

●Blood Divided – Soul Born Saga Book 2●

BLOOD DIVIDED

BOOK II OF THE SOUL BORN SAGA

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PROLOGUE

It was more than a rumor, the king was dying.

After the Great War, the small island continent of Illyia became a treacherous land. Once sprawling kingdoms constricted their borders, leaving the lands between riddled with brigands, thieves, and roaming tribal warlords.

Too busy working tirelessly to rebuild their fortresses, towns, and farms, ten long years passed before neighboring lands reestablished contact with each other again. As trade lines reformed from empire to empire, a common concern for safety and unity arose.

A secret assembly of the remaining monarchs of Illyia was called, and during that meeting, one topic was discussed. All agreed: a singular king should be crowned. Unanimously it was

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decided that the Duke Ethan Essex of Kel Tora should be that man.

The duke graciously accepted his new role as king and ruled the lands as greatly and honorably as everyone expected. Peace slowly dawned upon the lands of Illyia and with it came a dramatic rise in population. For the first time in many years, the large majority of the population of Illyia was happy.

Unfortunately, seven years into his reign as King of Illyia, the man grew ill. With the help of his physicians, he fought off his sickness for the remainder of that year, but his absence from seasonal celebrations gave birth to rumors that spread quickly through the lands—the King of Illyia was dying. Whispers grew to loud cries in the streets. Who would succeed the ailing king?

Two years later, now one year ago, the baroness who ruled Joa'ta denied allegiance to the King of Illyia and broke free under her own leadership. There was little that King Ethan could do. He refused to quell any rebellion with military might and was too sick to travel to Joa'ta to speak with the baroness directly. Each month that passed with no response from the King of Illyia left the other landowners nervous. Some demanded information, while others called for action, and all desired, at the very least, to know what his plan of action was. Talk of revolution soon spilled, with growing occurrence, from the mouths of the discontented and anxious citizenry. The hard earned peace of Illyia would soon be spoiled.

On the brink of disaster, Kel Tora riders raced across the lands, delivering the first scrap of news from king's court in ages. A royal summit had been decreed. The future of the entire continent would be decided on the sixth day of the following month.

That date was soon to arrive.

CHAPTER 1

NEW BEGINNINGS

Monday morning finally arrived, and with it a flourishing buzz inside the large city of Kel Tora. As the first Monday of the month, it meant that ships from Kel Tora's fleet would be docking in the harbor by midmorning. In addition to Kel Tora's overabundance of fishing vessels, her fleet had a few passenger boats that traveled trade routes between the closest neighboring islands. These boats would return with exotic pelts, spicy meats, and even gemstones unknown to Illyia. Occasionally, a ship would disembark at Kel Tora's harbor, bringing people from foreign lands to visit the prosperous capital of Illyia.

At the epicenter of the enormous and beautiful Kel Tora Castle was its royal hall and throne room—a room so lavishly decorated it seemed to sparkle as the morning's amber sunlight

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bounced around it. The King of Illyia sat upon his silver throne in the royal hall, beside him was his wife, Tala, an exotically stunning elven woman with yellow-green hair, and silver eyes that shined with a tint of purple. Although his officially recognized wife, she did not hold the title of queen. Ancient laws, still untouched by the current culture, did not allow an elf to hold such a title, yet it mattered little to her, since she had not married the king to become queen.

Tala appeared to be no older than her late twenties, with a glow about her that made even the silver throne look tarnished. Her posture implied a long lineage of royalty, and her demeanor was so flawless in court, scribes told tales of it to the younger generations. Tala was perfection in her husband's eyes, and he thanked his gods each day for the ageless prize of beauty and grace they bestowed upon him.

King Ethan himself was in his late fifties and did not appear his age either, with the exception of colorlessness of his long, flowing hair. Appearing as well built as the day he married her, he stood tall and sturdy, full of confidence.

Smiling at each other at every given chance, together the pair made an undeniably handsome couple, dressed in the finest formal wear the royal garment makers could create.

When gazing upon the jovial king that day, his servants found it difficult to identify the man under the crown as a deathly ill. It was a good day for King Ethan; his headaches were at a minimum and he felt well enough to get out of bed for the first time in almost a two weeks. As a result of feeling so good, he could not help but beam with excitement when his son entered the hall; after all, Lucien was his pride and joy.

Fully clad in his formal armor, Lucien, born of Tala, appeared more human than elf. Standing at average human height and carrying a large build, he was a balanced mix of his

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parents' good looks, though those scales tended to tip toward his mother a bit more. Adorned with high cheekbones and an almost femininely structured mouth, he was renowned as the best looking man in all of Kel Tora, a label once held by his father.

Yet, this designation did not make him happy. Lucien was too busy for the opposite sex and spent little time thinking of them, regardless of the constant offers of marriage from Illyia's wealthy family heads. The prince did not want to be bothered by such things, his mind almost always on the politics of court.

