

THE BLOOD AGE

Every Bite Costs Five Years



A Vampire Horror Novella

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Chapter One: Ashes of Midnight

The rain had not stopped in three days.

It fell in cold sheets over the rooftops of Bucharest, turning the city into a smear of shadow and reflection. The old stones of the alleyways glistened like wet obsidian, and the gutters ran with the runoff of a world that no longer belonged to the living or to the dead.

Casimir stood beneath the arch of a crumbling church, his long coat soaked through, his boots planted in a puddle that mirrored the broken glass above him. He had not moved in hours. Not since the last breath left Aurel's lips.

For nine hundred years he had been immortal in the plain, arithmetic sense of the word. He had fed on thousands, from the opium houses of Shanghai to the jazz cellars of New Orleans, and it had cost him nothing. Not a wrinkle. Not a gray hair. Not a single hour off the endless account of his life. That was the bargain their kind had struck with the dark, and for a thousand years the bargain had held.

Then the bargain broke.

Casimir heard the echo of Aurel's last words, pushed out through bloodied teeth.

"It's in their blood now. All of them. We drink; we die."

Aurel had been his brother in everything but name. They had hunted together for a century, and Aurel had always been the reckless one, always the first to laugh, always the hungriest. He had never once been afraid. Until the end.

Casimir had watched him die.

Not by a stake. Not by fire, not by sunlight. By something with no shape and no smell, something that lived quietly in the blood of the infected. That was the part that had unmade the world. The humans who carried it did not know it, and nothing set them apart from the ones who were clean. It gave them no fever, no cough, no mark. A man could pass it to his children and drink his coffee and never once suspect that his own veins had become a loaded thing, that the blood keeping him alive was the exact blood that killed the old gods who had fed on his kind since before there were cities. The prey had become the poison, and the prey had no idea.

The strain had no scent and gave no warning. One mouthful of tainted blood, and it went to work like acid poured through the veins, unmaking in a matter of hours what centuries of dark magic had built. Aurel had fed on a woman walking home alone through the rain, healthy and sweet and unremarkable, and by midnight his skin had blackened and split as though the sun itself had reached into his bones. She had walked away from that alley, Casimir thought, and never known she had killed the thing that tried to kill her.

Casimir had held him as he came apart, and there had been nothing to do but hold.

Now he was alone.

He moved through the city like a rumor, keeping wide of crowds, hospitals, anywhere the sickness might pool. He had not fed since that night. Hunger scraped at him, but fear cut deeper. Every heartbeat within reach was a wager. Every warm pulse a possible sentence.

He passed a knot of tourists sheltering under umbrellas, their laughter muffled by the downpour. One of them coughed. Casimir flinched and turned his face to the wall.

He no longer trusted the living. That was the joke of it. For a thousand years the living had been prey, cattle, weather. Now they were the thing in the dark.

By midnight he stood in the train station, watching the departures board flicker. He did not know where he was going, only that Bucharest was spoiled now, salted by Aurel's death. A train to Istanbul was boarding. He paid with a folded note and took a seat at the rear of a nearly empty carriage.

Outside, the platform slid away.

Inside, the hunger opened its eyes.

He let himself drift, because memory was the only country still safe to travel. Paris, 1942, a city turned graveyard, Aurel laughing with blood on his teeth because the war made the feeding easy. Kyoto, long before, cherry blossom falling like ash, the wine and the opium in a stranger's veins. Siberia, where the cold had frozen the blood in their prey before they could drink, and Aurel had laughed at that too, his breath fogging the air like a living man's.

There was no laughter left to remember forward into. Only the rattle of the train and the ache in his throat.

At a black station in the middle of nowhere, a woman boarded. Young, coughing into her sleeve. Her scent reached him half a second before she sat, and it told him nothing. That was the horror of it now. She might be clean. She might be carrying it. There was no way to know short of the first swallow.

She took a seat two rows back. He could hear her heart stumbling in her chest. His teeth ached in his jaw, and he did not move, because to feed on her might be to choose Aurel's death for himself.

He fixed his eyes on the window and watched the rain drag the platform lights into long streaks of gold and red.

By dawn the train slid into Istanbul, and the air came thick with salt and diesel and roasting chestnuts. The city was alive, hammering with sound, and he felt none of it. He needed answers. He needed to understand what the world had become while he was busy believing it could never change.

Most of all, some part of him already knew, he needed to decide how badly he wanted to keep living in it.

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