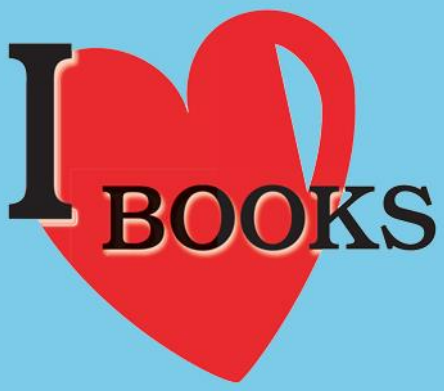


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Opening extract from

Because You Love to Hate Me

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Published by

Bloomsbury Children's an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

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Introduction

"You don't have the guts to be what you wanna be. You need people like me. You need people like me so you can point your f@$!n' fingers and say 'That's the bad guy.'"*

—"Tony Montana" in *Scarface*

Villains. Stories are nothing without them. Heroes cannot rise to greatness without them. In the absence of an enemy, our beloved protagonists are left kicking rocks in the Shire or taking tea and biscuits in a mind-numbingly cheery Spare Oom. We love villains because they turn their aches into action, their bruises into battering rams. They push through niceties and against societal restraints to propel the story forward. Unlike our lovable protagonists, villains—for better or worse—stop at literally nothing to achieve their goals. It's why we secretly root for them, why we find ourselves hoping they make their grand escape, and it's why our shoulders sag with equal parts relief and disappointment when they are caught. After all, how can you not give it up to someone who works that damned hard for what they want?

For as long as I can remember, I've empathized with the underdog, the misunderstood, the so-called wicked. Perhaps it has much to do with my worldview, which questions the very existence of "good" and "evil" in the first place. Maybe what is considered good today is foolish tomorrow; perhaps the terrible deeds done now will prove themselves

necessary evils in a year's time, a hundred years' time. I've always found the concept of good and evil to be wholly complicated, ever since learning as a kid about that conversation God had with Satan regarding Job. It was like seeing your best friend commiserating with your sworn nemesis: *Hold up, you guys are on speaking terms?*

Villains aren't created in a vacuum; they've likely suffered devastations and made the best choices available, never mind that their decisions might differ from our own. They've also had their share of oft-forgotten moments of truth and honor (Jaime Lannister, anyone?). Villains take the risks our heroes can't afford to take and make the choices our heroes are too afraid to make. They live in the Grey, and I, for one, love that sliver of space between light and dark, where things tend to be more interesting, people are more complex, and it's harder to draw clean lines. Look into a villain's eyes long enough and we might find our shadow selves, our uncut *what-if*s and unchecked ambitions, a blurry line if ever there was one.

Because You Love to Hate Me isn't just about badass villains, it's also about ourselves, in all our horror and glory. Within these pages, you will find thirteen stories of villainy written by some of today's greatest writers and paired with commentary by thirteen of the most influential booktubers and bloggers on YouTube and in the blogosphere. (Unlucky #13, reppin' baddies since 1307.) You'll see nefarious old favorites and new faces, some reimagined, some twisted out of context, but not in the ways you might expect. The perspectives explored in these stories force us to reexamine our most fiercely held notions of good and evil, right and wrong, and what it is to be human. To be alive. Life, death, hate, love, vengeance, heartbreak—it's all here.

Villains, the deliciously wicked. We love to hate them and they hate to be loved, if only because being hated frees them from having to be good.

And we'd have it no other way.

🩶😈 Amerie



The Blood of Imuriv

BY RENÉE AHDIEH

Everywhere Rhone walked, the nightmares followed.

Colorless creatures slunk at his sides, unseen from all save him. They whispered. Near and around him, their cold breaths pressed against his ear. Sometimes he could understand their mutterings: *Who are you?* Nobody. *What have you achieved?* Nothing. Other times they were the lost language of a faraway galaxy. A language—a world—Rhone only knew of in history lessons. A world his parents spoke of, in hushed tones of their own.

The nightmares often appeared in the shadows. In corners steeped in inky darkness. But he supposed that was to be expected.

After all, nightmares were creatures of the dark.

What Rhone did *not* expect was to feel them—to sense them—creeping silently after him even in broad daylight. Even in fleeting moments of happiness, they writhed through the holes around his heart, wriggling their way into anything and everything.

Until they were all he could see anymore.

His sister's smile was not a smile, but a leer. His father's look was not one of fondness, but of judgment.

And his mother? To his mother, Rhone would never be anything but a reminder.

