

# The Sanguine Chronicles Ch. 1

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*If blood and love are currency, then a pure heart is the greatest treasure.*

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“Light shines from the castle!” Alina stopped brushing her long blonde hair to cast a doubtful expression at her elderly cabin mate. There hadn’t been light coming from Castle Sanguine’s dismal windows for decades. Alina had grown up in the village of Lyrisa, one of many that dotted the mountainous region known as Relicium, and she couldn’t remember a single night where anything but shadows and darkness came from the castle. It stood like a bleak sentinel, halfway up the mountain that overlooked the village and the rest of the valley; its far side perched on the seemingly precarious edge of a cliff that dropped sharply into the sea. Constructed entirely of dark grey granite, it had long ago been overrun by vines that crept like tendrils of some unknown evil, clinging to the walls on all sides. Rumors, legends, and ghost stories abounded as to why the castle stood abandoned, but no living villager, from the aristocrats to the servants, knew the truth. None had ever dared to enter it unless summoned by a Gatekeeper to perform some sort of repair or other task important to the preservation of the structure and its surrounding grounds. There wasn’t even living memory of a member of the Sanguine family visiting the castle, let alone the village. It was known however, that there were at least three Sanguine Lords and from somewhere, far from the village, they were still exacting taxes on the people. Still ruling. Every harvest, a team of men all clad in black clothes and shining silver armor would descend on the village and take the portion from each household that was owed for the year. It was a frightful ordeal for most people and a dreaded time of the year for all. So, it was with great trepidation that Alina realized the truth of old Corina’s words as she peered into the night for herself. Indeed light shown from the castle’s myriad windows giving the impression that some hulking stone beast watched them with hungry eyes from the shadows. It took everything in her to stifle a gasp at the sight and she couldn’t stop her heart’s relentless thundering. Nothing about the light bode well for them. It was like living near the base of a volcano and seeing the first meager puffs of smoke for the first time in ages. It was harrowing. A renewed sense of dread crept into Alina’s soul.

Not the usual dread that was a nearly constant companion, but something altogether different. Something richer, denser. Darker. “Perhaps a Gatekeeper has come to inspect the old place for needed improvements?” Corina’s frail voice asked, its brittle notes tinged with a hope that neither of them truly felt. Gatekeepers usually came in secret, cloaked in mystery. The villagers usually knew of their arrival only once they’d been long gone. Only those who were summoned to the castle to make the necessary improvements actually saw the Gatekeepers and even then their minds were wiped clean of any memory of their physical appearance. Not once had a Gatekeeper come and made such a bold gesture to announce their arrival. No, this was something new. And new to most of the people of Lyrisa was almost never a good thing. Alina shook her head. “I don’t think so, Mi Corina,” she said with a weary sigh. Her body was exhausted from yet another long day working on the estate of one of Relicium’s wealthiest families. The Antonovs, whose patriarch, Grigori Antonov was a Knight of the Highest Order, were the most powerful family in Lyrisa. In the absence of the Sanguines they ruled the village with an iron fist, exacting their own taxes and enforcing their own laws. Alina was a maidservant in their house and her mistress, Grigori’s only daughter, was little better than a slave driver. Yulia Antonov with her shining black hair and eyes of midnight blue was nigh irresistible to most males. But her dark eyes reflected a black soul. As ugly on the inside as she was beautiful on the outside and for some reason she hated Alina with a passion that bordered on pathological obsession. Alina didn’t know what she’d done to incur Yulia’s wrath and suspected that her mistress’ hatred was natural born, having nothing to do with any action, deed, or intent on her part. No, since they were children – Yulia was but two years older than Alina – Yulia had been hell-bent on torturing her. Alina suspected that her weary body wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep until dawn, but her sharp mind was now fixed on the puzzle of the castle’s newfound light. She sat down on the windowsill and gently patted Corina’s shoulder. “Go to sleep, Corina. I will watch for signs of trouble.” The old woman, who had been as a mother to her, wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “You need sleep just as much as I do, Piccola. Cease this foolishness and come to bed.” Bed? Alina cast a glance at the small cot that the two of them shared. It was nearly falling apart, riddled with shards of wood that threatened splinters at every angle. She couldn’t help but to think of the opulent and oversized bed that nearly filled Yulia’s bedchamber. And it was just for her, not shared with another soul. At length, Alina shook her head. “I couldn’t sleep if I wanted to, Corina. Dreams beckon me with mysterious things I do not wish to encounter. I fear that seeing the light from the castle will only make things worse for me.” Corina’s expression was one of worry. “You’ve been having the same dreams, then?” Alina’s nod was solemn and she shifted uncomfortably under Corina’s watchful gaze. She watched as the old woman swallowed in...trepidation? “Corina, what’s wrong?” But the old woman had already checked her expression, forcing a mask of calm to overtake her worn features. “Nothing, My Treasure. I just worry for you. That you are not resting enough.” Alina could tell that Corina was hiding something, but her mind was too full to even begin trying to unravel the secrets her companion might be concealing. She desperately wanted to pry the truth from Corina but she knew how stubborn the old woman could be and didn’t have the energy to try. Instead, she reached forward and gave Corina’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “I’m fine, Corina. Really.” She smiled gently at her and added,

