

THE
WITCH
AND THE
VAMPIRE



THE
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AND THE
VAMPIRE
A NOVEL

FRANCESCA
FLORES

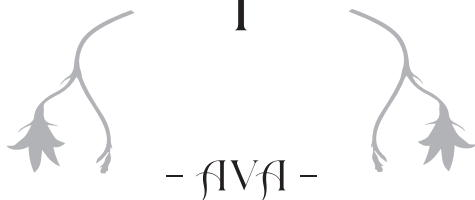


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CHAPTER

1



Deep in the woods, darkness treads.

Her name is Casiopea, the queen of the undead with blood on their lips.

She leads them to prey, humans and witches who've lost their way.

She draws them to her waiting arms with anguished cries that never end.

*Their blood spills, the shadows encroach,
but the thirst never dies.*

—JOURNAL, AUTHOR UNKNOWN

I slam the journal shut when a floorboard creaks downstairs, and listen closely for any more movement. Zenos must be awake now, which means he and my mother will come to my attic soon—and I'll have to play the part of the perfect, obedient daughter.

Standing on my bed, I push aside a loose tile on the ceiling. Dust falls onto my face as I place the book up there—a journal that tells of the vampire queen, Casiopea, and the history of vampires in Arborren. My fingers brush against my other hidden

trinkets: a doll my mother gave me back when we loved each other, a ruby necklace she brought me from one of her trips. A woven scarf gifted to me by my old school friend Kaye.

If I manage to escape today, I'll have to leave most of it behind. I squeeze the doll's arm once, then replace the ceiling tile and jump down from my bed.

Soon, my mother will come up here to take from me again. She can say she's keeping me here to protect me all she wants, but I know the truth: she needs me more than I need her.

Grabbing a broom from the corner, I sweep the floor, and look out of my western window every few seconds. The silver bars crossing it block some of my view, but I can still see the forest stretching away to the horizon. My non-beating heart swells at the sight of it: the towering oak, the golden-green leaves lit by dawn, and the pale, shimmering barrier that wraps all around it. I imagine the smoke-sweet scent of those trees, and a deep urge to go to them tugs at me.

After sweeping the room, I straighten the stacks of scarves and gloves I've knitted to pass the time. I ignore the throbbing sensation in the back of my throat that tells me I need blood soon. My hair, which is long enough to nearly touch the floor on its own, gets caught on loose nails and stacks of books as I move around the room. But I'm so used to it, it doesn't bother me. I simply tug it free, suppressing a smile as strands of it fall to the floor. I'm not allowed to cut it, but I can still get rid of some of it like this.

Then I wipe the dust off the books on literature and mathematics that my mother gives me, the ones I never touch because the journal tells me all I need to know: that there's a whole world of vampires waiting in the trees.

A faintly shimmering barrier around the forest keeps hu-

mans safe by locking the vampires in, but the forest is also a vast territory where vampires roam free, ruled by a queen named Casiopea. She became their leader after they were locked inside, and shaped the forest into a haven where they are safe from the mortals who seek to destroy them. That barrier is the only thing keeping both the humans and the vampires safe.

At night, when all is quiet, whispers call me from the woods.

I've heard them for two years now. Thousands of voices coming from the direction of the trees. I can never make out what they say, but I remember the scary stories passed among children at school—that if you strayed too close to the trees and a vampire called out to you, it was already too late; your blood was theirs for the taking.

The whispers I hear at night must be the vampires calling me. They *have* to be.

I'll escape and join them. I'll use the information in the journal to reach the vampire queen and her territory. I'll follow the whispers.

The sounds of my mother collecting documents, writing letters, and packing clothes into a trunk for her trip reach me through the thin floors below. Like me, she never sleeps.

Footsteps pounding on the staircase below send a jolt of panic through me. The wooden stairs are weak and weathered, each step making them groan. It must be Zenos. My mother would never make that much noise. I force myself to remember my plan.

Go in front of the armoire, Ava, and open it a crack.

I dart to the armoire that stands between the door and my vanity table, nearly tripping over my hair as I do. Then I open the armoire just wide enough to fit my hand through.

