

THE ASSASSIN PRINCESS

Book 1

SAMPLE

Blake Rivers

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for emi & becky
i love you both to the moon & back.

beware the mortrus lands, beware,
north to the flow, below, below,
danger in light, blue and glow,
many go in, one must go.

Part One: Ami's Legacy

“i keep my promise for thousands of generations and forgive evil and sin; but i will not fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents.”

– sunrise good news bible, exodus 34:7

Chapter One

The man appeared from the shadows and stepped onto the empty road, his parched face stark beneath a mop of black hair, eyes catching flicker of a nearby street light; he listened. Traffic droned a block away while laughter and footfall echoed and died, shades of colours spent.

Assured he was alone, he turned to the building on his left and lifted his palms. They sparked to burn a low green flame that blackened his skin, strips and flakes lifting in a light night breeze to swirl above him in a cloud of darkness.

“Find her,” he whispered, and the darkness obeyed.

*

Ami dipped her brush into the paint she'd mixed and left the flat altogether, joining the mountains, hills, forests and meadows. It was time alone spent in the spare room, amongst her paintings and sketches of brightly coloured faraway places, that she was able to truly feel herself. The brush flowed easily now as she bit down on her bottom lip, watching a vivid sunset come to life, the orange and yellow fire cradling the scant clouds, the blue and green of sky and forest meeting in a bleeding red. It was her final piece, her most accomplished work-in-progress to date. Her eyes caressed the meadow where the unicorns grazed, tracing their shining silk coats, touching her brush gently to the ripples of their manes and tails, painting reflection in their big mirrored eyes.

“Are you going to stay in there all night?” a voice called through the door, jolting Ami from her world. Even after six months of having a flatmate, she hadn't gotten used to Julie's shrill interruptions.

“I was just finishing up.” She moved her brushes into a jar, swirling them for a moment, all the colours billowing to a muddy brown. She dried them roughly with a cloth.

“I’ve left you some mac and cheese in the oven. Open this door, will you?”

Giving one more look to her work, Ami surveyed the forest, her unicorns, the mountains. The sunset was magical and set the whole canvas on fire. She sighed, nodded in approval, and lowered the sheet over it.

“Finally!” Julie stood in the doorway, keys in hand. “I’ve hardly seen you all week! Look, I know the place is a bit of a mess, but I’m just about to go out—” Ami looked around. Clothes lay crumpled on the living room floor, plates and cutlery spread across the kitchen counter, the sink piled high. “—and I was wondering if you could do me a favour and clean up a little bit? Jason’s coming round tonight.” She winked and Ami cringed. Jason was a creep, but Julie seemed to like him, for now at least.

“You expect me to clean up your mess?” Ami shut the door and stepped into the living room.

“Well, it would have been your mess too, if you hadn’t been in there for hours.” As Julie pouted and Ami’s face turned scarlet, she quickly changed tact. “But I promise I’ll make it up to you! I will! But right now, I have to go!” She skipped to the door, her keys jingling.

“Seriously? You just expect me to clean up after you?”

“Chill, Ami, I’d do the same for you. Bye!” Julie darted out the door before Ami could say another word. The clunk of the latch sealed the deal.

“Great,” she said to the empty flat, and worked her way across the floor avoiding the discarded tops, jeans, and other debris.

A dull thud stopped her dead, the sound of flapping fluttering her heart.

It came from the window, and through her reflection, out across the dark cityscape beyond, she saw a bird. It was a dancing shadow, circling in the night sky. She came closer and reached for the curtains to draw them as it rose high and dived at the glass. With a yelp and a yank the curtains closed, hiding the squawking mess of feathers from view.

“Urgh,” she said, stepping back and shuddering in disgust. It had happened before, mostly pigeons, but somehow in the dark it seemed all the more disturbing. Turning from the window, she shifted her attention back to the room, and then doubtfully to the kitchen. How could one girl make so much mess in two hours? Living with Julie had been a laugh to start with. They’d sat home in the evenings and watched cheesy films, eating cheesy

foods. Then Jason had come on the scene and things changed, Julie spending all her time out with him while Ami worked on her passion, art. She was glad to be consumed by it, and at least her consumption didn't leave sticky plates and clothes on the floor.

Ami's attention flipped back to the window as she bent to pick up a mug. A tapping. She looked back to the curtains and listened.

Tap... Tap... Tap...

