

# BLOOD CURSE

THE DRAGON QUEEN SERIES



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URSULA VISSER

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# ONE

*'May the curse hunt you until eternity.'*

Sometimes, the softly spoken words she had heard little less than a week ago still haunted her in her sleep. There had been nothing soft about the woman who said these words to her.

Even though she'd tried to avoid thinking about that fateful evening, the memory had also crept into her conscious mind when she least wanted it to. Like at this moment, when she was about to kill the rabbit she hunted for dinner. It had been a while since she last tasted the wild rabbits that usually frolicked on the meadow but seemed so difficult to catch.

Mara lowered her bow; the image of the hard woman who spoke those paralysing words to her would not leave her alone. Her soft sigh alarmed the rabbit and it shot off into the distance, out of reach of her arrow.

'Get out of my head, woman.' Mara tucked the arrow back into the shaft. Every chance of having that rabbit for dinner was gone.

'You have called it upon yourself.' It was as if she could hear the woman's whispers in the breeze. She pushed back the memories, but they were relentless. As the breeze picked up and blew a strand of hair into Mara's face, she tried to ignore the image in her head. This time, she could not seem to win.

'Had you listened to your father, this would not have happened,' Yorina said. Mara looked up to her from her position below the steps that led to where Yorina sat. She wore a beautiful midnight-blue dress that seemed to hug every centimetre of her slender body. But even the beauty of the dress could not make up for the hard expression on her pretty face. She was not a woman known for compassion.

Mara dared to look at her father, who sat next to Yorina. His expression was blank, a tiny muscle at the corner of his eye twitched. Mara knew she was in trouble. 'The healers did a good job,' Mara said as she showed her arm to her mother. 'There is merely a scar left.'

'No matter what we say, you always seem to get yourself in harm's way, Mara. How many times did you think we were going to clean up your mess and deal with your—'

'Forgive me, Father. I just thought there was something wrong with them. They made a lot of noise and I could not see any of the caretakers around to...'

Her voice was fading away.

'You dare interrupt me, Mara?'

Shivers went through her spine. Her father's voice was as cold as ice. Mara bowed her head remorsefully. This

time she had really gone too far. She looked up when her mother tapped on the table.

‘You should have called a caretaker instead of going to the nursery yourself. They do have a purpose, you know. If one of them got infected by the dragon blood, and got the curse, we can dispose of them. Tell me, Mara, what should we do if the healers find out you’re infected and they cannot stop the infection in your blood?’

Mara felt her heart sink. She knew her mother was right. If the infection was detected, she would be in grave danger. Nobody she knew of had survived a dragon blood curse; their skin had turned to scales and then they became mad, until the curse burned them up from the inside. To her parents the infected caretakers were nothing, to her they were very unlucky people.

Her father’s voice sounded hoarse. ‘Until we know for sure, our hands are tied, Mara.’

‘What do you want me to do? Stay in my room for a week?’ Her eyes went back and forth between her parents.

Her mother’s eyes glittered with discontent. ‘We cannot risk anything. You need to stay in a room at the caretakers’ building.’

Mara stopped breathing for a moment. She raised her hand in an effort to stop the next words. This was even worse than she imagined. Did she really need to go and live with the caretakers?

‘Preparations have been made. You need to leave right away.’

Mara got up and stepped forward, but one of the guards stood in her way.

‘Think about what you’ve done while you are at the caretakers and try to stay out of any more trouble.’ Her father’s eyes softened a little. ‘Don’t worry. When you consult the healers in a week and they confirm you are not cursed, you can return to us.’

That was six days ago. Tomorrow, Mara had to face the healers for their verdict that would decide her future. If she had one.

# TWO

Shutting away the event that got her here, Mara waited another minute or two, to make sure the rabbit had really left. She felt fine. Even though she was anxious for tomorrow's decision, she was confident as well. Surely she would have felt something wrong by now. She spotted another rabbit, far away on top of a hill; there was nothing wrong with her eyesight.

With a smooth movement she reached for the arrow, took it out of the quiver and got ready to aim at the blissfully unaware rabbit. Mara hesitated just one moment when she saw the little ones joining their mother. The empty hole in her stomach made the decision for her. She released the arrow and it soared towards the unfortunate animal. Before her arrow could hit its target, another one hit the rabbit in its heart. It died right on the spot.

Mara scanned the area in search of the hunter who had beaten her. To her surprise she saw Nelda, the ten-year-old daughter of one of the caretakers run towards the dead rabbit.

'That's my rabbit. Leave it there!'

