

A LOST HEIRESS.
A SOULLESS VAMPIRE.
A SECRET DRENCHED IN BLOOD.

IMMORTAL DARK



TIGEST GIRMA

PROLOGUE

ISIBLE THROUGH THE CANDLELIT WINDOW OF UxLAY UNIVERSITY, A campus as ancient as the creatures it housed, the dean and her vampire sat in private conversation.

They studied a piece of parchment that detailed the town's layout, and particularly the drop of blood fading near the cathedral. This map was one of the dean's most favorite treasures, handed down her family bloodline before all such tools were destroyed. She never could forgive such a loss.

Before the blood disappeared into the yellowed page, it blossomed into three letters, spelling the word "mot." Death.

"Silia Adane is dead," the dean said, exactly an hour after they'd first sat down.

Her vampire steepled his fingers and responded in Aarac. For a dead language, it possessed an unnatural amount of life, dancing on the tongue like a stirred snake.

"Then it is true. The will of inheritance is in effect."

The dean pushed her chair back and went to the window. Night pressed onward from the forest, wrapping long fingers around the Arat Towers and their mourning spire statues. Golden light poured from the open-mouthed lion statues perched on the stone walls. Each animal came awake to illuminate the entrance halls and corridors.

"There are two more Adanes left," she said.

"You would break your promise to her? I thought she was your dear friend."

The dean's thick brows knitted. Her vampire liked his honesty with an equal measure of cruelty. Even when she was younger, she disliked this most about him.

Of course she did not wish to break her promise. For weeks, Silia's blood had run thin on the map. A rare disease even Uxlay couldn't cure had infected her. The dean had urged Silia to call her two nieces from wherever they hid and entrust one of the girls with the family's legacy before it was too late. But stubbornness was the plague of all the Adanes.

Silia Adane had sought freedom at incredible cost, selfish even if it was not for herself. As such, fourteen years ago, after the death of her sister and her brother-in-law, Silia had disappeared in the middle of the night with her young twin nieces. The dean had forgiven this betrayal of responsibility for one reason only—grief.

Grief had a way of removing duty by its roots. It was why the dean had chosen it as the first enemy to master. Why she was here, planning the next set of events, instead of by her late friend's side. There was no faltering now. It was this very mastery that made her run a campus that kept peace among nature's natural enemies. And peace would not last if the Adanes' will came into effect.

The dean chose not to tell her vampire she regretted the promise. At the time, it had sounded justified. What did it matter if the girls were never to be contacted? The dean had been certain Silia would settle with her lover and birth a child and the great House Adane's bloodline would continue. How wrong she'd been. Death was pursuing House Adane with great intensity, and she had no choice but to bring new life into it.

She studied the growing darkness. "We'll retrieve the girl from Green Heights in a week."

"What of the other one?"

"I'm afraid I don't know where she is. It's said she ran away from their foster home the day she turned eighteen."

She glanced at him. To see if he was aware of this. It used to unsettle her how little their facial muscles moved, how their coal eyes cut into a stare and never blinked.

"Perhaps one is enough." Her vampire remained impassive. "Their presence will cause some unpleasantness."

The dean faced the window. "As all estranged things do."

"True." He considered. "I would enjoy having them in my class. Their mother was one of my brightest students."

The tale of the girls' parents was legend, but legend had a way of bearing tragedy.

"Do you wish me to collect her?" he asked.

"No, I will go."

In the window's reflection, a line marred his mahogany skin.

"You never leave Uxlay."

"I'm afraid it's necessary."

"Why?"

The dean regained her seat, calm as she delivered the next piece of news. "Because Kidan Adane was detained for murder as of twenty-four hours ago."

Pinpricks of light shone in her vampire's black eyes. "Whose life did she take?"

"I don't know yet. It's quite odd, but Kidan Adane believes her sister did not run away. Instead, she's convinced a vampire took June Adane. That they brought her here, to the university, against her will."

Brows lowered, she studied him again. He wasn't frowning. She marveled at how he'd settled into his old skin, handsome and stony as the day she met him. Her, nineteen. Him, five centuries old. She rubbed her wrinkled hand. Time was a frightening thing.

"I would know if June Adane was here," he simply said.

"I thought so too. Surely if such a crime had taken place, you would have dealt with it in the appropriate manner."

