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Opening extract from

Bloodline: Rising

Written by

Katy Moran

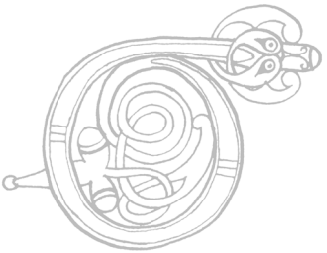
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Prologue
Constantinople, AD 643

The young man moved like a cat: quick, sure. His name was Essa; his eyes were blacker than well water, and they glittered with a strange, hard light. More than a handful of the harbour's pickpockets glanced his way and made other plans – swiftly. There was easier prey. Tall and rangy, Essa wore a sword in a dark, silver-wrought scabbard. Only a fool would have doubted that he was ready to use it, or the keen-edged dagger in his belt, or any one of the six knives hidden about his person.

"Come on, my honey." Stepping light and fleet from the wooden gangway and on to the quay, he took the girl's hand, helping her ashore. She was with child – and near her time by the look of it.

If Essa and his girl saw how folk stared at them, at their lean fairness, at the strange brightness of their hair – hers white, like the wing of a swan, his flame-red – they paid no

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heed. Caught up in the swirling throng, dazed by the crackle and hiss of the strange tongue spoken all around them, they wove through the crowd to the harbour wall.

"We did it, Lark, we got away." He held the girl as close as her swollen belly allowed.

Lark smiled, leaning back against the sun-warmed stones. "What are we going to do now?"

"Have a child, by the look of you."

She laughed. "Talk sense. The haul your mother gave us shan't last for ever, and like as not the folk in this place shall do everything they can to cheat us, just as they did in Carthage."

Essa closed his hand around the hilt of his sword, and shrugged. "Ah, well then, you shall have a child, and I'll fight for gold. This Emperor of theirs must have an army somewhere. We'll find it."

Lark looked away, sighing. "We've coin enough to last awhile."

They turned as one, backs to the sea. Shielding their eyes with their hands, Essa and Lark gazed up at the soaring city walls ahead; the jumbled red roof-tops and white buildings; the veins of greenery stretching down to the water – dusty gardens and tangled, overgrown orchards; the vast, domed church of rose-pink stone skeined with drifts of bluish smoke, and the huge sky above it all, dotted with wheeling seabirds, dashes of white against the brightness. *How many people must live in there,* Essa wondered, *seething all over one another like ants?* Among the jumble of wharves and ship

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masts, there were even rickety houses crammed on to piles stretching out over the water where lines of ragged, faded washing flapped in the sea wind. Women – thumb-sized at this distance – gathered around washing-tubs, shrieking at the children who leaped off the pilings into the sea, narrowly missing the fishing skiffs that thronged the harbour.

Looking at it all, hardly able to believe the sheer size of this city, Essa felt a pang for the wide, flat marshes of his homeland, where the sky stretched on for ever, and a man could really breathe. *But there's no going back*, he thought. *We can never go back*.

"Do you think they'll be all right?" Lark said at last, and in her mind she saw those who had been left behind. So few had survived. "Do you think they'll forget us, in the end?"

Essa leaned down, breathing in the warm, salty smell of Lark's hair. "Fenrir will never forget," he said, quietly. Then he smiled. "And Mother will tell Thorn about us, and Hild and Egric, and my father, and it shall all grow into a fireside tale."

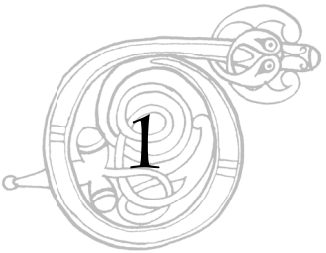
Lark took his hand. "And what a tale. What a mess."

He laughed. "Ah, God, but we're away from it now. Are you ready?"

And in the years that came afterwards Essa would say he knew, even then, that there was no hope they could escape what had gone before. For a man's past is like his shadow and it follows him everywhere, always just a step behind.

They walked on, into the city.

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1

Constantinople, some years later

They are not quick enough to catch me. Jesu, but it's hot up here. A dusty heat haze hovers above the city, blurring the great dome of Santa Sofia. The sea beyond glitters like cloth-of-gold. A pearl of sweat slides from beneath my headscarf and down my cheek. Swallowing a bubble of laughter, I slip into the shadow of a church. From this roof-top, I can see all the way back down to the street market nibbling at the walls of the Hippodrome. There they are: two city guardsmen pushing through a heaving crowd – it is like looking down on a carpet seething with moths.