Lucien carried with him an air of unmistakable seriousness, so much so it was often interpreted as dread. It was no secret that he was an angry young man, unhappy with the way his race was so horribly mistreated. Yet, regardless of how half-elves were not quite accepted by either humans or elves, Lucien embraced his half-breed heritage. He considered himself the sum of two powers; as an alternative to calling it *half-breed* he called it *twice bred*.

Instead of allowing himself to be overlooked as a half-elf, he championed his kind. Keeping his bright blonde hair pulled back into a short ponytail, Lucien continuously displayed his tall, pointed ears with pride.

Strapped to Lucien's side was a legendary sword, one of a group of seven that were believed a long time ago to hold powerful magical properties. The king had owned the entire collection once, until a villainous mage appeared one night over twenty years ago and boldly swiped them. The mage took all but one of these treasures from him, as he, his generals, and his commanding officers stood powerless to stop her.

King Ethan would never forget that day, as it was the very day mages were outlawed from the lands of Illyia.

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"He has become such a fine young man, Tala," the king whispered while stroking his gray streaked beard.

"You raised him well, my lord," Tala responded.

"Mother, Father." Lucien nodded as he approached them both. "Our towers count five vessels sailing directly to the harbor. All ours."

"Good morning, Lucien." Tala stood quickly, pulling her son into a tight embrace.

Lucien squirmed free, embarrassed by her display of emotions upon him—and in front of the guards no less. There was nothing he could do to stop her, even if he tried; Tala loved her children very much and they meant the world to her.

"Good morning, my son," the king laughed.

"Father, it is good to see you up and well," Lucien sincerely remarked.

"You have my gratitude for the tower report."

Lucien nodded in response.

"That is a beautiful dress, Mother. You should wear dresses like this more often," Lucien stated while pointing to her semi-formal, pink and white flowing gown.

"I thought your father and his court would appreciate it if I dressed formally today."

"Thank you, my dear." the king nodded and smiled.

"Occasionally, it is nice to wear something other than elven attire. By the way, have you seen your sister this morning?" Tala asked Lucien.

"I have not." Lucien grimaced. "Last report I heard was that she was racing toward the harbor to watch the ships dock."

"Oh, how could I forget? Autumn loves first day."

Autumn jogged through the city on her way to the harbor, her movements so precise and graceful, that the hundreds of

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people around could not help but stare. Autumn was an incredible beauty. Her half-elf blood gave her an exquisiteness nearly matching that of her mother's. Her long blonde curly hair had a slight tint of green that caught the sun and sparkled like precious jewels on sunny days like this one. Unlike her brother, Autumn looked more elven than human. It was a small blessing, as this helped her gain more acceptance from both the human and elven communities. The only visible human characteristic she displayed was her brown eyes. True elves were never born with brown eyes. It was a detail she good-naturedly referred to as her curse.

Autumn did not have to wear a crown; traveling merchants, soldiers, tavern owners, and farmers alike all knew who she was and always greeted her kindly with a smile and cheery hello. All of Kel Tora treasured the princess, and she loved them in return, donating both her time and coin when possible.

"The ships are almost here. You better hurry, Princess Autumn!" a farmer yelled to her as she jogged up to his stand.

Autumn snatched up an apple in her left hand as she ran past. Still moving, she twisted around long enough to give the farmer a quick wave and a giggle. As she faced forward, another farmer pulling a goat through the crowds blocked her path. Unshaken, Autumn continued to run toward the obstacle before her. In her eyes there was no quandary; instead, it was a perfect opportunity to show off one of her greatest skills. As Autumn was only three steps from colliding with the goat, she bent down, planting her hands in the dirt. Whipping her legs up over her body, the princess performed a handspring over the farm animal.

In her mind, it was nothing but a simple move she had mastered long ago, but the crowds around her saw it as truly amazing. As she planted her feet firmly on the ground and

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centered her weight to regain balance, the citizenry who had watched her began to applaud.

Autumn stopped her race through town for just a moment, and took a quick bow before jogging toward the harbor.

"That girl is phenomenal," a farmer stated to a young customer at his stand.

"Look at her! She is the most incredible woman I've ever seen. Those long, tight legs, those supple..."

"Watch it my friend. Try to remember that her brother will cut out your tongue for speaking such scandalous words."

"Her brother is nothing more than half-breed trash!"

"Need I remind you that she's half-elf too?" the farmer stated.

"Oh yes, elf in all the right places," the young customer laughed.

"That's no way to speak of the princess!" the farmer scolded the man as he walked away. "Begone with you!"

