The Sanguine Chronicles Ch. 3

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

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BaliorAvdaci, the Sanguine Regent of Lyrisa and a Prince of Relicium, slowly descended the marble staircase of his new home. '*New'* was a term he used quite loosely to describe the decrepit castle where he would dwell henceforth. An oracle had convinced his father, King Jorin, that Lyrisa was where he might find his mate. The oracle had neglected to say how long it might take him to find her in this sprawling village or whether or not she was even yet to be born. He'd been skeptical, resentful even, until he'd neared the village several nights ago and scented his mate on the air. Her fragrance called to him like a beacon and yet she was all around. He couldn't pinpoint her exact location, but she was near. Somewhere here in Lyrisa. And she lived. He felt his hardened heart swell slightly at the idea that somewhere just beyond the stone walls of this rambling castle, with its endless corridors and numberless rooms, his Fated female awaited him.

She would run to him with open arms, eager to staunch the spread of the darkness that thrived within him. Each day he'd been forced to spend without her, each hour of his long and relentless existence away from her soothing presence was dangerous to his soul. The longer he went without his mate, the better the chance that he would Fall, forsaking all honor and losing all respect for that life-giving substance that was so revered by his people.

Blood. He craved it even now. They all did. But if he *were* to Fall, he would not only crave its nourishment, he would become addicted to the process by which he procured it. He would take too much, killing his prey as he took from them what they would have freely given.

And *they* would hunt him. His own brothers. His father. His family. And his female would be left to wander this realm without him by her side.

So much at stake, and yet each day he found himself caring less and less about the consequences save for one. Her. He would *never* let her suffer. He would find and protect her, then spend the rest of this life and any that might follow cherishing her. She would know no pain with him. Only pleasure. Only joy. Only happiness. Even from a distance, even though he didn't know who she was, she was saving him. A treasure he did not yet possess and still she was already invaluable to him.

His heart had ached much over the week long journey to this village where mountains and sea met. He had visions of her running. Running away. From him? In fear? No, in sheer terror. He couldn't get his mind around it.

Usually, when he had visions, they were clear as day – both in how he saw and interpreted them. But these visions of his mate brought him anything but clarity. He could see her, and yet he couldn't. While in the heat of the vision he marveled at her beauty, drinking in every detail of her, but when he came out of it he could not recall anything about her. Only that she was truly beautiful.

He also felt her despair, her anguish and he understood that she held herself away from him because he was unknown to her. But to be so terrified of him? It meant only one thing.

She was human. She had to be.

And this posed a whole new set of problems, ones that he was scarcely willing to fathom until he actually had her in his grasp. He'd cross that bridge when he got to it, so to speak.

"Are you ready, my liege?" Balior's Head Guard and best friend, Maksim Vikenti, implored from the bottom of the staircase. Maksim was nearly as old as Balior and the two had grown up together. While Balior was the son of one of the highest royal houses in the Curia, Maksim was the bastard of a Cloak Demon and a Rania, a type of fire deity. His kind wasn't officially welcome in the Curia, but Maksim's place, high in the eyes of the Sanguines, afforded him much in the way of respect.

His dark blonde hair, which concealed a pair of tawny horns, and storm grey eyes were the talk of nearly every single female in the Curia. He was the forbidden fruit and was happy to be sampled by any female who wanted a taste. In other words –well, in the words of Balior – he was a slut.

Balior sneered at his friend. Maksim only ever addressed him so formally when he was in the mood to mock. And Balior knew why. His long red cape rustled loudly on the stairs as it dragged behind him and the ruby clasp that held it together over his chest was so massive that one might mistake it for an apple.

Balior liked dressing well, but this ceremonial garb that he was forced to don whenever meeting new subjects was so opulent that it verged on the ridiculous. The heavy silver crown that rested on his head, imbedded with emeralds, rubies, and diamonds, didn't help matters.

Maksim gave a low sweeping bow, his nose nearly touching the floor as Balior set foot on the landing. "Your Highness," Maksim intoned almost with a straight face.

"Go to Hell," Balior snapped.

At this, Maksim burst into a hearty laugh and clapped the prince on the back. "Oh, come now, Balior! Why so solemn? You begin the search for your female this day." He gave the prince another once over and pretended to wipe away a proud tear. "And how magnanimous she'll find you in your princely new clothes!"

"Straight to Hell," Balior grumbled which only brought more deep chuckles from Maksim and a few slow smiles from the rest of his guard.

Maksim went before the prince to push open the heavy doors that lead outside. "I've been there, my liege. In fact, I believe I was born in the fiery bowels of Pandemonium."

Balior cast his friend mischievous sideways glance. "Surely you were born in the bowels of something."

"Words hurt, Balior," Maksim yawned as they climbed into the carriage.

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The door to the shack burst open and one of the Antonov's guards forced his way into the small space, his massive body nearly filling it.

"Well, well," a shrill voice sounded from behind him. "Decided we'd have ourselves a bit of a lie in, did we?"

Alina just kept an exasperated groan from escaping her lips as Yulia Antonov skirted around the guard. She stared down her nose at her servant and snarled, "Where's the cook? There was naught but last night's bread, a bit of fruit, some eggs prepared by mother's maidservant and a suckling pig for breakfast!"

At the mention of Corina, Alina felt her bottom lip tremble. She was truly alone in the world. The

magnitude of this new truth hit her like a ton of bricks. “Gone,” she whispered to herself.

“Excuse me?” Yulia huffed, her nostrils flaring angrily. “What do you mean ‘GONE’?”

Still delirious from the events of the morning, sleep-deprived, and hungry, Alina snapped back, “Gone! No longer here! Not in this place! What other definition could ‘gone’ possibly have?”

“Why, you ungrateful little bitch!” Yulia screeched. The guard actually flinched, turning his head so that his ear wasn’t slow close to her mouth. “Let me tell you what’s about to happen. Since the cook is GONE, you will absorb her duties until she sees fit to return! And, you’ll continue your duties to me,” she enunciated, “With-out fail-ure! Lunch is to be served in half an hour! Make sure it’s ready. Then come to my chambers. I’ll need your assistance to get ready for the ball tonight!”

Speaking of the ball seemed to calm Yulia bit. “I must be stunning,” she muttered wistfully to herself as she turned to leave. “If the rumors are true…if *he* will actually be there!”

“A ball?” Alina asked dumbly. She had heard no murmurings around the village of an impending ball, had seen no preparations.

Yulia shot Alina a look of contempt over her shoulder. “Yes, you ignorant twit. A ball. Tonight. Not that it should matter much to you, but it will be held in our great hall.” She added with a evil smile, “So, I hope you enjoyed your nap and caught up on your rest. You’ll need it!”

With that she swept from the shack, leaving Alina to dress hurriedly as she made her way to the kitchen to begin the day’s work.

“Leave her to her Fate,” Alina mocked her mother’s ethereal tone.

Fate, it seemed, was as cruel a mistress as Yulia.