Too slow, my friends, too slow.

The Greens and the Blues are racing at sundown, and already folk are spilling into the circus quarter from every street, square and slum. Unlike me, they do not know which charioteer will be the faster tonight. A lot of them will lose money on it, some more than they can afford. *They should*

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not be so free with their coin, then, I think, annoyed with myself. Why should I feel sorry for them? The choice is theirs.

I squat in the dust and bite the last pink, glassy pomegranate seeds from their bitter skin, watching the crowd flow around my two guardsmen. All this fuss for a mangy fruit. It is not often a stallholder sees me, and ill luck it was that the guard were only paces away. I shall have to be more careful. I laugh again, softly though, for I can hear voices coming from the room below this roof-top – feel them, almost, shaking up through the sun-baked red tiles.

Time I was away. There is work to do.

Demosthenes is in the circus stables, leaning over the stall gate and murmuring something into the pricked-up ear of one of his horses – Helen, she's called. Demosthenes races a pair of greys, matched so well they hardly take a step out of time. The other he calls Paris. Demosthenes reads too much; if I were a charioteer, I should not name my horses after a pair of doomed lovers.

Leaning into the shelter of a barrel stacked up by the far wall, I breathe in the warm, round stink of oats, straw and horse shit. I watch Demos lean further over the gate, rubbing Helen between her black-tipped ears as he whispers to her. He talks to Helen as if she were a woman rather than a horse. He loves her. He does not know I am here: I am good at not being seen. I smile, resting back against the sun-warmed barrel. Demosthenes the Great may love his horses, but it will not stop him losing this race. *You are the*

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greatest chariot-rider this city has ever seen, I think, *but you are really bad at dice.*

I step out of the shadows.

"You again, boy," says the charioteer, turning to look at me. Demos is a slight man, not much taller than I am, with black hair that curls back from his forehead. But the muscles on his lean arms are knotted like leather cords and I know he is not a man to bait. His pride is wounded, for a start. That always makes them worse: madder than snakes in a barrel. "You're like a ghost, the way you creep around." Demos frowns. "How came you to be in here?"

I smile, fixing my eyes on his, and for a moment he looks as if he has lost his senses, or cannot remember who he is nor why he's standing in this stable. "My master sent me to remind you," I say. "About the race."

Demos shakes his head, running his hands through his hair. "Tell the Emperor of Thieves not to fret – the Blues shan't win tonight, and my debt'll be paid out. Let me tell you one thing, brat – never play dice. Or not for money, at least." The charioteer stares at me, eyes narrowed. "What age are you, anyhow? Should you not be at home with your mother?"

But I've no time to spare for foolish questions. "Hear this," I tell him. "If you win tonight, before sunrise the whole city shall know you've been fixing races for gold. But if you lose as we agreed, no one will ever know of it. Do not forget."

Demos sighs, and the fine lines around his eyes seem to

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grow deeper. He looks so tired, and I know why. Once there was a church-man who spoke out against the True God, and I saw him borne through the streets by a great tangled throng of men and women – even some children younger than me. Baying and screaming they were, tearing out his beard, gouging at his eyes. I remember my mother – *What manner of place is this, where they treat men like lumps of meat,* she cried. My shoulder ached by the time she had dragged Elflight and me home (this was before Tecca was born. Oh, but it hurts in my belly to think of Tecca, even now.) When the mob had finished with the bishop, we heard the corpse was missing an arm and that his tongue had been ripped out.

That's what shall happen to Demos, if anyone finds out he fixes the races for coin, I think, and I can tell by the weariness in the charioteer's eyes that he knows this, too.

"I've chosen my path, I'll go where it takes me," Demos says, and his courage makes me feel ashamed; I'll never be like him. My path is the quickest road to riches, and may the devil take anyone who gets in my way. It is not an honourable choice, but this is the first time I have cared. Demos walks across the stable towards me, moving all swift and catty. "There's something about you, boy," he says. "I've been trying to catch at it for weeks – who are you?"

Mary Mother of God. It is time I was gone.