"Of course." He showed no sign of offense at her inquiry. She valued this about him. He rarely took things personally. Nor did he ever lie. But these were strange times, and loyalty was the first casualty of change.

"How do you know all this?" he asked. "Surely having the girls followed and watched goes against the promise."

Satisfied he'd passed her questioning, the dean gestured to the pile of letters sitting next to a carving of an animal—a small impala with two magnificent horns.

"Kidan Adane writes quite a lot, always begging Uxlay to return her sister. I have tried to find June, but the girl has disappeared. Unfortunately for Kidan, her aunt Silia made Uxlay the birthplace of all her nightmares."

He moved with the quickness of a shadow caught in light, careful not to

touch the glass impala figurine before collecting the letters. The action made the dean's lips curve slightly. Superstition caused most dranaics to avoid the beautiful antelope, in the same way it convinced students that rubbing a lion statue delivered strength. As the vampire read, his brow furrowed, a crease forming.

"You never responded?" he asked curiously.

"I kept my word."

He had stood by her side for nearly forty years and still did not understand her promises, nor how she moved the earth to keep them. Skirting around her vows had made their life very difficult.

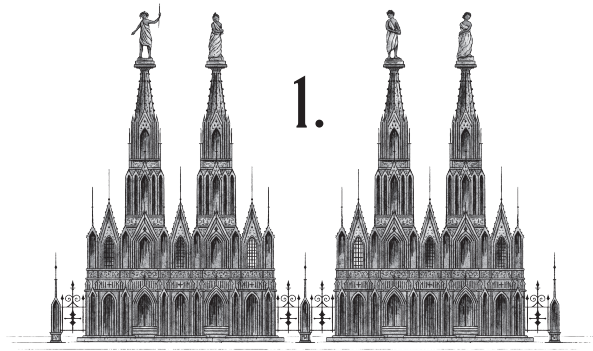
"What is different now?" he asked.

She studied one of the letters. Kidan's words slipping into anger and plea in tandem, the sun and moon of a horrible loss.

"Mot sewi yelkal," she responded in Aarac.

Death frees us from our previous selves.

In a very rare moment, her vampire's lips lifted at one corner. It never failed to amuse him when his students quoted his lessons back to him. Especially when they lived long enough to understand their true meanings.



KIDAN ADANE GAVE HERSELF EIGHT MONTHS TO DIE.

The schedule was quite generous, if she was being honest. Two months would have sufficed for the violent act. The extension was a poor attempt at a dream. A dream she wouldn't entertain if she wasn't currently dehydrated and fading in and out of her room.

She wanted to live with her sister again inside that odd little house. Live in a time when innocence didn't need to be proved at every turn. That last thought pulled her out of her haze, made her chuckle. She sounded wronged and, if she dared think it, a victim.

Her laughter rattled again, a clogged chimney inside her chest sounding painful and raw. How long had it been since she'd spoken? The curtains remained closed because of the cameras, so a bulb had become her only source of light. Like any artificial sun, it overheated and burned the air around it, forcing her to work half naked on the apartment floor.

Sweat gathered on her dark forehead now, wetting the file she was reading, her folded leg buried somewhere in the swarm of papers. She couldn't afford to switch off the light. Not when there was so much to do. Not when she was this close. In Kidan's mind, she was trapped in one never-ending night and hell was not dissimilar to this.

Movement—she needed movement. She stood too fast, stumbling, and blood rushed to her folded leg, paralyzing her. She shook off the numbness and walked to the small kitchen.

Murderer.

The word jumped from the newspaper article plastered on her fridge, branded above the image of a Black girl.

Kidan Adane was a murderer. She waited for the prickle of remorse she should have felt at those words. She even pinched her mouth and scrunched her nose, trying to force the emotion out of herself. But just like that fiery night, she failed to cry. She waited for a sliver of humanity to slip through. She was completely dry. A statue carved out of obsidian.

Kidan poured herself a drink. The shutter clicks of a camera snapped, accompanied by tiny flashes of light. She swung sharply to the window, drink nearly slipping from her grasp. The curtains remained drawn, but the reporters clawed at the gaps, like seagulls scratching for bread.

Be patient, she thought.

It would all be clear soon. In eight months, exactly. That was when her trial date was set. Kidan had no plan to attend. Long before any of it, her confession would be found taped to the underside of her bed and the violent workings of her mind unveiled for all.

