

RONIN

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Book I

Claruye Forest

DRAGON HORDE PROPHECY

In a season of devastation, abandonment, and conceit,

The rulers of the age are admired.

But soon, they will be brought to nothing—

Earning a demotion to the nethermost tier.

Using their power, they will succumb to their natural darkness,

Always with the intention of war.

The One, Who created them all,

Made the men whose descendants have Dragon blood—men who turned

To demons for power.

*So, those who would follow the Dragon drank the blood of other men, turning into
vampires.*

Theirs is the story of humans who were tempted and chose

To share their souls with disembodied spirits.

Choice by choice, humans transformed.

In the same way the Dragon is becoming.

He will come to rule, and they will call him Hiiruun Dragon Fire.

Striving for purpose, conflict will take root in this ruler's heart.

*Created by The One to bring light to Claruye, The Dragon will be tempted to misuse the
gifts granted to him.*

*Hiiruun Dragon Fire will decide whether the Horde will use its powers to guide the lost
out of the darkness,*

Or, if the lost will simply be forced to find their own way out.

Despite his bloodline, the Dragon will be judged unfit by the demonic tribes of the Vampire body.

Some of his own creature clan will deem him a cancer once he is crowned their king.

Nevertheless, Hiiruun Dragon Fire will preside as their leader—

Accompanied by his Horde,

Warriors bearing silver armor like the scales of dragons.

And war will come.

A war fought for many reasons, by different tribes, and by different creature clans—

Some will choose to fight because of their newfound allegiance to The One.

Other clans will revolt against the self-righteous acts of their orthodox vampire brothers,

The Engineers. The Dragon is coming.

He will change the world as it changes him—its evil and its goodness.

The Dragon with his Horde will choose whether to stand in light or darkness.

Prologue

"She's gone!"

It was a wild-haired, wild-eyed witch. She threw herself into King Premagin's hall, where the ruler of this age of vampires reclined on his throne. She was babbling, spittle flying from her fear-whitened lips.

"Your human... She's escaped!" The witch said, justifying her presence. "*Ileeka is gone...and the child is with her! She's headed for the Red Cloud at Sundown Forest! Claruye!*"

Lifting his chin high, Premagin issued orders. So the vampires began chasing Ileeka—their king's missing human woman—as she struggled down Mount *Haaósi* with the boy. A child permeated with their king's royal blood...

The wind lived that day. The vampires used their demonic powers to breathe stale death into it, so that it reached for Ileeka.

A slave to their dark magic, the wind yielded to the power of the vampires' demonic authority over the world. As an instrument to the king's evil passion, the wind turned into a frozen claw in the arctic mountain conditions.

The moon was full. And in the night's dark, the light was never overpoweredⁱ.

Ileeka treasured the bundle in her arms more than her own life.

Bowing to King Premagin, also known as *the Devastator*, the north wind tore back Ileeka's hood. Mean-spirited branches and saplings assaulted her. Drifting, diamond hard snow pulled loose her hair, voluminous black skirts, mantle, and even strips of her skin. But still, Ileeka did not turn back.

She stumbled, tripped, and pressed on.

Even though she was all alone, bare-footed and drugged by the witch's candles, she would have stood a chance. After all, she was a very strong woman.

But supernatural forces were against her—vampire royalty—and they counted her an enemy.

Tears hardened into a mask over her feral, raw-boned face, as the vampires forced her to become a warrior. It suited her. Running for her child's chance to disappear and be saved, Ileeka decided what her grandmother had told her was true. *God has a heart for those who mourn*ⁱⁱ. She thanked Him that she and her true love—her child—were both still alive.

Near the east entrance of *Claruye*, she heard her grandmother humming to Jesus in her wild garden. Then she saw a vision of the sun following Nana's hunched back wherever her bare feet moved. Her yellow hair was almost white in the light.

As Ileeka breathed through her fear and moved into the shadows under the trees, her nana stopped singing and turned to her, saying, "Death makes a heart bleed when a man looks away from heaven to see himself. Even the evil ones know this. What do *you* see?"

Then her nana transformed into a celestial being.

Fresh tears trickled down her face and hardened into an icy coating on Ileeka's windblown skin. Chills burned through her veins as other memories of her grandmother convulsed in her chest. Her frozen legs forced her to kneel. Then she went down, feeling like she was breaking. Ileeka fell into a dead faint, thankful in her last moment of pure sensory reality that she toppled *backward*—rather than forward onto her son. Invisible

footsteps approached her as the watcher watched the snow fall in fat flakes around her delicate outline.