Out of the stables, back into the heaving market-place of the Hippodrome. The great bulk of Santa Sofia looks down on me as if in judgement; her walls glow pinkish in the dying

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light. Smoke from a thousand cook-fires blues the air, and I suck in the scent of grilled meat: chicken and tiny quails with sweet flesh nestling under the blackened skin, fish drawn silvery and flipping from the Sea of Marmara just this morning. I'm hungry, despite the pomegranate, but there's no time for my kind to fill our bellies while people swarm into the Hippodrome for the race. Shutters are left open, doors unlatched; this will be a ripe evening for the Emperor of Thieves' children. There are so many empty homes, so many trinkets and baubles. The Emperor takes most of it, but not all – enough to keep us coming back for more. I am learning from my master. One day I shall be greater than him, and I will be King of the Underworld, lord of smuggling, gambling, casual pickpocketry, bribery and theft.

I move through the throng like an eel weaving through weeds at the bottom of a slow green river. A gaggle of young men in blue armbands shove their way past and I step back into a narrow doorway to let them by. They are loud and drunk, steeped in wine already, which makes me smile. They shall be none too pleased when Demos the Great loses the race at the last lap. If they've any luck, they'll spend most of their gold on wine before they have time to place any ill-fated bets. I think of Demos, alone in the stables with his horses. How strange it must be for him, running through the race in his mind, working out when to lose instead of how to win. Poor Demos. But I'm being soft-headed, a fool. Demos is right: he chose his path the moment he laid more money on dice than he could borrow.

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Slipping west down near the Great Palace, I turn into an alley darkened by tall houses with balconies and windows blistering out of their walls. Even here, there is a throng. A girl is selling sugared lemons from a tray hanging around her neck, and men are sitting on the steps of the houses drinking wine and arguing about the race.

"It'll be Demosthenes again," says a fat man, gesturing wildly with his wine-cup so that dark liquid splashes out and stains the dusty street. "And don't try to tell me otherwise, Mikos, because you only make yourself look a fool. Temon can't beat Demosthenes. He's not got the speed."

I leave behind the raised voices. Little do they know. At the end of the alley lies a secret hole, hidden behind a tangle of warm green vines and a heap of decaying brick. My city is old beyond time, and she has many hide-away, crumbling places – I know them all, and I love each one. Drawing in my breath, I clear my mind and think of nothing, knowing that although the street is heaving with people, no one will see me as I slip into the darkness. Already my skin feels damp. It is cold down here. Someone has left a torch alight further down the passage, and it casts a dim, oily glow on the stone walls. There is a smell of stale water that reminds me of wet metal, of rain drying on my father's sword out in the courtyard, long ago. *Don't think about him.*

Smoke hits the back of my throat. Someone has got the fire going in the tin cook-pot I stole from that one-eyed stallholder up on the Mese. Who is it? Who's here? Surely most are on their way to the Hippodrome, already busy

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liberating coin from the moneybags of foolish people. Soon the cold passageway opens out, and I see a forest of vast stone pillars reflected in the long, dark pit of water spreading out before me. They are like trees turned to rock by a witch-man. In places daylight streams down through holes in the vaulted roof where the paving slabs on the streets above have cracked, worn by many thousands of human feet. Tendrils of tangled weeds hang down, twisting in the slanted light.

Some say this flooded underground palace was once the home of a wicked empress, and that she was cast beneath the earth along with her rooms and all her riches as a punishment from God for her sins. Some say she walks among her chambers still, her hair knotted with slime, her skin whiter than bone. You may never be sure when she will come. I know that all this is untrue – because I made it up. The Kingdom of the Ghost is nothing but a big old underground lake which keeps fresh water flowing in the Great Palace. But it pays to have my subjects leery and afraid.

When I first came here, the water was so low I could wade from pillar to pillar, but then it rose and last year we built rope paths. That was a lot of rope we stole from the docks. Days and days it took to get it all. I leap onto a rope path now and run – it bucks and sways beneath me but I have never fallen yet. Who is down here, sitting by my fire, while all the rest are out harvesting riches for our master? This is *my* place – when you are here alone it feels like you are lord over it all; the thought of someone else claiming my rightful kingdom makes me feel cold and shivery.

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Don't be a fool, I tell myself. *It's probably just Iskendar or Niko waiting for you.* Yet I cannot help it: I've a sense there's something sore amiss down among the pillars of my dark, watery palace. I almost see the intruder now – it's gloomy here. He's big, whoever it is. Bigger than me: who? My master's older subjects rarely visit my kingdom. I am like a spider in their soup, a thorn in the soles of their feet – I have always known it riles them, seeing the master trusts me more, that he uses me for his more interesting and delicate tasks even though I am younger by far. Well, it is not my fault I am better. The best thief in Constantinople.