The door opens and my stepfather shuffles inside, with his

ratlike nose and mouth, steel-gray eyes, salt-and-pepper hair, and rail-thin body that is much stronger than it looks. In one hand he carries a candle, the tiny flickering flame adding hollows under his eyes. In his other hand, a small clay cup.

“You waited by the door?” he asks me with a raised eyebrow. I stiffen as he closes the door behind him. “Greedy little thing.”

His words sound like an insult, but I know he’s just trying to rile me. He holds out the cup, which is filled to the brim with a deep red liquid that makes my mouth water and clouds my thoughts. A familiar, dull ache suffuses my gums as my fangs itch to sink into something. I’ve never liked the coppery smell of blood; something about the scent feels so sinister. Reminds me I’m actually drinking human blood.

I fight down a shudder, and remind myself I’ve never killed or hurt anyone. I was made into a vampire against my will. The fact that I have to drink this to survive is not my fault.

I shove aside the whispers of doubt and guilt, then reach out to take the cup from Zenos. He grips it for a second longer than he needs to, tugging on it at the same time I do. My eyes widen. He wouldn’t keep my blood from me, would he? Is this a new experiment of his?

“No need to hide your thirst,” he says with a taunting chuckle. His dirty fingers brush against mine as he relinquishes the cup. “It’s fascinating how the blood fills your veins and makes your body function like a well-tuned machine.”

Ignoring him, I drink from the cup. Once the blood touches my tongue, I savor it, how the mere taste wakes up every sense inside me, lights me up as if I’ve been wallowing in a dark cave since the last time I drank. The world becomes brighter; I feel every dust mote as it falls on my skin, see every ant that crawls on the floorboards of this attic, hear my mother scribbling

something with a pen two floors down from here. Confidence floods every part of me, until escaping sounds not only possible, but easy.

I feel alive again.

Maybe drinking blood makes me evil in the eyes of humans, but it feels so good that for a moment I stop caring.

Zenos takes in every small change of my expression with a delighted glint in his gaze. I always avoid looking in mirrors when I drink, but I know what I look like now: veins showing under my eyes, pupils dilated, fangs growing past my lips. It will fade soon. It doesn't matter if Zenos stares now; as long as I'm smart and follow through with my plan, I'll get out of here and he'll never be able to look at me again.

"Is Mother almost ready for her trip?" I ask, keeping a friendly tone to my voice so he won't suspect me of anything.

"So eager for Eugenia to be gone?" Zenos asks, stepping toward me and the armoire. I try my hardest not to look at it and give myself away. "Once she leaves, we'll both be bored all day. I'll go into town, of course, but I know you won't have much to do. I'll invite you downstairs on occasion and you can sit with me there, all right?"

"That sounds wonderful," I say, forcing a smile onto my face. I'd rather stay locked in this attic for another two years than spend any time with him alone.

He turns to leave, but pauses at the door to say, "See you in four hours."

When he leaves, I only have seconds. I reach inside the armoire, under the thick paper I've painted to match the wooden bottom, and retrieve a length of cloth and a small hairpin. I dart to the door and catch it by the silver knob right before it closes. Gritting my teeth from the pain that shoots through me—silver

is one of the only ways to debilitate a vampire—I shove the cloth inside the lock, then tap the hairpin on the doorknob to mimic the sound of the door locking. My mother always makes sure the door is locked before descending, but Zenos is far too confident in his power over me to bother checking.

I let the door close with the wadded cloth preventing it from locking. Once Zenos's footsteps have completely cleared the creaking stairs, I turn the knob. The door opens without a sound. Relief floods through me; my plan might work after all.

After I return the cloth and hairpin to the fake bottom of my armoire, I lock the door so my mother won't notice anything amiss.

There's nothing to be done about the searing pain on my hand, but my adrenaline is rushing so much I hardly care. My test went perfectly. All I need to do now is wait for my mother to leave.

A moment later it's her light footsteps on the stairs. I rush to the vanity and pick up a hairbrush before she enters, forcing myself to look calm. Through the mirror, I smile at her as she opens the door and walks toward me.

"Good morning, sweet girl." Her arms wrap around my shoulders and squeeze for a moment. Her touch feels like ants crawling on my skin—like she's searching for something.