Of all that had once been.

Of the woman she had once called Mother. The woman Rhone so resembled, in carriage and in character.

Of a monster who had all but destroyed everything she touched.

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Without a glance back, Rhone left the warmth and merriment of his family's dinner gathering, as he tended to do of late. It was not meant to be a slight to anyone in particular. It was just his way. The parties hosted under the illustrious banner of the Imuriv family were different from many of the celebrations given by other highborn nobles of Oranith; his family's parties were never the garish kind. Instead, they were ones filled with friends and food and laughter, often culminating in tales of his mother's youthful exploits.

As Rhone made his way down the curved corridor, he caught his reflection sneering back at him in the rounded surface of the white wall to his right.

Despite his mother's best efforts, her parties did not deceive him. Though she strove to make them seem inclusive, Rhone knew his presence was—and always would be—unnecessary. Extraneous. The celebrations were tasteful, clearly gatherings meant to reflect their family's status. On the ice planet of Isqandia, in its shining capital of Oranith, there was not a single child who did not know of the Imuriv family.

Most knew of the name fondly. After all, Rhone's mother was quite beloved, despite the whispers of her past. As the sovereign of Oranith, she had brought an era of unprecedented peace to the planet ruled by women.

Others remembered the Imuriv name . . . much less fondly.

A name infamous for murder. Painted by the brush of darkest warcraft.

Colored by ancient, unknowable thaumaturgy.

As Rhone continued walking down the cool, darkened corridors of his family's ice fortress, the familiar hum of droning machines took on

a presence of its own. A lulling, hypnotic sort of presence. Lost in its gentle purr, Rhone stopped to wonder what kind of woman his grandmother had been to those she loved.

What kind of woman. What kind of sovereign. What kind of mother she had been before her own daughter executed her for committing war crimes.

Odd how his grandmother seemed to rule Rhone's most recent dreams. Dreams of searing reckoning. Of blood and glory. Dreams of all that could never be.

At least not for him. Or for any man of Isqandia.

The sound of sliding glass whirring open caught Rhone's attention. He turned his head back toward the dinner gathering. A servant in a jauntily patterned smock was bringing his family's guests another round of drinks. Followed by another tray of food. Clinking glasses and cheerful laughter spilled into the hallway, calling Rhone back. Beckoning him to take his rightful place at his mother's side. When he hesitated, the doors snapped quickly shut. The warmth and the cheer faded into memory. Into nothingness.

Rhone turned and resumed his nighttime haunt through the halls of his family's fortress, staying to the curtain of shadows along one side. His hand grazed across the smooth white paladrium wall. The curve of its rounded center, and the soft blue light of its databands, flashing in lines at his shoulders and at his feet. At any moment, Rhone could pause and ask the blue band of light a question. Almost any question. It would respond in less than the blink of an eye. But such a machine could not answer any of Rhone's most pressing questions. No. For now, the blue glow only served to light the path before him.

A small bot no bigger than Rhone's boot careened around a corner, whisking its way to deliver a message contained in the outstretched grip of its metal tongs. A message clearly meant for Rhone's mother. Or perhaps his all-important sister. When the bot spotted Rhone crouching beside the strip of blue light nearest the floor, it stopped with a high-pitched squeal.

The bot lingered, uncertain.

Then the tiny metal creature backed up warily, pausing once more before continuing to chirp its way toward the well-appointed banquet hall at Rhone's back.

Rhone suppressed a wry grin.

Even the brainless bots knew better than to trod in Rhone Imuriv's path. It appeared the tale of his most recent misdeed had already spread to even the lowliest of servants residing within the ice fortress of Oranith.

Perhaps Rhone shouldn't have kicked that cheeky bot out of the way last week. Though he could not recall doing it, his anger had clearly ruled his mind for an instant. A twisted part of him had relished the sight as the small bot had sailed through the air, only to land with a sickening thud against a paladrium wall in the east wing. He'd watched in morbid fascination as the bot slid to the floor with the saddest of chirrups. He might not control much of anything in his life, but at least he had power over these silly metal creatures.

Still, a twinge of guilt knifed through him.

Rhone knitted his brow. Pressed his lips tight.

No. It was not his fault.

The tiny creature without a soul should not have dared to challenge him. And it had been doubly the fool for interrupting him while he was reading, all for the silliest of reasons.

Rhone had not wanted to play d'jaryek with his sister that day. Anymore than the day before that. Or the day after. Altais was a merciless opponent when it came to games of strategy like d'jaryek. And Rhone did not care to fight battles he could not win.