“Now go on to bed and I’ll keep watch.” Reluctantly, Corina did as Alina bade her, her own weariness helping to force her to bed. “I will save space for you,” the old woman said as she climbed onto the cot and curled up under their dingy quilt. She was asleep before her head even hit the pillow. Alina watched the slow rise and fall of Corina’s chest as a wave of sorrow filled her own. Corina was too old to be working the kitchens of such a grand estate. She should have been retired by now, but because of Alina she’d been forced to work her whole life just to keep the two of them alive. She would never have admitted this, but Alina knew it was true. When Alina’s mother, as Corina had told her, had come stumbling from the dark forest that backed Lyrisa against the sea, she’d been heavy with pregnancy. No sooner than she’d laid eyes on Corina, the woman had gone into labor. With Corina’s help, she’d delivered Alina into the world, but the grueling process which had gone on for more than two days had taken its toll. Alina’s mother drew her last breath just she had drawn her first. The woman she would never know, ‘Iliana’ as Corina had called her, had come from the northernmost realm of Relicium, somewhere near the capitol city of Amaranth. This was all Alina knew of her birth mother. Corina was the only the parent she’d ever known. As the night wore on, Alina felt herself nod off from time to time only to jerk herself awake. She refused to succumb to the dreams she’d been having of late. In them, a tall, dark, and mysterious man stalked her from the shadows. He beckoned to her, reaching for her with both of his elegant hands but she always ran from him. When she did, she could feel his despair and with each escape of hers, his sadness seemed to grow. He was clearly wealthy. His cloak was a rich velvet of a hue so deep a red that it was nearly purple. The color of aristocracy. No, the color of royalty . He always wore a ring on the smallest finger of his right hand. It was an expensive silver metal with a shining black stone. She always noticed it because she suspected that it was a massive black diamond. But even with all of his riches, he seemed miserable. She sensed that he pursued her because somehow he’d surmised that she was the key to his...happiness? Happiness. This was why she ran from him. She knew that if she allowed him to take her into his arms, she would know it at last. That elusive emotion would be hers to enjoy, to fathom. Until she awoke. Slammed back to reality as soon as her eyes opened. And she knew that knowing that happiness, tasting it only to have it ripped away would be her ruin. So ran from him in her dreams and even in wakefulness, refusing to succumb to sleep. For she knew that he would be waiting: Her fantasy. Her nightmare. A movement from one of the upper windows of the castle caught her eye and Alina peered harder into the darkness. A shadow on the back wall of a large room. It was the shadow of a person, a hulking man from the looks of it and he was picking something up. She heard a roar, one filled with such anger and despair that the hairs on the back of her neck bristled and her heart pounded anew. With a loud crash she watched as the shadow figure hurled a vase at the wall on the on other side of the room. She watched, holding her breath as the shadow shrank in size and knew that he was walking to the window. Suddenly, she was filled with alarm. Suddenly, she knew what she was about to see. He appeared at the window and put his hands on the ledge as he glared over the village. Even from a distance and in the dark she could make out the piercing green of his eyes, could see their feral nature. And on one hand, gleaming in the light of the moon, was the black stone ring. She thrust the back of her hand to her mouth to stifle the frightened and anguished

gasp that bubbled from her lips. But it was too late. With the swiftness of an eagle, his gaze snapped in her direction. She shrank behind the windowpane as he surveyed the wide swath of land that belonged to the Antonov estate. She could no longer see him, tucked as she was behind the ragged curtain of their humble shack, but she could feel his eyes. She knew that he couldn't see her, but he sensed her presence. A voice – his voice – carried on the wind and whispered through her mind, and though he spoke the old language she understood implicitly. 'I will find you, Ahlia. Soon.'