

# Blood Chess

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## Winter and the Sorian Approach

A CRUMBLING stone staircase leads down the mountain-hill from the castle. About a mile above the valley, there is a walled terrace, and here the gigantic chessboard is laid out. It is old and faded, the black squares grey, the blood-red squares a life-less pink. As she crosses the chessboard, each square taking a full three steps, Ismira glances down at it, at the cracks in its paving where wild flowers push up in spring, and where, now winter is approaching, they die.

She is not a vampire, but the people in the valley are afraid of her, thinking she must be. Her brother is the vampire. In the valley they call him the Sorian. He comes from the land of Soriath, over the mountains, so the name is not inappropriate—but really they are trying to distance him in the only way they can. They are aware of his true name, which is Yane, and never use it.

Ismira knows her brother will return during the night, By going down to the village, she is also warning them.

There is an afternoon frost. When she reaches the village street, the tall trees by the well are clouded with cold. Icicles thin as needles spike the roofs. Already the ball of the sun is rolling off the sky.

Before she would often come here in full daylight, striving to convince them she was only herself, had no fear of sunlight, and did not require blood. But when she saw this did no good, she did not do it any more.

All the doors are shut and the street and alleys empty. Somewhere a dog howls and is struck—she hears the blow—to silence it.

Ismira stops in the centre of the street, by the well. In her long black garments, her long black hair curling down like a fleece to her shoulder-blades, she is only what they must expect.

As she stands waiting, the sun too runs away, afraid she will see its redness and desire its blood.

Yane, the Sorian, once said to her, in one of his intermittent fevers: “The sun—give me the sun to drink—it’s *full* as a wineskin—”

After a time of merely standing there, Ismira sees a door is being eased open in the side of the big house, the one with the carvings that pretend to the decoration of the castle on the mountain-hill. Something is thrust out. It drops and lies motionless on the street.

Ismira goes over to this object, which turns out to be a young woman of about sixteen, clothed in white, and with her fair hair washed and braided. She is not unconscious, as sometimes they are. She stares up at Ismira from the dirt.

“Don’t make me, lady—let me go—”

“I can’t. Get up and come with me.”

Shaking and temporarily past tears, the girl does so. She will probably walk meekly behind Ismira all the way back up the mountain. Now and then, one of them will dash off, and never be seen by Ismira again. She suspects the village pursues and murders them.

Ismira herself has done what she must. She has procured the sacrifice for her brother’s needs, and also warned the village by her presence that he is imminent.

The sky burns crimson.

Ismira and the sacrifice plod doggedly up the terrible, ruinous stair.

“Look,” says Ismira, encouragingly, as the epic bulk of the castle looms over them, touched with ruby by the falling sun they have, through climbing, managed to keep sight of. Now the girl starts to cry.

Ismira hardens her heart, at which act she has, over the fifteen years since her tenth birthday, become adept.

Why attempt reassurance? These ones the village select by unlucky lot. Each of them knows what will happen.

They pass the chessboard. The weeping girl takes no notice of it. All the flowers have been abruptly frost bitten to death, and above, in the castle garden, scarcely any leaves remain on the tangled trees, and those that do are like silver daggers.

### **The Return of Yane**

The girl's name is Thental. She sits crying on and on.

Once it begins to be very dark, Ismira walks about the castle, the rooms, passages and annexes, lighting a few lamps and enormous candles. She wonders if the girl would be more comfortable in the great hall. But the kitchen, with its huge fire, will be much warmer.

Coming back into the kitchen, there is Thental, still crying.

Ismira has given her white bread and an apple, and wine for courage, none of which has Thental tried.

*How dismal it all is*, Ismira thinks, lighting another candle on the branch above the hearth. She hopes Yane will soon arrive.

As if reading her mind, Thental checks her sobs.

"Does he fly here, on his bat wings?" she asks.

Ismira senses an unpleasant pettiness in the question. Thental knows she is being given to a monster, the monster must therefore live up to his legends.

"No, in fact, he'll ride across the pass."

"Some demon will have told you he's near."