It is Thales. Thales the Knife.

He is sitting on the ledge by my cook-pot fire, legs dangling down towards the water. His toes graze the surface. He is not frightened of the dark, glassy depths. Unlike the others.

"Why so quickly, little Ghost?" Thales says, turning to look at me in the shadows. Thales is taller than me by a head and a half – he must have fourteen summers at least – and his limbs are knotted with muscle. Everyone knows how he got his name. No one plays games with the Knife. I wish now that I had crept up on him instead of bounding in like this. A foolish mistake. My second of the day, after nearly getting caught by the guard for filching that pomegranate. If Iskendar and Niko knew of that, they would never let me forget it.

I shrug, stepping off the rope path onto the ledge. "It is not often you delight us with your noble self down here, Thales the Knife."

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Thales lifts one eyebrow. Everyone is always so fawning and slimy towards him he cannot tell if I'm mocking or no. *Surely the brat wouldn't dare?* I see the thought flash across his mind as clearly as if it were my own. "I don't concern myself with children, that's why," he says.

I lean back against the wall and it chills my skin, but at least I can look down on him like this. "I'm all the more honoured, then," I say. "How may I serve you, Thales? I pray you, be quick. It's time I was away to the circus."

Thales smirks. "There'll be no circus for you tonight, my boy," he says.

I have to think about Tecca to stop myself laughing at him. I'm so full of sin, using poor Tecca like this, but I'm sure she would not mind.

"You're wanted," Thales goes on. "You're to go up to the villa before the sun is down. Do you know where it is?"

We both know that I have been admitted into the chambers of our Emperor more times than he. *Fool!* I tell myself. *Don't let him see you think he's not got the brain of an ox.* I smile, saying, "I think I know it well enough."

What does he want, I wonder, feeling a tiny flicker of fear. It pays ill to get on the wrong side of our master, and he does not like us to forget this. I cannot help thinking of Black Elias – till last summer, he was our master's golden angel-thief who could do no wrong. And then word got out that instead of tumbling his stolen prizes into the lap of the Emperor, Elias had been selling them to traders out of Chalcedon. Elias has not been seen for many a long month.

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They say he was found floating in the harbour with both hands missing. The Emperor of Thieves does not make a quick end for his enemies.

But what am I thinking? I've done no wrong; I'm not like Elias. All that I steal, I hand over to my lord.

"I hope you've been behaving yourself, little Ghost," Thales says. "I wouldn't want to be in your place if you've not. Better go directly to Master, hadn't you?"

Thales is boring me now. And he is right. It's time I was away. The Emperor does not like to be kept waiting, and besides which, I'm curious. What can he want? But before I find out I must teach the Knife a lesson.

It happens quite easily – all thought, all colour drains from my mind as I step away from the leaping shadows of the cook-pot fire.

Thales shakes his head; if he'd a friend with him he might try not to look scared, but he's alone – he cannot help it. "Where've you gone, you little witch? Your tricks don't scare me, brat," he hisses.

Just because he cannot see me, he thinks I cannot hear him. He is wrong: there is no ungodly magic here. I am just quiet, and quick, but it fills people with fear when the next moment I am just not there any more. Up the wall I go, digging my toes into gaps, curling my fingers over crumbling ledges, gripping at plants creeping out of cracks. I'm climbing up to the light – there's a hole in the vaulted roof where a paving slab's fallen down into my underground lake.

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I feel the breath quicken in my body; I want to laugh as I climb.

Thales is standing now, holding on to one of the rope walkways, looking around. "You think you're so cunning, don't you?" he says. "But one day soon you'll get what's coming to you, you and your barbarian witch-father. He's a traitor now, or had you not heard the news? Don't think I don't know who you really are, Ghost. You've no place in the Empire of Thieves."

My father. A cold, empty feeling washes over me. What does Thales the Knife know about him? But I don't stop climbing. That's what Thales wants. He wants to goad me into coming back, so I try to fight him. As if I'd be that foolish. He'd love an excuse to finish me off.

Who does he think I am?

I'm nearly there, nearly out into the street. I can feel the light warm on my face. Up, up. I'm out. Out on the street, pressing my face against the sun-baked pavement. A woman nearly trips over me and looks back, cursing. She cannot see me. It is a skill I have. I can go anywhere without being seen; I can do anything.

It is why they call me the Ghost, and it is why no one can stop me.

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