

CHAPTER 1

Everyone thinks their ex-wife is a bloodsucker, but one of mine really is a vampire. Actually, it's not that weird because I am a vampire too. My name is Sirius Sinister, and this is my love story. Though it is probably more accurate to call it my divorce story because of my all too frequent appearances in Immortal Divorce Court.

Immortal creatures are reality not mythology. Vampires are but one of the many immortal races that inhabit the earth. We were here before mortals figured out that whole opposable thumb thing. Mortals walk among us, not the other way around. Immortals bleed and can die, and do not age once they hit twenty-five or thirty. Thus, we don't get older, theoretically just wiser, and if you didn't know any better (and most of you don't), you would think we are ordinary humans. But we aren't. We have remarkable regenerative abilities, and can take an astounding amount of physical punishment and survive—except the brutal financial beatings ordered by the head magistrates of Immortal Divorce Court . . . Well, that brings even the toughest immortal man to his knees. The only reason said immortal man is actually on his knees is that he is looking for dropped gold so he can buy something to eat.

I was born to vampire parents on Sa Dragonera, a small island off the coast of Spain near Majorca, in the year 1425. My parents made their living as most vampires did in those days, as hired mercenaries and assassins. Most vampires have toned but not overly muscular frames, incredible hearing, vision, and dexterity along with acrobatic skills, and the ability to move quite soundlessly. We are also about five times as strong as mortals, which, combined with all the above, made us quite popular as hired killers. You see, the only mortals that know about immortals are the royals, the power brokers, the oligarchs—the very top of the mortal echelon. Forget about the one-percenters, we deal with those that have *all* the cents.

My father, Ernesto, and my mother, Maria, named me Sirio Sinestra, which I changed to the more deadly sounding Sirius Sinister. So, into this world of assassins and contract murders I was born, learning from my parents the tricks of our family trade. By 1450, I had reached my physical maturity and was as deadly as I was handsome. The sweat would glisten on my tanned skin as I flung back my shoulder-length black hair and worked my muscles during my training. Thanks to my parents, I could kill you by sword, poison, arrow, staff, dagger, mace, and my favorite method—by hand.

One day, Father and I went down into a cavern, where he revealed to me his collection of Lazarus stones holding blood from all his special kills. The stoppered stones looked like they were made from marble, but as Father held one out to me, I could see that cloudy white and black patterns moved all over it like a series of small storms.

“Why do you put the blood of the kills in the Lazarus stones?” I asked.

“I was asked to,” my father said.

“Fair enough,” I replied. “Do all assassins do the Lazarus-stone thing?”

“No, only if you are a Specter of Death like me,” he said.

“A what?”

He laughed. “Most of the time, my kills are paid for with gold from the world’s most wealthy and powerful mortals. Those kills do not get put in the Lazarus stones. When you are acting as a Specter of Death, you are getting your orders straight from the Grim Reaper himself, and those are the only kills that get put in the stones.”

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“The Grim Reaper is a real person!” I exclaimed. “I get it now, because that is one person, uh, thing, that I would not want to say no to!”

“You are correct there—and of course I do not,” he replied. “And, thing, person, or something else, there is no doubt the Grim Reaper is as real as you and me. I have seen the Grim with my own eyes—well, probably too many times, to tell you the truth.”

“Once would be enough for me,” I said. “Well, I am off to more training with Mother. Have fun playing with your Lazarus stones.”

By 1460, I had learned all my parents could teach me, and it was time to leave Sa Dragonera and see the world. Leaving Sa Dragonera was the only way I could take the final steps in my training and hopefully reach my full potential. Of course, the world has a way of teaching you the humility and maturity that your parents could not, and I was about to be taken to school.

First, however, let me dispel some myths about vampires. We do not have pale skin from avoiding the sun. Sunlight is a detriment to us only in that we prefer to kill our marks at night to take advantage of the cover of darkness. Holy water and crucifixes are mortal constructs, though some of us get baptized for appearances or to get closer to a kill. We have been gifted with the wonderful ability to eat our meat raw without any consequences. As you can imagine, the ability to kill and eat your meals without calling attention to yourself by starting a fire is pretty valuable to an assassin tracking his, or her, mark.

We can drink blood for sustenance, which has inspired a whole misguided mythos about vampires among the mortals. Our incisors are oversized and good for eating raw meat or killing an intended target in close-quarter fighting. Yes, I have been trained to go for the jugular. Immortals can and do have sex with mortals, though most immortals stay within the immortal realm to find a more permanent life mate. But if I were to bite you during a wild sexual encounter or during an assassination, I would not turn you into one of us. You would actually have to ingest copious quantities of our blood in comparison to your body mass to be turned into a vampire. Which leads me to

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Garlic, and no, I didn’t capitalize it because I am in fear of it—that is simply her name. (Though it’s true that vampires are not fond of garlic because it plays havoc with our keen sense of smell and ability to bed nubile wenches.)