It was the bird the other side of the window, asking to come in.

Stupid, she thought, *it's not asking anything*. But there was the noise again. Three taps, steady, evenly spaced, patient.

Ami thought of vampires in horror films, begging for entry; if she pulled the curtain she would see a white face, lit and hateful, whispering, long fingernails tapping.

No, she thought, *that's just stupid*.

Ignoring the noise, she took the mug into the kitchen.

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The bird exploded into a swarm of darkness and returned to its owner, swirling in front of him, spinning faster and faster. In the blur the man saw the building, windows dark and light. He saw the girl, and watched the curtains close.

The swarm stopped spinning and flew into the man's hand where it turned a bright green and shimmered across his body; a smile creased his smooth face as he rose up in search of the girl.

*

Soon the floor was free of clutter, and Ami's hands were soft from the soak of soap suds. She sat slumped on the sofa and closed her eyes. "An early night tonight," she said to no one, but her thoughts were interrupted as the tapping returned.

Tap... Tap... Tap...

Three taps as before, more forceful than they had been. Maybe the bird was injured and was dying on the outside sill? She scrambled to the floor on

her knees and crawled to the curtains. Using her fingertips only, she lifted the very bottom and looked up, an irrational fear growing inside that she couldn't shake. Was the vampire waiting, smiling, glaring in at her?

Three more taps.

Being silly, she thought. Be brave and rip those curtains open! It's just a bird.

For no reason she could think of, the mountains in her painting came to mind—the dark mountains where any manner of creature could live, even a vampire.

This was too stupid.

Standing up, she grabbed the edges of the curtains and pulled them open.

The face was as white as she'd imagined, the grin more terrible than she'd feared. The eyes were glowing, not the red of horror movies, but a bright green. Nothing was real in that moment, only her fear and the vampire that glared in at her.

The window smashed, shards showering her as she screamed into a high wind that whipped through the flat. The vampire entered.

Her paralysis broke as the coffee table splintered beneath the vampire's step, and Ami took flight to the spare room. Crashing in, she slammed the door behind her and locked it with shaking fingers. What the hell was going on? Visions of blood suckers, zombies, and ghouls flooded her mind as she cowered next to her canvas. The sheet had lifted when the door had opened and she was now looking at mountains, grey and mysterious.

A solid knocking a violation, the door shook with the intruder's force. Her eyes turned to the forest, the meadow and the unicorns with their tails swaying in the breeze. There was a man next to a unicorn that she hadn't painted, and in his hand he held a sword.

The knocks gave way to a terrifying creaking, a green light flooding the edges of the frame as it pulsed and warped before her eyes.

"Help! Please, help me!" she screamed, but there was no one to answer. Her heart raced. A vampire in her flat, a man she didn't paint, a light so green and bright it hurt her eyes; she covered them with her hands and screamed again.

“Come with me,” said a voice at her ear, and she turned to a pair of deep brown eyes staring out at her from the painting. The painted man himself now filled the whole canvas, his hooded figure leaning out and over her. “Come now.”

Ami was pulled into his embrace as the door split open and flew into splinters, shredding the room. And then there was no longer a door, and she was no longer there.

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His breathing was slow, his face a waxwork bust, smooth and calm, hiding the rage beneath. He stepped over the remains, his boots large and heavy, his eyes trained on the canvas that lay face-up on the floor.

It was empty.

Chapter Two

The setting sun burned its last embers across the meadow, hues of orange, red, and yellow swallowed by the shaded green of a nearby forest that lay in all directions but one. There, the dark and jagged mountains rose, the deep red creating blacker shadows, the footings loose rock and silt.

Ami rose to her knees, a hollow wind rushing through the long grass all around her. The air smelt of earth and green, and the shadows were as ash, fallen from the burning clouds. “What the—?” It was an all too familiar scene, and the impossibility awed her.

This was her painting. From the grazing meadow she knelt in, to the thick forest in front and beyond, and even the burning sunset sky. It was hers, exact and alive as she’d imagined it. *Impossible*, she thought, yet every sense told her it was real. The fear of only moments ago had been replaced with a curious wonder. The flat was gone, the vampire who’d entered it gone, the dark city around it a memory; yet there had been a second intruder. Ami thought back, remembering those last moments—the voice in her ear, the arm around her pulling her back...and then nothing, until her awakening just now. “It’s got to be a dream.” Yes, that was it. She was dreaming of her painting.