Nor was he in the mood to smile generously through a loss. He was not his father.

No. He would never be his father.

He would never be the kind of fool who happily stood in the shadows of greater women.

As he mused over these and so many other thoughts, Rhone felt his feet carry him toward the game room, unbidden. His steps were smooth

and soundless in the elastine soles of his boots. He adjusted the platinum clasp of his navy cloak and straightened its complicated folds. They hung from his left shoulder, in a style nodding to yesteryear. A style hearkening to an imperium lost eons ago.

When Rhone rounded the final corner, he stopped short. The sliding doors to the game room were slightly open, the space between them no bigger than the span of one hand. A white glow emanated from within, its light nothing but a weak ribbon from floor to ceiling.

His curiosity growing, Rhone moved toward the room.

As soon as he brushed his palm across the access panel, the doors slid open fully. The glow inside flashed bright, like lightning cutting across a dark firmament.

Without thinking, Rhone lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the burning light. Once his sight had adjusted, he found himself in the spherical chamber he and his sister had often played in as children. The walls were normally the same shining white as the corridors.

But today a different scene greeted Rhone.

Waves lapped at a holographic shore in the distance. The sun shone high in a clear blue sky. The sand at his feet and along the chamber perimeter was crystalline, glittering all around him like infinitesimal gems. Rhone walked through the room. Birds that had been extinct for millennia—cawing, long-beaked beggars with creamy feathers—drifted above him, their images so clear and crisp Rhone resisted the urge to reach out and offer them a holographic morsel of food.

Even the air smelled briny and sharp and otherworldly.

"This was our favorite," a soft voice emanated from behind him.

Rhone shook his head without turning around. "Yours. Not mine."

"Did you not like it?" Careful footsteps padded closer.

"I preferred the one with the volcano."

Cutting, feminine laughter echoed clear across to the other side of the shore. "Liar."

At that, Rhone glanced over one shoulder, his forehead creasing. "How did you know I was coming here, Altais?"

His sister strolled fully into view, her steps light, her gait precise.

Her smile had upturned all her features. She wore a playful expression. One that Rhone could not mirror, no matter how hard he tried, though so much of their appearances were so similar. Altais shared his dark hair and pale skin. His strong eyebrows and bladed cheekbones.

But while these features appeared severe on Rhone, they managed to look striking on Altais.

With nothing constructive to say, Rhone decided to tease. "You're wearing a dress?" He peaked a brow. "How ridiculous."

"Why is that?" She crossed her arms, the jeweled gauntlet on her left hand sparkling in the light of the holographic sun.

"You look like a fool."

Altais huffed, a gauntleted finger tapping against an elbow. "It doesn't matter if I'm wearing a dress, a suit of armor, or nothing at all. I can still beat anyone who dares to challenge me."

"Dresses are for silly, foolish girls." Rhone grinned mockingly. "I defy you to contradict me."

"Better a silly, foolish girl than a sullen boy like you, skulking in the darkness." She sniffed. "Besides, I like the colors." With a flourish of her skirts, she spun in place. Her dress flashed through a series of rainbows. Rhone recognized the material. It was among the most costly to procure, made of a special cynesilk woven from the strands of many tiny mirrors. Mirrors too small to see with the naked eye. Far too many mirrors for any one person to count.

When Altais was done spinning, she glided nearer to the aquamarine waves. The colors of the ocean rippled across her flowing skirts, deepening until they became a beautiful complementing color, tinged by the rose of a setting sun.

She looked like a girl, for once, instead of the next in line to rule Oranith.

A sudden realization took hold of Rhone. "Are you meant to catch a man at Mother's dinner party with that ridiculous dress?"

"Excuse me?"

"Because you should know it won't work." Despite his best efforts, Rhone could not conceal the petulance in his voice.

Altais's pale brown eyes softened. "Why are you being so hateful tonight, Rho?"

A small pang of remorse flared near his heart. Rhone hated the note of pity in her words. "You've never wanted to marry before. And I can only imagine a dress that hideous to have an equally insidious purpose."

His sister's shoulders sagged for an instant. Then Altais stood taller. "I'm only sixteen. No one is going to force me to marry. Mother wouldn't allow it."

"You say that . . ." Rhone had found a footing. Something to cow his usually confident sister. And he refused to relinquish his hold a moment too soon. "But the matriarchy passes to you—the eldest of the Imuriv daughters. Eventually, you will have to marry to continue the lineage."