"Also no. Common sense, and memory. Snow will soon fall and close all the passes. It's always on this night Yane comes back. Have none of you realized?"

The girl shudders. Her head darts up and her shining hair, loosened by now, flutters candlelit round her head like a bridal veil.

"Is that a clatter of wings?"

Ismira says nothing. She can hear it too, and quite obviously the noise is that of hoofs clattering into the yard outside.

Yane will stable his horse in the stall Ismira has prepared, before he enters the kitchen; they have no servants, of course. But the girl springs up and falls now on her knees, tightly shutting her eyes, and praying.

Ismira feels sorry for her, but also it is all so tiresome, this. “*Shush!*” she exclaims sharply, and Thental becomes quiet as the grave.

It will be useless to try to reason with her. Ismira, long since, additionally gave that up with the sacrifices who accompany her to the castle, their names written helpfully on little scraps of book paper and wrapped round their wrists.

They pose there then, in stasis, Ismira seated on the wooden chair, Thental kneeling abject on the stone-flagged floor.

Outside now a sound of boots, then the door is pushed wide. Yane strides in out of the night, bringing the night in with him, cold and mysterious, across cloak and hair.

Ismira sees, as so often, Thental stare, then avert her gaze.

Yane is very handsome. His blue-black hair falls to his waist; he is tall and straight, his body hard and fined from constant journeys, his large dark eyes full of a luminous introspection fatal to most women.

Ismira gets up. She takes him a cup of wine.

Yane thanks her. He drinks the wine. Then he glances at the girl kneeling on the floor, staring at him between fingers she has clamped over her eyes.

“Is she for me?”

“Who else?”

“Dear God,” says Yane. He sighs, perhaps an affectation. He walks across and sits in the wooden chair, and looks at Thental. Thental does not look back, but nor does she cry any more. “Well,” says Yane, “good evening. Isn’t the floor rather hard on your knees?”

Thental blinks. She puts down her hands.

“Don’t kill me,” she says quietly, “don’t damn my soul.”

“I’m not interested in your soul. Keep it.” Thental grunts. She lowers her head, desolate now. Yane stands up, frowning with irritation and tiredness. Ismira has drawn a bath for him, across the passage, with extra water heating on the fire there. He goes out to this, and Ismira moves around the kitchen, seeing to the supper, constantly detouring past Thental kneeling on the floor.

## **An Evening At Home**

When Yane enters again he is more relaxed, wrapped in a dressing-robe of scarlet, black, and gold. He goes to Thental at once and lifts her off the floor, and sits her at the table in a chair adjacent to his own.

She is evidently exhausted by her fright, far worse than Yane from his travels. He takes advantage of that, feeding her scraps of meat and cheese, and making her sip the wine.

Her head droops on to his shoulder. He kisses her hair absently. Ismira watches all this from the other end of the table.

It has ceased to offend, puzzle, or upset her.

She thinks back to the day the horsemen came to her father's house in another country, not this one, and not Soriath either. That was the day of her tenth birthday. While her proud father sat in talk with the riders, Ismira's chilly mother took her aside. "Listen to me, Ismira. Today you're to go away to another place. We've never treated you as we do our other children, and this is because, you must now understand, you're no child of ours at all. You are the cuckoo's egg left to hatch in this house. We bore it because we must, and we've done you no harm. You've been raised nobly, as our true children have, although without our love. Under the circumstances, you'll agree, you could hardly expect any." Astounded, shocked beyond reason, Ismira stood listening. Her mother—who was not—told her she was the child of an ancient and corrupt family who exerted much power in this region and elsewhere. The Scaratha, they were called. Due to their way of living, which was that of vampires, blood-drinkers, and creatures of darkness and horror, they kept no children of their own in their domiciles before the age of ten. At that age they would send for and claim them, whether the vampire strain was prevalent or not. "You have been closely observed, more for our sakes than yours," said Ismira's unmother, with great distaste. "You show no symptoms of any of that. Even so you are a fiend, the child of fiends. It's made me sick to have you in this house. I have seldom touched you and won't now. Get out and go to your own, you foul abomination."