Nelda's eyes widened as she spotted Mara. 'I killed it.'

'Yes you did, but you're on private land.'

The little girl looked skittish. 'You contaminated it,' she whispered.

'I did no such thing!' Mara walked the few metres up to her. Nelda kept her distance.

'You do have a good shot, Nelda.' Her own arrow missed the rabbit's heart by a centimetre. The girl pointed her finger. 'You can have it.' She looked at the animal as if it had three eyes and six legs. 'I cannot eat it now.'

Mara frowned. 'There's nothing wrong with it; looks like a healthy one.'

Nelda stepped backwards to turn around. 'You've contaminated it.'

Before Mara could think of a reply, the girl took off into the woods. Shaking her head she grabbed the ends of the arrows and pulled them out. Only then did she realise that she should have hit it in the heart. She never missed.

It had cooled outside and thin fingers of fog crept up the riverbed and into the forest adjacent to the caretakers' homes. All three houses combined were even smaller than Mara's rooms in the mansion she had lived in until a few days ago. From here, it was blocked out of sight by the woods consisting of the thin odd looking trees the caretakers called Firesticks.

The other houses were occupied by two families who avoided her most of the time. Nelda lived in the house next door. Through the thin walls she could hear laughter. It

made her feel the chill of the dampness in the air even more.

Her hands were cold from the river water in which she had cleaned and washed the meat. Back in her room Mara lit the fire. There wasn't much wood left to cook with. She made her way into the woods again to collect dead material for her fire. A squeaking noise caught her attention. It came from behind the river.

She was about to turn around when a figure appeared out of the fog. Her heart pounded in her chest. It was one of the caretakers. He carried an empty bucket. Had he just been feeding the dragons?

'Best stay away from there, miss.' He stepped aside, the empty bucket in front of him, making sure she could not touch him. 'You should ignore them. Even if they call you.'

'How could they call me? They don't know me.'

There was a shadow in his eyes when he spoke next. 'Oh, yes, miss. They have known you for a long time.'

'But that can't be. I saw them for the first time last week, when...' Mara's voice trembled a little, her last word carried away in the fog. She wanted to say, when the small cute dragon had scratched her arm. But the man was already afraid of her.

'No one has touched a dragon for a very, very long time. You shouldn't be alive.'

'But how do you keep your distance, sir?'

'Sticks, door traps on top of their cages to drop food into. Things that are none of your concern.'

Mara looked at the man who seemed eager to move on. She wanted to know more about the beasts who were go-

ing to seal her fate, should she be unfortunate enough to be cursed.

‘Please, sir. You said they knew me already for a long time. How is that possible?’

‘I shouldn’t have said that.’

He started walking away and Mara stepped forward. The man almost tripped over a root that lay concealed under the leaves. He barely managed to stay on his feet, but nearly fell again when Mara tried to help him. ‘Please, miss. You cannot touch me.’ He looked genuinely terrified at her hand that she reached out to catch him with. His lips moved, but Mara could hardly understand his whispers. The words she could understand turned her heart ice-cold. Did he really say that she’d been touched before?

‘What are you doing with my husband?’

Mara turned around to face a buxom woman carrying a huge axe. Her nostrils were wide open, crooked teeth between her thin lips. She came out of the fog like a ghost. Mara did not take her eyes off the axe as she replied, ‘I didn’t do anything, I’m just here to collect wood for a fire.’

It looked like the woman might want to swing that axe in her direction. She was furious. ‘Keep your distance. They should have dealt with you a long time ago instead of–’

‘Woman, keep your mouth shut,’ the man said.

‘I am through keeping my tongue. She is evil and you know it. Burn the beasts and her with them!’

Mara was so shocked that she just stood there, paralysed. How could they say these things? ‘You must have got me mixed up with someone else.’

'I damn the night you discovered the burrow of these beasts and awakened them.' She pointed the axe to Mara. 'You'll see, tomorrow you will understand.'

'Do you want to get us killed, woman?'

She swung the axe towards her husband; he could only just avoid it. The woman looked as if possessed. 'You might be a caretaker, husband, and we have lived a good life thanks to it, but I will not stand here and watch her sink her dragon claws into you!'

'I do not understand, ma'am.' Mara tried, but the woman seemed unleashed.

'By sun-up tomorrow you will know I was right.' And then she took her husband's hand and dragged him inside their house, leaving Mara standing between the trees, with the fog rolling in. In the distance she could hear the rattling of chains. The eerie sound she heard before came drifting in carried by the fog. Mara took the few branches she had collected and ran into her house.