"I'm not the eldest Imuriv," Altais grumbled back with a nod to him. "But I am the *only* Imuriv daughter."

"A fact for which I've been constantly reminded my entire life. And . . . a burden I do not want for myself." He tried to sound sympathetic, but the chord he struck did not ring true, even to his own ears.

"Be glad it isn't you, Rhone Valtea Imuriv. Or else you might be the one forced to wear a silly dress."

A ghost of a smile drifted across his lips. "That would indeed be a fate worse than death."

"Or maybe you harbor a secret love of fashion." She grinned back. "Then perhaps you can pray some tragedy befalls me in the near future." Altais stepped closer. "Should that happen, I swear on the fourth star that I will leave you this dress."

Rhone snorted, almost amused. In moments like these, he recalled how close they'd once been. How easily they'd championed each other as children. How much they'd shared. So many memories. "That alone would be reason enough to wish your death."

"Careful, Rho," she whispered, biting back a laugh. "Should anyone overhear you, they might be apt to accuse you of treason." The last

word echoed into the holographic blue sky. As the sound ricocheted from the rounded ceiling, a murder of beggar birds scattered in its wake.

Altais's cheeks colored. Her gaze drifted to one side.

Though his sister had pronounced the statement in an unmistakably lighthearted tone, her words nevertheless conjured an entirely different picture.

One of blood and fiery retribution.

Grandmother.

"Careful, Altais," Rhone murmured. "That word spoken by an Imuriv is a promise of impending doom." He took a step back, almost satisfied to see a sudden pallor descend on his sister's face.

Rhone sobered, thoughts of impending doom beginning to take shape. "A bot delivered a message to Mother not long ago. Is there any word on the unrest happening on the planets along the eastern quadrant of the Byzana system?"

Altais took a deep breath. "I have yet to hear anything of substance." Nevertheless, her eyes glittered knowingly.

The sight rankled Rhone. Another sneer formed across his lips. "The Byzana system lacks the resources to mount a proper defense. If they don't pay restitution, then we will simply obliterate what remains of their harvest."

"Mother does not agree with your assessment." Altais frowned. "Neither do I."

"You'd rather levy empty threats at those who defy us?"

She shook her head slowly. "Mother and I would rather meet with the Byzanate leaders and seek a diplomatic solution."

"Then you both are the greatest fools of all."

Dismay flashed first across Altais's features, followed quickly by anger. "How can you say that when Mother sacrificed—"

"Don't offer me a history lesson, little sister. And I've heard quite enough of your lectures on filial devotion."

A groove formed between her brows. "Mother would take you to task for such words, Rho. It's wrong to—"

“Given her lack of filial devotion toward her own mother, I’m not certain I care what she thinks.” Rhone turned his back on his sister and focused instead on the small, cylindrical control center near the back of the spherical chamber. It was camouflaged in the trunk of a gently swaying tree with leafy fronds that grazed the shimmering sand.

Rhone watched the leaves dust the holographic surface as a discomfiting silence filled the space between Altais and him. The silence settled into the cracks, bringing them further to light.

A soft touch fell upon his shoulder. “Come . . .” Altais’s voice was gentle. “I didn’t plan this so that we would bicker about politics. I came because I wished to play a game with you.”

Rhone remained silent. For a brief instant, he considered throwing off her touch. But they were standing in the room with the best of his childhood memories. And Altais had been a part of so many happy ones. Before power, family, and responsibility threatened to pull them apart. Before he realized he had no place in his own family. Rhone glanced past his shoulder, his gaze flitting across her gauntlet, its jewels cut to mask intricate dials and gleaming screens no bigger than his thumb. Finally, his eyes paused on her face. “Not d’jaryek,” he said curtly.

Her laughter was impish. “You’ve already turned me down twice. If you turn me down once more, I’ll tell everyone you’re afraid to play against me.”

At that, Rhone did throw off her touch with a disdainful roll of his shoulder. “It has nothing to do with fear.”

“Then why won’t you play?”

“Why don’t we shoot instead?” Rhone walked toward the small white chest near the control console. The box had once gleamed as bright as the bare walls around him. Now it was scored by tiny marks, and its corners were worn smooth.

He pressed the latch, and the cover of the chest rolled back with uneven clicks. Rhone removed two miniature carbines, their surfaces similarly damaged. The silver barrels of the two laser weapons were

notched by years of play. When he pressed the switch on one, the muzzle of the carbine sputtered before flashing to life. He aimed it at the wall, then quickly spun in place to shoot one of the squawking beggar birds from the sky. It fell to the sparkling sand with an ear-piercing cry. With a satisfied smirk, Rhone brandished his weapon, watching the tiny sparks and residual smoke curl from its barrel.