We look so alike. Heart-shaped faces, tawny skin, and long, straight black hair parted down the middle, though hers stops at her elbows and mine trails to my ankles. Before I became a vampire, I had warm undertones to my skin, bright and full of life. Now it's dull and no pinch to my cheeks can bring any rosininess to them. My lips are bloodless as a corpse's. My mother,

though . . . she's mastered it. Crushed berries to bring a tint to her lips and cheeks, and after the hours she spent practicing breathing patterns in front of a mirror, no one would guess her lungs no longer function. Even now, I see the steady rise and fall of her chest. Since she's leaving soon, she practices even in front of me. Her deep brown eyes soften as they meet mine in our reflections.

"I'll pick something beautiful for you to wear," she says.

I nod and begin brushing my hair, a task that usually takes a good half hour to complete. My mother starts rummaging through the armoire, and I almost drop the brush. If she finds the false floor . . .

But all she does is draw out a bell-sleeved white blouse with a high black collar and a long, pleated black skirt to match. She hands the clothes to me, and then removes one of her own rings to give me: a black one with a brilliant ruby at the center. The letter A, for my name, is engraved on the surface of the ruby.

"This will look lovely on you," she says, beaming at me as she passes me the ring.

My mouth twitches slightly. "No one will see me except you and Zenos."

"Yes, but . . ." Her eyes darken for a moment, but then she shakes her head. "Do it for me, please. Wearing neutral colors like this makes your skin look warm and alive. Go ahead, put it on."

I bite back my complaints and take the clothes from her. As I dress, she walks around the room humming to herself. Like Zenos, she would seem normal to anyone who doesn't know her. But every morning, when she walks around my attic, it's like

watching a lion stalk a herd of deer and trying to guess when it will pounce.

She peers closely at the silver bars on my windows to check for loose nails. She lifts up the blankets on the bed, searches through the pillowcases for any weapons or tools I might have pilfered to help me break out of here. Then she goes to the stack of books in the corner and lifts a few, flipping through the pages.

Her eyes cut over to me sharply, but I look out the window before she can catch me staring.

Dawn light graces the town of Arborren, which I can see clearly from the fourth floor of our towering, narrow house. Burnt-orange tile roofs spread away over soft yellow and white buildings, the Clarity Council Hall and the Silver District of miners' homes, the market I went to every day after school because I didn't want to go home, the alleys I walked through with my friends Kaye and Tristan. Arborren is a large town in the east of Erlanis Empire. Humans and witches are mortals who can only see a few blocks ahead, only notice the bright colors and the morning songs of birds.

But with my vision, stronger than theirs, I see the stains on those pretty walls, the soot on the rooftops from the last time the townspeople set up a pyre for a vampire, and my stomach twists at the thought. They would never accept me here. There's only one place I can belong: the vampire haven in the forest with the queen, Casiopea.

And once I find her, I'll warn her about my mother and what she intends to do.

Finally finishing her search, my mother makes a satisfied *hmm* noise in the back of her throat. I try not to look too relieved.

"You look beautiful," she says once I've put on the blouse,

the skirt, and the ring, but my hair still needs brushing. "Finish your hair after I leave. It looks so beautiful when it's all brushed, just like when you were a little girl."

I hold back a grimace and the complaint at the tip of my tongue. I've asked to cut my hair a thousand times, but she insists on keeping it this length, and I don't have any way to cut it myself. I often wore it this long as a child, but I still cut it frequently to make it manageable. Now I can barely do anything with it, but my mother likes it this long to remind her of the child I used to be. Before I became a vampire.

I wonder if making me look presentable, innocent, and sweet helps her feel better about locking me inside this tower in the first place.

She steps forward to smooth out some wrinkles on my sleeves. She wraps her arms around me in a hug, and a lump builds in my throat. I hold on for a second longer than I normally would. I need to escape, but . . . this is still the only home I've ever known.

She pulls away from the embrace, then brushes my hair behind my ears with a contemplative expression. "I'll be gone for a week. Zenos will look out for you."

"I don't want Zenos to look out for me," I mutter under my breath. "I don't like him."

"He's just a human, Ava. He can't hurt you."