When Autumn reached the harbor she climbed atop a tall pile of wooden crates to get a better look at the ships as they approached. Their sails fluttered and made sounds alike the cracking of a whip, yet deeper and much louder in tone. The anticipation of their exotic cargo was almost too much for her to bear. Her mind flashed back three months, to when Captain Parn of the *Cordenz* gifted her Garnet, a small lizard from one of the many small islands he had been on during his travels. When the captain handed her the pet that day, it took hold of an apple she was carrying and changed color, turning a deep reddish-brown. It was that moment she decided to name the lizard Garnet.

Autumn sat upon the crates until the ships were all secured, then jumped down. As she wiped the dust and dirt from the seat of her leather pants, a small group of guards arrived

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at the docks in anticipation of her arrival. They fanned out and watched every movement of man, beast, and boat for trouble. The Captain of Kel Tora's Guard and the leader of this small group turned his attention to Autumn as she stepped up to the ships. Although a muscular man in his late twenties, he seemed anything save for an officer. Unlike the men under his control, the handsome captain did not wear a helmet, always joking that it flattened his gorgeous brown hair. It was not just his lack of helmet that broke his dress code either, as this soldier wore additional weapons past the one he was ordered to carry.

"Morning, Autumn," Kel Tora's Captain of the Guard said as he approached.

"Good morning, Vasche." Autumn waved as she walked up to the captain and stood at his side.

"How is your father, may I ask?" Vasche inquired with deep concern.

"I have not seen him yet today, but yesterday he seemed to be well. Mother says not to worry, that inside his chest beats the heart of a passionate young man."

"Good to hear." Vasche nodded.

"I really appreciate your assistance carrying my things around town for me, but must you really bring all of these other men with you?" Autumn teased.

"I had to bring extras guards today, since you've often eluded me and my soldiers in the past. You know I have standing orders to keep the Princess of Kel Tora safe while she visits the docks."

"Funny, that label... you know there are times I wish I was just like other girls," she spoke softly.

"Well you are royalty, like it or not, and unlike other girls you are astonishingly stunning."

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Autumn shot Vasche a quick smirk meant only for his consumption.

"Don't you think it's about time you rewarded all my hard work protecting you with a little kiss?"

"Vasche!" she snipped, a gesture that made her nose wrinkle.

Vasche moved closer, his eyes drifting down from hers to her mouth and then a bit lower. The captain knew he was being inappropriate, but Autumn's natural glow had ensnared him. Reaching for her arm, he found nothing but empty air, as Princess Autumn stepped back.

"I'm not ready."

"All things of beauty are worth waiting for."

"Vasche." His flirting was making her blush.

"Forgive my actions amongst the crowds," he whispered.

"But—"

"You are responsible for at least six members of this crowd."

"Ten today, sadly I had to break up a fight here earlier..."

"All ashore that is going ashore!" a man screamed from atop the boat, interrupting them.

"Each first day I am reminded that it has only been five years since the Cordenz was built, five years since the people of Illyia struck out into the sea to search for other lands."

"Five years from the day we were formally introduced," she added to the captain's statement.

After swiping the windblown blonde hair from her face, she shifted her attention back to the ships. She could not wait to see what new excitement they brought to Kel Tora. Autumn loved to guess the occupations of each traveler as they stepped off the boat. After they had all disembarked, she would question each one to discover if she had guessed correctly. Sailors were

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the first to step off the Cordenz, and then came a few travelers. First of the travelers off the ship was a short, stout man with a cane. He wore a dark burgundy cape and fancy shoes that matched.

"Merchant," Autumn whispered aloud.

A tall slender, man with who appeared to be his wife and children stepped of the ramp from the boat next. Her acute elven vision told her the man's hands were rough and calloused, so Autumn guessed farmer, then changed her mind, saying lumberjack. Following that man were two hooded individuals wearing long riding cloaks. One was tall and strong, obviously a man, the other thin and wiry, possibly a boy or a woman. As they stepped from the ramp to the docks, a gust of wind pushed open the wiry one's cloak at the waist, revealing a soft pale skin and feminine form. Autumn tried to listen in on their conversation, but even her adept elven hearing could not aid her in understanding what these two mysterious people were saying. The sounds of the sea and whipping wind swallowed up the words before they could reach Autumn's pointy ears. Whatever the man had vocalized ended abruptly with an outstretched arm and pointed finger. *That must have been an important order*, Autumn thought, because his companion ran off instantly.

More sailors exited the ship carrying dirty, old cargo boxes, big and small. Yet Autumn's attention remained on the hooded man who seemed to be waiting for something. Lastly, Captain Parn stepped down from the Cordenz, personally handing a small sack to the hooded man who traded coin for the delivery. With a slight nod of his hooded head, the mysterious man excused himself, freeing up Captain Parn to walk directly toward Autumn and her cadre of guards.

"Princess." The captain bowed deeply at the waist.