"It still works," he mused.

"Of course. Mother made sure we were given only the best."

Rhone tossed the other carbine to Altais. "First one to take down ten birds wins."

"No."

"Then—"

"Why don't we make a deal?" she interrupted. "Play one game of d'jaryek with me, and I'll shoot one round with you."

Though Rhone knew Altais to be a more skilled player of d'jaryek, he knew she would not leave him be if he did not at least try. And he could even the score and then some when it came to a round of carbine shooting.

Altais had never been the best shot. She was a formidable opponent when it came to iceblades, but she'd never mastered using a carbine.

"Fine." He nodded. "But don't cry to our father when you walk away burned."

Altais snorted, and for an instant Rhone recalled her as a child. "Don't cry to Mother when you're left without even a cat's paw on the d'jaryek board."

"I haven't cried to Mother for an age," he retorted, his voice dripping with disdain.

The siblings took position near the back of the room, where the lone console stood waiting. Altais pressed her palm to its surface, and the walls of the chamber flashed from their forestlike splendor back to the subdued dark of the cosmos. She pushed several more buttons, and slowly swirling galaxies blossomed to life in a kaleidoscope of color.

Altais continued sliding her fingers across the console screen and pushing several more buttons. A round table emerged from the smooth floor behind them. Two white chairs followed suit.

The d'jaryek board lay in the table's center. Black and white squares cut at a diagonal across its entire round surface. Along the table's edges were the game's controls. D'jaryek was first and foremost a game of survival.

His sister positioned herself before the controllers on the right. With a sigh, Rhone took his place opposite.

They both struck the switches that brought the board to life. As with the toy carbines, the board flickered, the lights wavering in place before settling on paler, grainier versions of themselves.

When the images finally cleared, a portion of Rhone's pieces on the d'jaryek board fluttered to life. His pawns were sharply curving antlers. His soldiers were gazelles—the craftiest of all the possible avatars. Altais's pawns were cats' paws, her soldiers spotted cheetahs—the swiftest of all the avatars in the game of d'jaryek.

Rhone frowned. He folded his left hand atop his right, taking time to choose his words. "Do you suppose it says something that the game chose a cat as your avatar?"

"No. Unless you believe there's meaning behind the fact that *your* avatar is commonly the food of mine." A mischievous sparkle alighted Altais's gaze.

"Only if they are caught." His frown deepened.

"Then, by all means, let's see who catches whom."

A dial sputtered to life in the center of the d'jaryek board. Both Rhone and Altais struck it.

Rhone won the right to move one of his pieces first—an antler shifted two spaces forward.

Altais mirrored his move.

They played in silence for a time.

When Rhone looked up from the board after his fourth move, he saw his sister staring at him, a thoughtful expression lingering on her face.

"What?" he demanded.

"Are you still very mad at me and Mother?"

Rhone shifted in his seat. "I was never angry in the first place."

"Why do you lie to me so much, Rho? I know you better than anyone else."

"I wasn't angry." His tone was clipped.

Altais sighed. "Would it matter if I told you I was sorry?"

"I was never angry!" Rhone's voice rose in pitch until the final word bordered on a shout.

His sister shot him a pointed glare. "You're a terrible liar, by the way. It was part of the reason why Mother and I thought politics would be trying for you."

Rhone pinched his eyes shut, trying to control his temper.

He attempted to clarify. "I was never—"

"Rhone!"

"Damn it, Altais, let me finish, for once!" His thunderous cry echoed throughout the chamber.

Altais leaned back and waved a hand for him to continue.

"I was never angry," Rhone repeated. "But I was disappointed. You—" He toyed with a d'jaryek piece, his hands flitting across the control screen. The holographic antler spun in place. "You will have the sovereignty of Oranith. It's your birthright. And possibly all of Isqandia. I thought to make a name for myself, too, within our Caucus. I am not certain why you and Mother were so against it."

Altais took a deep breath. "Father did not think it a wise idea, either."

"And why is that?" Rhone's shoulders tightened. He refrained from turning his hands to fists. "Since when did Father ever bother to share his opinion on such matters?"

"We"—she hesitated, chewing on her lower lip—"hoped you would stay on Isqandia and help with everything here."

Anger collected in Rhone's chest. "Do you wish for me to be honest with you?"

"Of course."