But I am not referring to the onion’s stinky cousin. I am referring to Garlic, the even more stinky vampire Maltese that came into my life in the year 1596. I was at The Theatre in Shoreditch, London, watching Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I was a brash young vampire

and had prime seats, and had drunk some whiskey with my mates, along with way, way too much wine. As bad luck would have it, the fairy Cobweb, servant to Titania, was played by a real faerie. He forgot his line in act 3, scene 1. All he had to say was his name—Cobweb. He froze for a moment, got red in the face, and said, “Fobschleb.” And of all the people in the audience, this young drunk vampire laughed the loudest.

“What an utter buffoon,” I announced to a silent auditorium when all the laughter had died down, starting a fresh torrent of laughter. This encouraged me to comment even more audibly on the fairy Cobweb’s deficiencies as an actor. Bad idea. After the show that faerie caught up with me in a dark alley to show me his displeasure.

You might think faeries are all magic dust, wings, and glittery goodness. But let me tell you something—you never ever want to piss off a faerie. Sure, they might look human, but the strongest of them can turn their bodies into stone, and their fingernails into diamonds, among other adaptive physical abilities. If you catch a faerie by surprise, however, they are only able to turn their bodies into something a whole lot softer. I hear the faeries that are terrible at turning their bodies into a harder substance can only manage stiff parchment paper on their best day. But this guy, well, he was like fighting a cannonball covered with daggers. Yeah. He beat my drunken ass to within an inch of my immortal life and dumped my nearly lifeless body in a nearby barn.

As fate would have it, the runt of a Maltese lion dog litter had been either purposely abandoned or accidentally left in the barn. A Maltese is a small, fluffy dog favored by aristocrats because the dogs are small enough to fit in the sleeves of their ornate dresses, gowns, and robes. They were quite valuable, and this runt probably got overlooked. So it instinctively turned to the only food source it could find—the blood

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seeping from the many gashes on my body. For two and a half weeks, I slowly healed, and the runt kept feeding from the blood coming from my wounds. Finally, I awoke to the sensation of a dog sitting on my chest and licking my blistered lips.

“Get off, you,” I gasped, and forced open my blood-encrusted eyelids.

A blast of garlic assaulted my nostrils, and I looked up to see that the owners of the barn had hung several cloves to prevent their cows from being menaced by vampires. “You smell even worse than the garlic,” I said to the tiny white dog with soulful black eyes just sitting on my chest like she owned me. “Actually nothing smells worse than garlic. So that is now your name—Garlic.” Garlic yelped, clearing out the rest of the fog in my brain, and hopped off my chest.

I struggled to my feet and noticed lots and lots of dead rats. I looked at the runt Maltese—way too small and all too dirty to try and sell for a drink—and did not think anything of it at the time, assuming the rats had been poisoned. I was simply too exhausted to notice their necks had all been snapped. I set off stumbling through London, still in a daze, and realized Garlic was nipping at my heels. I cut down a side alley and broke into a jog, trying to lose her. Suddenly, two fleabitten and rather hungry mongrels came out of a scrap heap and went right for Garlic’s throat. Or shall I say, they *attempted* to go for Garlic’s

throat. With a savage growl belying her six-pound size, Garlic ripped one mongrel's throat out and chewed the tail off the other before it ran for its life. She stood back from her kill, giving appropriate deference to me, the alpha dog.

"No, Garlic, that is quite all right," I said. "You can go ahead and feed on that mutt. I don't care much for dog tartar." Garlic began furiously feeding on her conquest, finishing her meal by lapping up the blood of her vanquished victim, which turned her white fur a lovely shade of crimson.

"Oh, that was a jolly good show, Garlic, way better than that god-awful play." I briefly considered adding "death by Maltese" to my assassin repertoire, but no real man, immortal or not, would be caught dead or undead with a fluffy, little white dog prancing along in his possession, even if that dog was a killer vampire Maltese.

"Aye, Garlic, too bad you were not some kind of massive wolfhound or a breed more suitable to my manliness," I said. "Come along now,

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we'll find someplace safe to leave you where you won't rid all of London proper of its collection of mortal mutts."

As it turned out, I could never ever rid myself of the stink of Garlic. I left her on a farm owned by Harvis, a werewolf friend of mine, figuring the whole canine thing would work out. But I was awoken the next day in my London inn by Garlic licking my face. I returned her to the farm again. Harvis, my werewolf friend, knowing all things dog, gave me the bad news.

"Sirio," he said, raising a craggy eyebrow. "The little bitch has imprinted on you."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" I took down my fine breeches, and took out my immortal splendor. "Is it contagious?" Harvis howled, literally. "You foppish vampire, return your breeches' boa constrictor to its lair. You do not have mange of the manhood. You are her Pack leader. She will never leave you. You are stuck with that little bitch forever. And, trust me, that is a good thing!" What wasn't a good thing was entering my room back at the inn to find an unwanted guest.