I gulp, pushing back my questions about their marriage once more. She met him three years ago, when I was fifteen and my mother was newly a vampire herself, and they married within a month. He keeps her secrets, and she lets him stick around—probably because he's the emperor's nephew and therefore a good connection to have. But she's never believed me when I tell her about Zenos's experiments and games that happen when she's out of town.

She places her hands on my shoulders, and I tense, knowing what's coming next. It starts with a burning sensation in my chest. Sweat breaks out on my forehead. I squeeze my hands into fists and bite my lower lip.

"Relax," my mother says in a hard voice. "You'll be fine."

Forcing my shoulders to loosen up, I let her do what she needs to do every week. She closes her eyes as a glowing light spreads outward from my chest, to my shoulders, and to her hands. Already, I feel weaker, like I'll collapse if she doesn't maintain her grip on me. I close my eyes and wait for it to pass.

Every witch's powers grow strongest once she turns fifteen; those are the hardest years of training for witches in Arborren, when our regular schooling ends, and we're trained to master our magical skills before the potency lessens to a steadier level—one that can still be incredibly strong, if we're trained enough in our youth. For the next few years of school, a witch's power is nearly uncontrollable, dangerous, but also dazzling when used. Other witches are strengthened when they're near young witches, and can pull on our energy to enhance their own powers, as long as they are the same type of witch we are. My mother is a Root witch like I am, so she can take mine.

If a witch is killed and turned into a vampire, she loses her powers—unless she is killed in these prime years.

Then, the power stays and she—or any older Root witch—can take it from me, no matter how much I wish she would stop.

My mother's arms and chest and face are all glowing with the light that passes through her, and she lets out a steady breath. When she opens her eyes, the brown color glitters with an inner fire and I recoil slightly. It's been three years since she was turned into a vampire, but some childish part of me still

misses the loving way she used to be. Not this power-hungry woman who threatens the safety of humans and vampires.

The first few months Zenos was here, he would drink far too much mead every night, and spill secrets to me whenever my mother was out of the house.

Secrets like her plans to tear down the barrier that surrounds the forest.

Whenever I pressed him for more information, his words would slur together and he'd wave me off. I don't know how exactly she plans to break the barrier, but she has access to so many historical documents and tales in the Council Hall that I'm sure she's gathered the information.

My mother raises one hand, palm turned upward. A moment later, wind swirls above it, pulling in dirt from outside; it flies under the door to my room, probably from an open window downstairs. The dirt coalesces on her hand, spinning frantically. Moments later, a small white flower appears, with a yellow middle and a sweet, nutty scent—something only a Root witch could do, with our connection to the earth and everything in it: soil, rocks, plants, flowers, roots.

The berries on her lips, the breathing patterns . . . they help her keep up the ruse of being a mortal. But her witch power is what truly convinces them all she's still one of them. It allows her to stay on the Clarity, the local government body composed of several humans and witches—the next highest level of government after the emperor. It allows her to kill solitary humans and witches on the outskirts of Arborren without ever drawing suspicion to herself.

"Perfect," she whispers, not even looking at me. A warm satisfaction fills her eyes. She drops her other hand from my

shoulder, and my knees buckle. My vision sways, and I have to catch myself on the back of my vanity chair. “Zenos will bring blood for you soon to recover. You’ll practice while I’m gone, won’t you?”

I nod immediately, knowing that’s the answer she wants—she often brings plants to my room, or occasionally a tub of dirt and rocks, for me to practice my Root witch abilities with.

“Wouldn’t want your powers to wane,” she says softly. “They protect us, and soon we won’t have to hide who we are anymore. When I return, we’ll be safer than ever, Ava.”

When I return . . . A chill sweeps through me. I thought she was going on a regular trip for Clarity-related business. But what if she’s aiming to destroy the barrier and free the vampires this time? This *week*? Panic shoots through me.

If she succeeds, I know the humans and witches will keep fighting us, and countless lives will be lost. It won’t give us freedom and power. Humans will take back the forest, and the vampires will have no home while mortals hunt us down.

If I take this information to Casiopea, she’ll protect me. She’ll stand up to my mother to stop the barrier from falling and destroying her queendom.