The camera flashed again, making her wince. It was unlikely they could get her picture, but maybe she should put on clothes. It wasn't her full chest or her wide hips that she wanted to hide. A racy picture of her might actually work in her favor: a gross violation of her privacy making the rounds. It didn't sound bad at all. She shook her head. There she was again, thinking of ways she could manipulate sympathy.

She met her reflection, and a thin, frail voice slipped out of her. "You are not like them. You are *not* like them."

Them.

Aunt Silia called them dranaics. Vampires.

Despite the heat of the apartment walls, Kidan shivered. Dranaics appeared no different from humans. It was the very source of all her disturbance. Evil shouldn't go around in human skin. It was a desecration.

Kidan loathed her aunt. Loathed her inaction. She had waited too long to rescue them from that vile society. Maybe then evil wouldn't have seeped into Kidan as a child. June had fared better, but Kidan had feasted on it. Her morbid curiosity with death, her sick fascination with and collection of films depicting its art, and now committing the final act itself—all this came from vampires. If she could dig into her chest and pull out her twisted heart right now, she would.

Eight months.

Relief punctured through with those two words. All she had to do was wait eight months to die. Make sure June was found. Bear this wretched existence a little longer.

A picture of June beamed at her from her open laptop. They looked nothing alike, despite being born within minutes of each other. June's disappearance received no coverage, not even a whisper in the neighborhood. Where would Kidan be if these reporters had hunted for her lost sister the way they hunted her? No, Black girls had to commit horrifying acts to earn the spotlight.

The papers on her floor were the frenzied tracking of a place called Uxlay University. Kidan had searched for twelve months and twenty days. Her eyes darted to the recording taped under her bed, and the temperature of the room dropped. It held the last, tortured conversation between Kidan and her victim.

Better, she thought, almost smiling. She was assigning blame where it needed to go. *Kidan's* victim.

The recording held the proof, the name of the person—no, animal—responsible for taking June. It was only a matter of finding the fucking place. And him.

Kidan squatted and studied the trail of her search. She reached for a pen, pulled off the cap with her teeth, and started another letter to Aunt Silia, who never wrote back.

If there was even the slimmest chance of finding June again, she'd spend the rest of her life writing.

Her fingers tensed, digging into her palms. Thin arcs of blood irritated her skin. With her forefinger, she traced a continuous square inside her palm. Nerves. She recognized the emotion. So she wasn't completely lost yet. The jagged mirror across the room cut an ugly shape along her dark throat. A cool, unimpressed expression gazed back. If only she could master crying before her trial, the world might forgive her. She might live longer.

Cry, she ordered her image.

Why? it asked. *You would do it again.*



An hour later, once the reporters outside left, Kidan dressed in a large hoodie, grabbed her earbuds, and locked her small apartment. She'd moved here for precisely one reason.

Across the street, at the corner of Longway and St. Albans Streets, waited a single parcel locker. One key belonged to Kidan, the other to Aunt Silia, who resided in Uxlay. After Kidan deposited each of her letters, she'd hide and wait. Sometimes she'd wait for days, sleeping in the café nearby or the alley, but someone would always come and take her letters. Each time, the hooded figure escaped Kidan, either climbing over the park gates with frightening strength or disappearing into traffic.

Every week she played this cat and mouse game. Aunt Silia was reading her letters but, for some messed-up reason, kept ignoring her.

After she put the new letter into the empty locker, Kidan went to wait by the bus stop, a new spot, and hoped blending in with the passengers would give her enough time to identify the messenger.

As she waited, June's sweet voice crackled through her earbuds. Kidan's world jerked into balance.

"Hi," her sister whispered. "I don't really know how to start this, so I'm just going to say a generic intro."

June made fifteen videos before she disappeared. This was the first, and she'd been fourteen. Kidan listened to the videos daily, except for the last one. That one she could only bear listening to once before deleting it so it wouldn't hurt her.

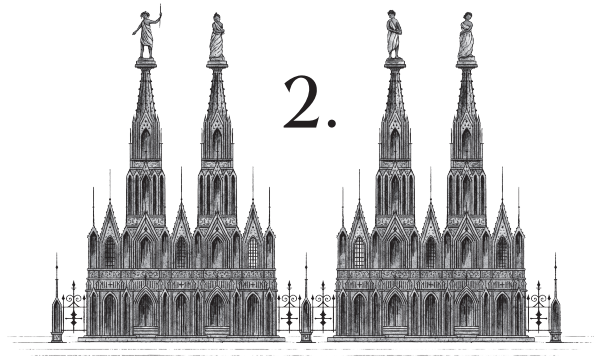
Inside her pockets, her fingers traced the shape of a triangle, enjoying the scratching sound it made. The triangle changed to a square when June mentioned Kidan in the video.