"Sirio Sinestra?"

Before I could answer, Garlic sprang into action, clamping her pint-sized but razor-sharp teeth on the arm of the faerie I knew only as Fobschleb. He had been caught off guard by my courageous canine, and had only enough time to turn his arm into wood. Unfazed by the growling vampire Maltese attached to his arm and sending a steady flow of sawdust to the floor, the faerie beckoned me forward.

"Have you come back to finish the job?" I said, whipping my travel cloak to the floor. "I have not had a lick of alcohol, so this time you better be prepared to meet your maker." Truth be known, I knew I was not ready to fight this faerie again, but at least Garlic would be there to protect me from the rats and other assorted vermin—human, immortal, and otherwise—that would soon be searching my corpse for valuables. Fobschleb looked confused. "What do you mean 'this time'?"

"Don't play coy with me," I sneered. "If you were just as good of an actor on stage at The Theatre as you are now, I wouldn't have laughed

my drunken ass off. You faeries certainly do hold a grudge, now don't you?"

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A flicker of recognition crossed Fobschleb's face. "I see now," he said. "You have had a run-in with my twin brother, Pansy."

"Pansy?" I snorted. Ah, the humor of the cosmos. My ass had been kicked by a faerie named Pansy. "What's your name? Daffodil?" The faerie shook his head. "No, that is my cousin. Do you know him too? My name is Buttercup."

"Of course it is," I muttered. "Tell me, Buttercup, why are you in my room?"

Buttercup stared down at Garlic who was still gnawing faithfully on his arm, and shook his head at the growing pile of sawdust on the floor. "Can you call off your little bitch? Then, I will tell you."

"To me, Garlic," I said. Garlic dropped to the ground and proceeded to piss on Buttercup's shoes before coming over to sit on my boots.

"Sorry 'bout that," I said, trying unsuccessfully to conceal a smirk. Buttercup shook the pee off his shoes, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a rolled-up sheaf of papers embossed with an iridescent wax seal. "It is I who should be sorry," he said. "Sirio Sinestra, by the power vested in me by the Immortal Divorce Court, you are hereby *served*."

A rainbow I would come to know all too well shot from the wax seal and struck my money pouch, magically lightening it by ten gold coins. "My gold!" I exclaimed. "What in the hell just happened to my gold?"

"You have to pay the service fee," Buttercup stated.

"But I have no idea what I just got served with," I said, clamping my hands over my pouch to prevent any further magical drain of my resources. "Wait a minute. You said Immortal Divorce Court, didn't you? Ha! This is a complete mistake because I have never even been married!"

Buttercup merely nodded knowingly as if he'd heard all this before.

"Immortal Divorce Court does not make mistakes. I suggest you take a look at the name on the petition and see if it jogs your memory."

I opened the papers and pored over them. I could read very well, yet most of the words on the pages could have very well been in another language. These papers had obviously been drafted by a lawyer. How many wherefores, heretos, thereafters, and parties to the first, second, and third parts did you really need to have in one bloody sentence?

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I did, however, recognize the name of the deceitful vampire harlot known as Bloodsucker Number One.

I sat down slowly on a chair and hung my head between my legs.

Garlic, quite concerned, took this as an opportunity to lick my face. I held up the papers. "I don't understand what all this lawyer bullturd means," I said. "And, what is with all of the really, really fine print? I can spy the crumbs on a field mouse's whiskers at two hundred paces, yet somehow I can't see this crap? What does she want?"

Buttercup took the papers from me and scanned them expertly.

"Oh, the usual," he said. "She cannot support herself and needs alimony."

“All my money—what?”

“Alimony, alimony,” Buttercup repeated. “You are right in that alimony tends to be all your money, and preferably gold for the ones that dig the gold.” He continued reading. “Oh, congratulations are in order.”

I looked at the grinning faerie quizzically. “Why?” My anger was headed from simmer to full boil.

“She is also suing you for child support. It seems you two have a child together.”

I flew into a full vampire rage, splintering every piece of furniture in the room into so much kindling. “Child?” I sputtered. “We never were married, and we certainly never had a child together!”

Buttercup looked down at the papers once again and shrugged.

“Well, these papers say you do have a child together. Little Martin.”

“Martin? That was the name of the fellow she was having carnal relations with behind my back. But he was a mortal, and that was over a hundred years ago. He should be dust by now. This is an outrage! I will get my just revenge on her.”

Buttercup handed the papers back to me and sidestepped another yellow stream of urinary vengeance from Garlic. “I suggest you dispense with exacting revenge, and get what you truly need—a good lawyer. And I mean a really good lawyer, since she has retained one of the best as her counsel.” He opened the lodging room door. “Immortal Divorce Court is not to be trifled with, young vampire,” he said. And with that, he was gone into the night.