There was movement from the trees ahead and Ami stood, peering into the far away gloom of the forest, squinting to see through the red shadows there; and from between parted branches came a white horse, galloping the meadow toward her. Its long translucent crystal horn jutted from its forehead, capturing the sky in its spiral shape. A unicorn. It was not alone though, as riding upon its back was a hooded, cloaked man—the man she hadn’t painted.

The unicorn strutted to a halt and the man slipped to the ground.

He was tall, shadowed in dirty grey robes. “We have little time for words, Princess,” he said, holding out his hand. Ami didn’t move. There was

a sword at his side, swinging in the wind and her eyes were drawn to it. “Come with me, we need to go now!”

“Hey, get your hands off me,” she said, but her protests were for naught as the man dragged her toward the unicorn and lifted her onto its back. “Who are you? What’s going on?”

The man pulled himself up behind her and held tight to her waist.

“Be still, Princess, and hold on to the mane. Hold tight.”

The unicorn broke into a gallop, back toward the forest, the ground beneath them shooting by in a blur, propelling them across the meadow faster than she’d ever moved, the wind whipping at her hair. She turned back and felt a cold dread sink into her belly at the sight of the distant black mountains, the sky flashing green, the steep climbs alive with falls of black mist that gathered at the foot. Swallowing trees and gaining fast, it was soon half way across the meadow.

“Xavier!” The man yelled through the wind, “Xavier! Protect us!”

Ami looked back to the forest, her heart thumping in her ears. The sky had already darkened, the sun’s fire waning and the forest a black wall in front of them. Between the trees, more unicorns gathered—tens, hundreds—their white coats ablaze with light, their heads lowered, their horns *en guard*. She stole a quick glance behind, the sky quilted in malevolence.

“I want to wake up now,” she screamed. “Please, I want to wake up!”

A moment later the wind was replaced by the swift movement of hooves on leaves, the scent of wood and moss. They were in the forest, dodging branches and wayward trunks beneath a canopy of leaf and limb. Ami let go of the breath she’d been holding, looking to the man who held her. His dark eyes kept a watch on the path ahead, his arms loosening their grip.

Eventually they entered a clearing where small shafts of dying red light filtered through the branches. It looked like blood. There was no sign that the black cloud had breached the forest, and the only sounds were of the trees—scurrying and chirping, branches squeaking.

Ami looked back up at the man. “I—I think I’d like to wake up now.” Her voice sounded small.

“There is no waking from this, Princess,” he said.

“This is so weird. I don’t want to be dreaming this. Am I in a coma? Was I knocked unconscious or something?” The man didn’t answer. She pinched herself, but it just hurt.

They stopped next to a cluster of trees and the man dismounted, pulling Ami with him. The unicorn bowed, turned, and disappeared through the trees leaving Ami alone in the dark forest with the hooded man.

The last of the blood-red light faded, and the darkness grew cold.

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Ami sat with her back against a tree, her knees drawn to her chest, watching the man gather stones from the earth. He made them into a circle and then commenced to add broken branches, twigs, and leaves. With the spark of a flint, the fire was lit and the cavernous clearing flooded and flickered with an orange glow.

Though the heat barely reached her, Ami refused to move toward the fire.

The dream hadn’t ended, hadn’t changed, hadn’t done any of those *dream-like* things that dreams did. She hadn’t seen a clown having tea with a bear, or met her favourite band at a fairground; there had been nothing—just a chill that made her shudder, and the temptation of warmth from her strange kidnapper.

She blew on her hands, watching the steam rise and disappear, refusing to accept any of it. She’d sit there until she woke up. Of course, in her chilled protest, she’d figured out exactly what had happened. She’d exhausted herself, as simple as that. She’d been to uni, gotten home, painted until late, cleaned up after Julie, and fell asleep dreaming of that damned bird and vampires—her painting was her focus, and so it was within her dream. The only thing that didn’t make sense was that she still hadn’t woken up.

“Please, Princess, come to the warmth of the fire. You’re freezing.” The man was crouched opposite her, warming his hands against the flames, watching her. The fire played shapes on his face, revealing his eyes in flashes.

As her teeth began to chatter, hurting her jaw, Ami finally gave in and crawled to the edge of the fire. The man had placed his cloak in that very spot, and she took it, pulling it tight around her.

She stared into the flames, watching them dance.