Kidan's attention never strayed from the parcel locker, but there was a shadow in the corner of her eye, unmoving.

A woman under the crooked branch of a tree. Her skin was an aged bronze in the streetlight, and she wore a dark green skirt paired with a slicked bun.

The woman stood remarkably still, no different from a tawny owl perched on a ledge, staring right at her.

The back of Kidan's neck prickled. She had the oddest sensation that this woman, whoever she was, had been waiting for her.



RECORDED VIDEO

May 10, 2017

June, age fourteen, on Kidan's phone

Location: Mama Anoet's private bathroom

"Hi," June whispered, blinking into the camera. Her short braids curled around a scarred, pimpled chin. "I don't really know how to start this, so I'm just going to say a generic intro. My name is June. I go to Green Heights School. I guess I'm making this video because of what happened today. I got in trouble for falling asleep in class again."

A pause.

"I have parasomnia. I know, big word. It means I don't just sleepwalk but scream and kick. My sister takes care of me but... I know she gets tired. I'm tired of me." A small laugh. "I try to stay awake as much as I can, but that backfires. Like today. I know what you're thinking—get help. Believe me, I'm trying."

The camera angle shook, capturing the overcrowded shampoos, four different kinds; a butterfly-patterned shower curtain; medicine for anxiety and depression.

"We can't afford a psychologist, really, but our guidance counselor isn't bad. It's actually because of her I'm making this video. Miss Tris said... I'm scared of something. Something I don't want to tell anyone about. She told me to write everything down.

“But I hate writing. So she told me to record myself instead—and if I feel brave enough, share it. Good, isn’t she?” A small smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “So, what am I afraid of?”

June took a hesitating breath, glancing nervously at the door.

“I’m scared of . . . vampires.”

The camera went dark, face down on the sink. Water ran, splashing sounds echoed, a minute ticked by. June’s brown face came into focus, now slightly damp as she settled in the tub’s corner.

“Vampires.” Her voice rang stronger. “The good news, if there is any, is that they’re no longer dangerous to everyone. So those of you watching this, if you even believe me, can go to bed knowing your blood tastes like poison to them. But they still need to feed, they need blood to survive.” The phone shook a little. “Something called the First Bind forces vampires to only feed from specific families. There are around eighty bloodlines trapped in this cycle for generations. Guess who’s in one of those families. Yup.”

June looked off camera, eyes glazing over.

“My sister and I take having a messed-up family to a whole new meaning. But we escaped. Our aunt took us away from that life, after our parents died, and brought us here, to Mama Anoe’t’s. We’re safe here, but I see them every night . . . in my dreams . . . even in the hallways at school sometimes. It’s like I know . . . one day they’ll come for us.”

She inhaled, exhaled. Played with the thin silver bracelet on her wrist.

“Kidān reminds me every night about the Three Binds placed on vampires. It helps a little. Makes me remember they can’t get to me so easily. The Second Bind restricts some of their strength, and the Third Bind requires a heavy sacrifice when they turn a human into one of them. Kidān keeps saying the powerful Last Sage didn’t know how to use his incredible gift—that he should have killed all vampires off instead of putting restrictions on them. I think she’s right. Our lives would have been so different if he had.”

Her fingers left her butterfly bracelet, eyes creased.

“So why am I making this video? I guess I do want Miss Tris to know. Maybe even my friends. Maybe everyone. I don’t want to be like this for the rest of my life. I don’t want to waste every minute of every day thinking about when they’ll come and get us. I want to feel safe. I want—”

A loud knocking made her drop the phone.

“June, it’s me.”

June sagged; the door handle turned.

Kidan scowled at her dripping phone. “Hurry.”

Quickly June added her password to make the videos private.

Her password had always been a set of five numbers that added up to thirty-five. That was their biological mother’s age when she died, and also the number of vampires, dranaics, assigned to their family. Thirty-five vampires that would have consumed June’s and Kidan’s blood if they hadn’t gotten away.