Taking on the form of Ileeka's grandmother before, now the warrior of light spoke in his true form: "I must get back. *Your son* will be given the chance to fulfill his purpose and his destiny by my merciful Master. You've called him *Macbeth Kaptan* but his father has a different name that he will wear one day. My Master says, 'His name will be *Ronin*, for he *is*.' He's heard your cries and seen your tears. He remembers your creature clan. He will keep guard while you sleep."

Ileeka said nothing in return because she was unconscious. The appointed guardian blew flames out around them, blinding and burning Ileeka's vampire pursuers. One warrior of light used his worship song to warn even the wind to turn back, as another warrior appeared to take his place. The flames continued to spread, entering the gate to an unseen world. The fire released fragrant poison, warning magical beings to stay far away. In the burned field only one human life remained. In this peculiar area of the world known as Morbid Earth, the moon turned its back.

Except for *the Devestator's* son, nothing but the ashes of a woman, her once long hair, and the sediment of her fragile bones were left—spreading over the ground with blood and the bitter water of melted ice.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ileeka was Premagin's jealousy offering, and her death brought the curse.

This is how Ronin Gerath's life started.

He'd grow up to say that on this day—the day he was abandoned—his life ended. It was the end of his biological mother, Ileeka, too. She'd loved him, but that would be lost. To death, and death after death...

If anyone ever told him, it would be almost impossible to believe that his mother had used her life to give him the chance to live...while his vampire family had nearly killed them both.

#1

Looking back, Morgan could see that the entire beginning had been like the old horror flick about the pregnant lady who found out that her man had traded her to a cult and her baby's dad was the devil—except that it had really happened: The darkness had snuck up on her...but had come to feel like it was inescapable. Like no matter what they would have done, it would have turned out the same... Like fate. So everything that happened seemed like a surprise, but when you looked back, you could see that it had always been coming.

Standing on East Lake High's quad with her hands in her pockets, and on the cusp of saying goodbyes, all kinds of memories flashed into her mind. *"The end is just what they say at the beginning of something else..."* In the past, she'd had trouble accepting the implications of those words, but as Morgan remembered how everything started; she hoped they were true.

The beginning... The beginning had been a high school lull between an adopted kid and the promise of who he could be. *None* of them—Morgan, Élan, Bliss, or Ronin—had realized it at the time. *Back then*, they'd all been regular kids. But then layers had developed and complicated everything. Layers were weight that could shift things and make what was hidden unstable. Layers could change the world...just as they had changed them.

It started out stupid. With a conversation about nothing. About fantasies. About vampires.

Morgan Lee, president of everything and editor of the school yearbook was still upset about her argument with a low-ranking friend, Jessica Dupree when she saw the new girl for the first time. Her entrance stopped all the talk that was setting the students of East Lake High School aflame. When the new girl passed by, Morgan sensed invisible creatures flying up, flapping with heavy wings, fleeing. Morgan had always been able to sense things in ways she was afraid to tell anyone else about. Sometimes it was a feeling inside. But sometimes she could feel what she sensed on her skin. Sometimes, she *saw* things.

When the new girl first passed by Morgan, she felt wind. It didn't matter that she was inside a building. The wind still swept across Morgan's face and ruffled her hair. What she was feeling changed the course of lives, including her own.

None of it made any sense, but deep down Morgan was sure that they—the unseen, flying creatures she'd felt—were going to *report* what they had seen.

The new girl was strange and perplexing—not the way new girls should be in high school, but like creatures being described in a science fiction fantasy often are. The energy that erupted when the new girl's green eyes met those of a boy Morgan really didn't know... Morgan *sensed* that energy in all the ways she had ever *experienced* them—in her gut, in her soul, on her skin, visually... Like sparks and fireworks of color exploding silently around her... Covered in her own goose bumps, Morgan understood what had unsettled them—both East Lake students and demon spies—in that one moment.

The new girl was the reason Morgan and Jessica had argued in the first place.
Jessica had important questions: *Is the new girl a vampire? And, Does she watch
'Vampires in Cleveland?'*

"So you've never heard of 'Vampires in Cleveland'? Every woman between the ages of...twelve and *fifty* has at least *heard* of it!" Jessica said, crossing her arms.

"Houston, we have a problem. Should I throw myself off a cliff, because *I* haven't? Jess, you crack me up!" Morgan said, rolling her eyes, but her smile softened her scorn. She checked a text on her phone as the notification buzzed in her hand, thumbed the phone to standby, and dumped it into the banana crème leather flap bag strapped across her body. She went back to going through her locker, moving things around, and deciding what things she needed for class.

"*Girl!* Are you saying you've never seen it? *Malachi* is something else! And his concubine, *Erica*, knows how to work her fishnets and leather! YASSS, girl!—do you hear me?" Jess's head moved side to side on her neck, and she punctuated her question with a fist on her right hip.