“Who are you?” she asked finally.

“My name is Hero,” he said, and rubbing his hands together he sat back, the light holding in his dark eyes. “I was sent to bring you to Legacy, where I am from, where you belong. It was lucky for all of us that I reached you before *he* did.”

“*He*? You mean the vampire? They do exist then?” she asked.

The man smiled. “If they do exist, he is not one of them. He is much worse.”

Much worse? This dream was quickly turning into a nightmare, and she still hadn’t woken up. The fire spat between them, orange sparks flying into the air and rising toward the canopy of trees above.

“Please tell me, where am I? What am I doing here? Who are you? And who is the vampire, and what the hell was that black cloud thing? Why are we in here? Just...” Ami broke off, confused and overwhelmed. Tears sprang to her eyes, though she fought them back; the fire blurred everything orange.

The man sighed. “To answer those questions, I need to tell you who you are first.”

“Who I am? I know who I am!” She wiped her eyes.

“You are Princess Ami, heir to the throne of Legacy.”

Ami frowned. That wasn’t what she expected, though she didn’t truly know what she did expect. “I’m not a princess.”

“Yes, yes you are,” he said, looking down. “It was always going to be hard to explain, because you’ve never been told, have never known. No one knew. It is only a recent revelation to myself and our people, but I assure you that you are.”

Ami looked around her suddenly, her skin crawling as if someone was behind her, watching her. The man waited for her eyes to come back to his.

“I am Hero, Captain of the Guard of Legacy. The Guard keep the throne of Legacy for the heir, and protect the city. There is...much to discuss, and much you must learn. However, Adam will not make it easy for us.”

“Adam?” Ami shivered.

“Yes, Adam. The *vampire* as you called him. Though not a vampire, he is an evil and twisted man, a user of sacred power, now wretched.” Hero squinted into the fire. “It was he that created the storm cloud, using his power against us. Xavier was able to rally the herd in time, and it is the herd we should be grateful to. Adam is a shadowy part of history.”

Ami shook her head. “I’m an art student. I go to university and study art. I don’t even know whether we’re still in England.” If she were Dorothy, where was Toto? Because this sure wasn’t Kansas. “I just...I don’t care about princesses, legacies, evil vampire men and unicorns. I just want to wake up!”

Hero’s eyes were ablaze.

“You do care, about a lot of those things,” he said in a whisper above the crackle. “You paint them, you dream them, you imagine them. I know you do for I have seen your life, and you dream of Legacy.”

Ami shook her head, laughing in frustration. She’d love to disagree with him, argue her point, tell him that no, this had nothing to do with her, and it was all a damned dream anyway. And yet, what he said was true. In Ami’s earliest memories, her happiest dreams, her inspiration, there had always been unicorns and forests, bright colours and secret places, hidden and magical. But this was all just that, wasn’t it? Her imagination? Her dream? She was asleep. Had to be.

“Xavier showed me, let me glimpse your life, your hopes and dreams, proof beyond reason that you are the princess we never knew existed.”

Hero lifted a burning branch from the fire and blew the flame from the end. Standing, he came to her side and crouched back down. She shuffled away, but Hero lowered the end of the branch to the edge of his cloak and drew a large circle in black upon the fabric.

“This is earth.” He checked to make sure she was following. Ami nodded. “This one represents where we are.” He drew a smaller circle, just within the first. “And this one, is a different place, and this one another one again.” He drew two more circles, each just within the last.

“This outer layer is where you are from, and what you know, and who you know. Your whole existence is here.” He pointed with the branch to the outer layer and looked up at Ami before continuing. “The second layer exists

in exactly the same space, but is a layer below yours. And the same for these other two here. There are an infinite number of layers to this world.”

Ami shook her head. “Each layer is a *reality*,” he concluded. “You are still on the same earth, but in a different *reality*. I brought you from yours,” he drew a line from the outer circle to the next one in, “to ours. If you have the power to *rip* into a layer, you can travel to any layer you wish.” He continued the line straight through the circles.

Ami considered the crude drawing. Was it possible? Could she actually be in another *reality*? She looked around her again, the *being watched* feeling acute.

Hero continued.

“Your father’s name is Graeme. He was the last Lord of Legacy.”

Ami looked up at Hero and then burst into laughter. “My father? He’s an illustrator.” She shook her head, but Hero wasn’t getting the joke. “He isn’t a lord and has never been a lord of anything.”

