.

Everyone was watching their backs: the old royalists loyal to Lady Natasha, the ones loyal to the House of Drake and my mother, and the ones caught in between. Lucy would have been running around with white sage chanting some Vedic mantra to cleanse our auras if she were here. But she was forbidden to come to the caves until the worst of the politics had been sorted out. She shouldn't have been staying with us either, but her parents' drive home was interrupted by their ancient van and some ancient part that fell out on the highway. They were stuck in a small town and Lucy was stuck with us. Humans were fragile at the best of times, and Solange's best friend didn't have the basic self-preservation of a gnat. If there was trouble, she always jumped right in feetfirst. If she hadn't started it in the first place, of course.

Between her and my sister, we had our hands full. Vampire politics paled in comparison.

"Now *she's* cute," Quinn murmured appreciatively as one of the courtiers dragged a box of what looked like the remains of a broken table. "I'll just go help her out. It's the princely thing to do."

"You're an ass," I told him fondly.

"You're just jealous because I'm so much prettier," he tossed out over his shoulder as he left to charm yet another girl.

He never reached her.

She straightened suddenly, stepping onto a footstool that gave her a good view of the length of the hall, and my parents in particular. She pulled a crossbow loaded with three wickedly pointed stakes out of the bag.

Not a broken table after all.

And no matter how prepared you are, or how careful, there's always an opening somewhere.

Mom taught us that.

The girl aimed and squeezed the trigger, barely making a sound. We might not even have noticed her at all if we hadn't been actively watching her. The stakes hissed out of the crossbow, hurtling through the air with deadly accuracy.

Or what would have been deadly accuracy had Quinn not been close enough to grab her leg and yank her off the stool.

The shot went wide, but not quite wide enough. She tumbled to the hand-embroidered rug, Quinn's fangs extending so fast they caught the lamplight. My own stung my gums, my lips lifting off the rest of my teeth.

I didn't have time to reach her or my parents.

I only had time enough to whip the dagger at my belt out into the trajectory of the stakes. It caught one and split it into two, the pieces biting into a huge wooden cupboard, the knife into the back of a chair. My nostrils burned.

Poison.

Everyone else seemed to be moving in slow motion. Guards turned, eyes widening, fangs flashing. Swords gleamed, lace ribbons fluttered, and boots clomped onto the wall as the best of them flipped out of the way of the other two stakes. A wire birdcage toppled, spilling the stubs of half-burned candles. Beeswax joined the sharp, sweet smell of the poison. One of the stakes caught a thin pale courtier in the shoulder when he failed to lean backward quickly enough. He yelled and even that sound seemed

too slow and stretched out until it distorted. His blood splattered onto the tiles laid into the ground between the edges of the carpets.

The third stake went unerringly on its way, straight toward my mother's heart.

The girl smiled once, even as she fought to free herself from Quinn's grim hold.

Which just went to show how little she knew my mother.

My father whirled to put himself between her and the stake, as two of my other brothers, Marcus and Connor, somersaulted to his side to form a wider barrier.

Even as my mother leaped into the air and tumbled over their heads, refusing to use a shield made of her husband and sons.

She landed a little to the left and stuck out her arm, safely encased in a leather bracer, and knocked the stake right out of the air. It hit a tapestry and fell into a basket, looking innocuous. Guards closed in. There was so much snarling, the royal caves sounded more like cougar enclosures at the zoo. Mom fought her way free of her overeager guards as the girl was hauled away from Quinn.

"I want her alive!" Dad was shouting.

Too late.

The assassin-girl was clearly prepared, and knew enough not to be captured and questioned by the enemy. The inside of her vest was rigged with a slender hidden stake. She pulled a small piece of rope sewn into the armhole of her vest and smiled. There was a very small *thwack* sound and then she crumbled into ashes. Her clothes fell into a pile.

Dad swore, very loudly and very creatively.

Mom's fists clenched. "Quinn, Logan. With me. *Now*." She shot a glare at Marcus and Connor. "You too."

Mom did *not* like being saved by her children.

We followed her into a small private antechamber. Adrenaline was still coursing through me. Quinn's jaw was clenched so tightly he looked like a marble statue, pale and cold. I knew just how he felt.

We had a short reprieve as Dad cupped Mom's face and ran his hands down her neck, over her shoulders. "Helena, are you hurt?"

She waved that away. "I'm fine." She smiled briefly, then turned hard eyes on us. Each of us took a healthy step backward and not a single one of us felt any less manly for the wise retreat.

"I distinctly remember," she said softly, her long black braid swinging behind her as she crossed her arms over her chest, "after the events of last week, ordering you never to step between me and a weapon again."

"Mom," Quinn ground out. "Give me a break."

Her glare could have sizzled steak. "I will not have my sons killed by some third-rate assassin."

"And we won't have our mother killed by one either," I added.

She closed her eyes briefly. She looked less like an ancient Fury, pale as fire and just as angry, when she opened them again.

"Thank you, boys," she said finally. "I'm very proud of you. Don't ever do that again." She leaned against Dad. "You either, Liam."

"Shut up, dear," he said affectionately, kissing the top of her head. He looked at the guard standing in the doorway, under the string of small glass lanterns. The candles flickered. "Well?"

I recognized Sophie when she stepped forward. She had a mass of curly brown hair and scars on the side of her face from when she'd been human. No one knew how she'd gotten them. She bowed sharply. "The girl belonged to Montmartre. His insignia was stitched on the inside of her vest."

"And?"

"And that's all we know."

"That's not nearly enough," Helena snapped.

"I agree, Your Highness."

Helena sighed. "Don't 'Your Highness' me."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Wait." Quinn frowned. "She had a tattoo."

"You're sure?" Mom asked. "Where?"

"Under her collarbone, above her left breast." To his credit, he didn't blush. Exactly.

Mom's eyes narrowed on his face. "You were looking down her shirt?"

Quinn swallowed. "No, ma'am."

"Mmm-hmmm. What was the tattoo?"

"A red rose with three daggers or stakes through it. I didn't get a very good look."

Dad frowned. "I don't know that insignia. I wonder if it's new?" He glanced at Sophie. "Find out. And double the patrols, and set another guard on my wife."

Sophie bowed and left the antechamber just as Mom started to bristle.

"Liam Drake, I can look after myself."

"Helena Drake, I love you, take the extra guard."

They glowered at each other. I knew Dad would win. Mom was vicious when cornered, but Dad had a way about him, like a snake hypnotizing his supper. His glower softened. "Please, love."

Her fangs lengthened with her annoyance. "Don't do that," she muttered, but we knew Dad would get his way. "Only until the coronation," she said finally, firmly.

Dad nodded. "Deal." He'd find some other argument come the coronation. The walkie-talkie on his belt burbled some garbled sentence. He pressed the button. "Repeat."

"You asked us to let you know when it was midnight."

Dad looked at his watch. "Right," he said to the rest of us. "The Hound delegation should be here any minute. Logan, you'll go meet them. If what we know about this Isabeau is true, she was turned just after the French Revolution. You'll be more familiar to her in that frock coat."

"Okay." I ignored my brothers' smirks out of long habit. They were strictly the jeans and T-shirt types. I couldn't help it if they had no style.

"The mountainside guards know to expect them, but no one else does," he added. "We didn't want the drama."

"All we get is drama." I rolled my eyes, leaving to make my way down to the main cave entrance. Dad's walkie-talkie warbled again. His voice went grim when he called out to me.

"Logan?"

"Yeah?"

"Run."