"I thought you were a God girl," Morgan said. She still didn't have the books and folders she needed for class. Leaning on the open door of her locker, Morgan pinned Jess with a serious look.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean that I live under a rock sporting my pilgrim skirt and bare face!" Jess said, crossing her arms and jutting out her chin. At this, Morgan's brow went up.

"Clothes and make-up don't mean anything to God... I was just kidding, but *vampires*, Jess? Really? They're evil and they suck blood!" Morgan lectured, while shaking her head.

"Remind me why we're talking about vampires?" Jess said.

"Um... Because you think the new girl *is* one, right? A *vampire*," Morgan said.

"She is!" Jess said, tightening her crossed arms and lifting them against her body.

"So you were saying..." Morgan said, smiling and waving Jess on to continue her argument.

"Yes! Think about it, Morg! A loner...appears out of nowhere...practically hypnotizes every boy at our school... I mean it's totally *weird!* She just shows up with those strange eyes... *No* parents," Jess said, in her most persuasive tone.

"I have to admit I'm zoning a little bit, Jess. Do you know this girl's name?" Morgan said, while blowing out a breath. With her left arm across her, resting her right elbow over her forearm, Morgan flipped her hand like a southern belle. "I mean, I would feel like an *idiot*—repeating any of this." Morgan's gentle tone masked her disdain a little, but Jess's eyes were unrepentant about the claims she'd made.

"I don't need a lecture," Jess said.

"I'm not lecturing you. But I seriously don't get what you're doing here," said Morgan. "Where you're going with all this..."

"Geez, why do you have to be all snotty about it?" Jess said while squinting and shaking her head. The way she was thrusting out her hip spoke volumes about her attitude.

"*Because...* I would really hate it if someone just...started putting all this crap out there about me. And it doesn't even make any sense." Dropping them down before her thighs, Morgan clasped her hands. "Also... The whole...She doesn't have any parents thing... It's hurtful and mean. And you'll look bad, because—"

"So I'm a bad guy? A mean girl? Because I point out the obvious?" Jess asked. Then she inhaled sharply, hands coming to both hips. Her shoulders pressed forward. Her mouth hung open, as she refused to accept Morgan's conclusion.

"*Vampires? In Cleveland?* It's a movie! It's not real life."

"Whatever," said Jess, biting her lip. "Listen, I don't know where you've been for, like, the past decade, but vampires are cool! And 'Vampires in Cleveland' is a popular TV show, *not* a movie, Morgan. This *gossip* will probably *improve* her status! That's probably what this girl wants! Have you even *seen* her? It doesn't sound like it! To me, it sounds like *you* think you're better than everyone else!" Jess used her fingers to make each point, like she was numbering her statements.

"I get it. You're feeling all these feels, but... You are watching too much television—"

"I don't need you to talk slow for me, doll. My hearing works just fine."

"Okay, so do you even hear yourself? You talk about these made-up stories like you're dealing with real people! Just because some boy you like is fantasizing about her—" Morgan was saying.

"Whatever!" Jess interrupted, and her hand became a stop sign in Morgan's face. "I, for one, don't have anything else to say to you." After pointing a finger in Morgan's direction as she said these words, Jess changed her posture to mirror Morgan's pose, with her hands clasped before her. Raising her eyebrows, she focused on her toes.

"I'm not letting it come between us. I heard what you said. I'm telling you what *I* think. And, I *am* going to talk to the new girl—an *actual, real* person. *For one.*"

Morgan, the taller girl, lifted her shoulders up around her ears and spread open her hands, like she had nothing left to say that might convince Jess otherwise.

"Good for you!" Jess said, annoyance twisting up her face. Morgan blinked and shrugged in response to the hostility aimed at her. Her fingers entwined in front of her.

"She's an orphan, Jess. Are we really gonna start bullying orphans?" Morgan said, shaking her head.

"She's *adopted*—"

"Now, yes, but didn't you say she lost her parents?"

"We are all so impressed, Morgan. By your ethics...and morals, whatever... Really, we are... And thank you so much for judging me." Jess clasped her own hands together under her chin, in mock supplication. She spoke with as much sarcasm as her hurt feelings could muster.

"Whatever. It's my turn not to care, I think," Morgan said.

Rolling her eyes, Jess fell away, melting into the stream of students that flowed through the halls surrounded by lockers. Finally able to focus enough to realize what she needed, Morgan quickly grabbed the book and the binder she was looking for. Rolling her eyes, Morgan closed her locker quietly. She looked at the oceanic blue metal under her green leopard spotted nails, shaking her head again. She blew out a breath feeling, like she'd won...and lost at the same time.