“Ami, all is not as it once seemed. I know this is a shock, but Lord Graeme ruled Legacy, as did his father, and his father before him. Graeme disappeared from Legacy and never returned.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, what you’re talking about.” Ami stood up and walked far from the fire, back into the shadows at the edge of the clearing. The trunks and branches squeaked, sending a shiver down her back as the feeling of *being watched* grew stronger.

“I know you don’t,” Hero said, following her with his whisper, “and that’s something we’ll rectify on our way to Legacy.”

“Is this not Legacy?”

“No,” he said. “Legacy is a land to the west, a beautiful city upon a mountain peak. It overlooks all other lands: the Planrus Lands and Noxumbra in the east, the sea to the west, the Madorus Lands to the south, and the impenetrable forests of the Mortrus Lands to the north. It’s a beautiful and enchanting place. In the days of your father’s rule, it was prosperous and benevolent. Now though, Legacy is dying, its people restless. It has been my entire lifetime without a lord. We need the heir of Legacy.” He gently took Ami’s arms in his hands and stroked down them, his dark eyes hidden. “We need our princess.”

“I’m not her,” she whispered.

“Are you so sure?”

Ami nodded, whispering again, “It’s not me.”

In one fluid movement Hero stepped back and drew his sword, slashing through the air toward Ami’s neck.

Ami shrieked and closed her eyes.

Then there was silence, except the crackle of the fire and the sounds of the forest. When Ami realised she wasn’t dead, she opened her eyes.

Hero was on his knees, his face pained. A guttural noise came from him as her hand squeezed tight around his throat. She let go with a yelp and pulled away, yelping again when she found her other hand holding his sword.

“What the hell just happened?” She dropped the sword and stepped back against the tree, looking from the sword to her hand, then to Hero who was now getting to his feet.

“What I expected to happen, hoped to happen,” he croaked. “That you would defend yourself.”

“But I didn’t move!”

“You did,” he said. “In the split second that you knew you were in danger, you grabbed my wrist and released the sword. You swung it and disabled me by grabbing my throat, forcing me to my knees. It was... impressive to watch to say the least.” He smiled and picked up the sword.

“I didn’t. I wouldn’t know how. I didn’t...” She slid down the trunk, her back scratching on the bark, her eyes closing as she realised that she’d done exactly what he’d said she had. She saw each move in her mind, each action, fast and precise.

“You did, you can, you have, and you know. It is you, Princess Ami. You have powers inherited from your father, from your bloodline.” He took Ami’s hand, and pulled her to her feet. “You are the heir of Legacy.”

Noises sounded deep within the forest, but Ami ignored them. They were far away, distant and apart from her.

She thought instead to her childhood and how she’d always been told that she had spirit and imagination. As early as she could remember she’d made up stories based around TV shows and films. She’d act them out like a play, her hands moving spaceships across the sky, her arms flailing at the big explosions. Few people understood her and would say, ‘Oh, Ami’s *exploding*

again...' leaving her to it. But as she'd grown up, she was able to explain that she'd had to play all the parts of the story herself, a one girl theatre production. From then on it was known that Ami was *artistic*. She'd been given paints and pencils, paper and card. Encouraged to draw and paint, Ami had taken to each task with excitement. As she let her imagination go, new worlds, scenes, characters and places had opened up to her; books inspired her, the written word sketched, painted, and drawn.

Dreams began to take shape of distant lands, places she could escape to and explore.

Was it possible that all her dreams were about this place, this land where unicorns roamed in forests? Had her father hidden a whole other life from her, a whole other world where she was a princess and he a lord?

It was quite a story—an adventure—if it were true.

“What does the vampire-man want?”

“He wants you.” Hero sheathed his sword and pulled Ami to her feet.

“Me? Why does he want me? What did I do?”

“It's not about what you've done, but about who you are. He wants you because you are the heir. He wants you destroyed because he is the *son* of Graeme, and in his mind the rightful heir. He's your half-brother.”

“My what?” Ami's eyes widened. “My brother? And he wants to kill me?”

“Xavier will explain more,” he said, taking her by the hand. “It is now morning, and we should go to him.”

“This Xavier again...who is this Xavier?”

“That would be I,” a smooth voice said from the darkness, a white unicorn stepping into the firelight. “Hello, Ami, and welcome to the Solanra Forest.”