If there were some other way to convince my mother to stop . . . some way to return her to who she was before . . .

“While you’re away . . .” I begin, my voice weakened and shaky. “Can I go outside, just for an hour or two? I’ll even go with Zenos.”

She stiffens, such a small movement that no mortal would notice it.

“Leaving this tower now will only get you killed, Ava,” she says in a strained voice. “And I have fought too hard to give you a chance at life. You know that, don’t you?” She gestures to the

window behind her, a dismissive movement. “You don’t know what it’s like out there, where they hate people like us. You are too naive, too weak, and far too kind to survive in such a cruel world, where mortals claim that anyone different from them must be killed. You don’t know what it’s like to only be able to count on yourself. So count on me, and trust that I will provide a way for you to be safe.”

Her voices rings with finality, and I open my mouth to—what? Argue, beg, rage at her? I don’t know, but the words die in my throat and a moment later my mother leaves, her heels tapping against the wood floor in a determined stride. The door closes behind her, and she tugs on the handle twice to make sure it’s locked. The other side isn’t silver, so this causes her no pain.

Then she’s gone. I wipe away the tears at the corners of my eyes, knowing this is the last time I’ll see my mother.

I collapse into my vanity chair, limbs weak and mind hazy. More blood and sleep are the only things that will give me back my strength, but for now I must focus on breaking free of here.

From downstairs I hear a heavy trunk dragged across the floor. Doors open and close, my mother tells Zenos goodbye, and silence falls inside the house. From the window, I watch her walk down the street with a retinue of guards who are assigned to protect the councilors of the Clarity of Arborren. If she succeeds, they’ll all die, and so will everyone in this town. And she’ll continue to leach my powers.

As much as they hate me, I won’t let that happen to them. As much as they have reason to fear me and other vampires who must drink blood to survive, I’m still the same Ava. I still care for these people and this place, even if they’ll never love me back. Saving this town will prove that, even if only to me.

An hour later, after I've taken the journal and the scarf from my nook in the ceiling and stuffed them in a pillowcase that I sewed straps through, Zenos's footsteps ascend the stairs. I place the pillowcase lightly on the floor of the armoire and stand in one smooth movement.

The door opens and Zenos steps through, holding another tiny cup of blood.

"Is that enough for you?" he asks in a gruff tone.

"Thank you, Zenos," I say in a sweet tone that I hate, but it makes him light up. My stomach twists in disgust, but I remind myself this is necessary for my freedom. This single ounce of blood won't keep me satisfied for long, but if I make Zenos complacent enough, maybe he won't pay attention later. He won't notice me sneaking down to the bottom floor to take some of the sacks of blood stored in the cooler, and he won't notice me leaving the house. I need that blood so I won't have to worry about my thirst while traveling to Casiopea.

After I drink and hand him back the cup, he turns to leave. My pulse would be racing now if it could. I reach inside the armoire for the cloth and the pin. On light feet, I bound to the door, stick the cloth in the lock, and tap the silver knob with the pin. My hand sears in pain while holding the doorknob, but a rush of energy floods me until I barely notice the stinging. Every step I take now must be careful. Zenos's footsteps disappear downstairs, and I wait until I hear him riffling through papers in the office.

I can do this, I think, willing myself to be brave. I'll escape this house. I'll follow the whispers and the journal wherever they lead me, and learn all I can to help stop my mother.

I'll save Arborren because I still have a heart even if it hasn't

beaten in two years. And along the way, I'll find a new home, and freedom, with the vampire queen.

I grab my pillowcase sack and swing it around my shoulders before leaving. The staircase spirals down the next three floors to the bottom floor. I try not to think about what else has happened down there. My vision narrows, tunnel-like, as I descend the stairs. I walk quietly, so the wood doesn't creak. Everything is going the way I imagined, exactly like I've dreamed about for so long.

My feet have touched the third-floor landing, exhilaration racing through me, when a hand wraps tightly around my elbow.

I'm jerked backward, stumbling into Zenos. Panic grips me and I know I've lost, all my chances vanishing like smoke from a pyre. His cold voice slithers through the air.

"Where do you think you're going, bloodsucker?"

He places a silver bar across my neck, and I scream.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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