Down in the community of fire engine red lockers, anonymous high school things were happening, and ugly dramas were playing out in the restrooms. A place where hearts were being broken, because someone had torn a picture out of a locker and left it behind to be trod over with snowy shoes... There, two boys that Morgan really didn't

know were debating the new girl, too. One of them had his blue, blue eyes fixed on Morgan the whole time.

Even as he was telling Ronin Gerath about the new girl's strange green eyes, Élan Dixon was trying to figure out how to approach Morgan Lee. With Jessica Dupree backing away, Élan took advantage of the opportunity to talk to Morgan alone. He jogged up the steps to her locker while Ronin grabbed a few more things from his locker. Before Ronin caught up to him, Élan pressed into Morgan's personal space from behind.

"Excuse me," Élan murmured.

Morgan jumped and barely kept herself from screaming as the heat from a long, lean body invaded her space. Heart pounding, she stepped back. Her fingers tightened on her book and binder.

She didn't know his name, but whatever it was; he was blond as an angel with blue eyes. He was a man-boy with skin too browned by the sun for him to be labeled "pretty".

He said, "Hey."

Morgan opened her mouth, but the soft cigarette that was melting between his fingers kept her from saying anything back. Like a typical female lead in a 'Vampires in Cleveland' scene, Morgan dropped everything in front of her hunky male counterpart. She grabbed her forearm, like her hands had forgotten they were already busy holding her book and binder.

That's what his eyes did to her.

Morgan closed her eyes before the inevitable crash even came. She opened her eyes in time to see his soft smile before he bent down to pick up her things. That he'd

wiped the smile away before handing over her dropped book and binder helped Morgan to forgive him. They were standing so close together, she could feel the heat of his breath on her nose and lips.

And just like in that show she hated, the new girl walked by...right on cue. Before Élan could introduce himself and his friend; and before he could get Morgan's name, there she was. This new girl's presence was distracting and disrupting to the entire school.

"Speak of the devil," Morgan heard the breath-stealing blond say. He made a sound of appreciation that Morgan heard, and she knew his attention wasn't fixed on her, but on the new girl. Morgan made that realization and sensed something weird happening inside of her. This time, she didn't just experience the feeling *inside* or, *in her soul* or, on her skin or, visually. She heard words. His interest in the new girl was a catalyst for something: *You sure?* Morgan heard. *I mean a girl like that can't be all good, right? But seriously, don't you think there's something weird about her eyes?*

The air was electric around Morgan as the new girl floated past them without uttering a word. Something stirred inside of Morgan, and she felt something pushing against her. It felt like she was standing at the edge of a cliff, and she wanted to back away. Somehow, Morgan knew that nothing would stop whatever it was from coming.

"What's her name?" The question was asked by a new voice, and Morgan looked up to see a black-haired, black-eyed boy. Out of nowhere, Ronin Gerath had appeared beside the blond. The darkness of his eyes was as crushing as watching silver sun through passing clouds. The black of them was lovely and terrifying at the same time. Surrounded by long, perfect lashes, they pulled you in and sucked air from your lungs. It appeared to Morgan that *Ronin* had caught the new girl's attention, too, because she looked up.

Then, the sun stood still and silent, as gravity took hold of everything, even the air...and then suddenly let it all go again.^{iv} Time, the day, the high school routines and its people flowed freely again. Morgan just stood there trying to convince herself she hadn't seen white flames come to life in the new girl's green eyes.

As Morgan was still trying to normalize her emotions, she noticed the black-haired, black-eyed boy who'd been beside the blond angel had gone. He'd followed the new girl as if in a trance, without saying anything to anyone else before taking off.

"Élan," the gorgeous face said, finally, giving himself a name.

"Hi," Morgan said. She stared at him, until the warmth and certainty left his eyes. Then they backed away from each other. Needing to regroup, Morgan started to drift off toward the exit. Then she suddenly turned and bolted through the molded, metal archways.

She headed to class in a daze, reflecting on the situation. She didn't hear Élan ask what *her* name was.

There was no denying that something magical had happened when the new girl appeared on the scene. Like a chemical reaction that changed everything... Something asleep inside started to unwind and reveal unseen things to Morgan, and she started to transform. Élan's apparent curiosity about Morgan magnified the instant attraction between them, even as it tapped into unwelcome insecurity.

Before they even knew her name, all of East Lake knew that the new girl was extraordinary.

ⁱ John 1:5; *See also*, Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on John 1:1-5.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 5:4; Psalm 34:18.

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 5:17-19.

^{iv} Joshua 10:12-13.