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"Captain," Autumn responded still distracted by the cloaked man as he walked into a crowd of townsfolk.

"I'm proud to say I've returned with something very unusual, this—"

"Captain," Autumn interrupted. "Who was that man?"

The captain smiled, knowing all about her game.

"What was your guess, Princess?" he inquired.

"I am not sure." Autumn paused to think. "I get a strange feeling about him."

"Well, from what I gather he's a hunter as his cargo, I believe my men to have reported, was animal pelts, hunters tools, and weapons. He did just ask where to find men for odd jobs."

"Seeking men for odd jobs, you say?" Vasche took mental note of the captain's findings.

"You are too paranoid, Captain Vasche." Captain Parn laughed. "Perhaps the man is simply planning a big hunt here in Illyia. Did I hear tale of cockatrice sightings about two months ago?"

"Not inside Kel Tora's borders."

"Regardless, I find myself stunned, my dear Princess. Tell me you are not baffled by this one man; you always have a good guess."

Autumn excused herself from Captain Parn's presence and started off in the direction of the hooded man. Without haste, Vasche dispatched four of his guards to walk a loose defensive diamond formation around her, while he and the remainder walked further behind.

Autumn could not justify her reasons for stalking this one man, other than out of a demented curiosity. Just as her pace increased, the cloaked man stopped and looked over his shoulder. She could not see his face through the shadows of the hood, but

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could sense he was not looking at her but past her. As she drew closer and was sure she would catch up to him in a matter of a few breaths, the man did something she never would have expected—he removed his hood. Out spilled long, wavy, black hair, as dark and shiny as a raven's feathers. He was much younger and more handsome than Autumn ever would of presumed, so much so that she stopped dead in her tracks and stared intensely at him. The stranger continued to look behind him, as if watching for something or someone. Autumn could not help but notice the look of concern on his face. For a brief second his eyes met hers. The gaze they held through the crowd bound them by an invisible force, connecting them. When he finally looked away, he did so with a smirk that suggested something, yet Autumn was unsure what. The man began walking again, but this time Autumn was not going to allow him to escape.

She sprinted into the crowd, entering town as the man disappeared into it. Kel Tora's guards tried their best to keep pace with her, but their heavy chainmail armor slowed them down too greatly.

Autumn raced down the narrow paths of the market inside the entrance of town, following only a scent she thought belonged to the handsome stranger. Still she could not explain why she was so compelled to meet him; all she knew was that she must. As the crowds dispersed, she rediscovered her target talking to an arms merchant. Once all the loose hair was brushed out of her face with the back of her hand, she approached the stranger to introduce herself. Just as she was about to step up to him, he turned and bumped directly into her, spilling gold pieces from a pouch he had open in his hand.

"Excuse me," the stranger said with a serious stare. "Are you following me, young lady?"

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Taken aback by his seriousness, Autumn choked out her words. "Sorry. I'm so sorry. I saw you leave the ship in the harbor and I just had to—"

"Crash into me? Spill my gold?" He laughed.

Greatly embarrassed, Autumn knew her introduction was ruined. She felt so suddenly awkward and strange, a murmur where words should have in her mouth. There was something unique about this man that captivated her, however he felt familiar to her as well, though she could not, for the life of her, figure out why.

"I-I am so very sorry, please let me..." Autumn said as she bent over.

Autumn helped the stranger scoop the gold up from the ground and when they each turned to pick out the last piece, they nearly brushed cheeks.

"Thank you for your help."

The stranger spoke so close that Autumn could nearly feel the heat from his lips as he introduced himself.

"My name is Nathan."

"Autumn," she replied while staring into his pale blue eyes.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Autumn," he said taking her hand in his for a gentle kiss.

As he drew her hand back from his mouth he peered over her shoulder. Autumn turned expecting to see her guards rapidly approaching, but saw nothing but farmers, merchants, and townsfolk. When she looked back at him he seemed horribly bothered by something.

"Perhaps we will meet again. Now, I must take my leave of you for the moment; I have crucial business to tend to."

Autumn stood silently her mind a jumble of questions to ask. She knew she might only have this last chance so she yelled to him before he was too far away.

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"What business?"

"I'm meeting with the beloved King of Illyia!" he yelled back to her as he walked.

The king, she thought. *What business would this stranger have with my father?* This man had become quite an enigma, one she vowed to solve. Just as she turned to look behind herself for whatever Nathan saw, her guards appeared.

"Vasche, sir, the princess is over here!" one guard shouted.

"Relax." Autumn grumbled as she approached the out of breath guards.

"Let's go back to the ship to gather the goods that Captain Parn brought you. Afterwards, we'll escort you directly to the castle, okay, Princess?" Vasche asked, clearly highly annoyed.

"Yes, that will be fine," she answered calmly.

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