"What are you brooding on, Ismi?" asks Yane from along the table. The girl from the village has fallen asleep against him, soothed by

his glamorous kindness and the Eastern incense he has rubbed into his hair.

“The past,” says Ismira.

“Oh, that. Don’t think of that. Let me tell you what I saw on my way here—something better than the Eastern markets, for all their glitter and show. Better even than the moon-and-star night over the City of Rome.”

“What?” inquires Ismira. She knows what he will say.

“I saw the sun.”

“Which will make you ill. It always does.”

“Yes, it always does, but this was three days ago. And you see, I’m cool and well. Perhaps I’m growing used to the sun, or it to me.”

“The wineskin full of blood,” says Ismira. She becomes angry with him, because, in his fevers she must nurse him, and she hates the chore, and also is infuriated to see him suffer so stupidly by his own lack of control. *He is addicted to the sun*, she sometimes thinks, *worse than blood*.

But Yane boasts, “I crept out of my deep hiding cave, and I beheld a sunrise in the mountains. The sky was redder than any blood. I’m cool and hale, Ismi. Can’t you see? Perhaps, in a day or so, I can try again.”

“The sun isn’t for you.”

But you can see it every day! Don’t you know how jealous I am of you, Ismi?”

She too frowns. She considers how Yane rides about the world, journeying to lands she has never, will never, see. How she remains at home, tending the castle, alone, save for the winter months when Yane comes back, often flaming with sun-fever, crazy and devilish, and girls must be collected from the village, one every thirty days, for Yane’s pleasure.

*I’m his skivvy*, Ismira thinks. *And he is jealous?*

This is why they value those of their kind who are not vampiric. They take them in and load them with codes of honour and high dreams of loyalty, and make them into useful servants of the house.

Ismira can hear Yane talking endlessly, in raptures about the sun. She pretends—she is quite clever at pretence—that she attends to him. She loves him, admires him, but resents him. They may have

two hundred years more like this, for, left to themselves, the Scaratha are all long-lived. The rest of the castle inhabitants perished in a war with other Scaratha ten years ago. But other castles and fortresses exist still well-stocked with their kind. Sometimes Yane promises to take her visiting. He never does, and doubtless never will.

She considers leaving him and going off on her own. Wherever she went—on foot, alone, unsafe ways for a women, even—*especially*—a Scaratha woman to travel—she would in the end fetch up with the Scaratha. She would have no other place to go. And then her life would be the same as it is here, save with more to do, more persons to love, admire and tend—the higher echelons of the practising vampires.

Now Yane is speaking to Thental, the flower-like sacrifice. “Time for bed, sweetheart.”

He has put something in the wine. The girl stirs and smiles at him, sleepy and adoring, ready as a summer peach on the vine.

He half carries this now-willing and pliable companion—perhaps she thinks this is her wedding night?—away along the passage, and up the steps of a tower to the bedroom Yane has there. Ismira has put fresh embroidered sheets on the bed, sprinkled lavender and other herbs. Scented lamps burn, and the window is heavily shuttered against sunrise, and locked. Ismira keeps the key.

Up there Yane the Sorian will make love to the girl, exquisitely, and also he will drink her blood, with passionate discretion. It will do her no harm whatsoever. He is wholesome, his teeth clean and flawless. Even the marks on her throat will fade when, after seven or so nights, he turns her out of bed, with enough money and jewels to make her rich beyond her most avaricious dreams. He will also escort her—by night—along the valley. That is Yane’s gallantry. He knows about women travelling on their own, particularly with wealth about them. He will make sure she reaches some sort of safety, for the Scaratha are careful with the goods they handle. After a certain point, however, once he has discharged his duty by her, or his payment for her services, Yane will leave the girl. If something happens to Thental then—or has happened in the past to any of the countless others—that will not be Yane’s fault.

Ismira tidies the table. She hauls a pitcher of cold water and adds it to a wooden tub of hot, and rinses the platters and knives. The precious cups of emerald crystal, rimmed and stemmed with gold, she replaces on the stone top of the hearth, among the candles, vases of dead flowers, iron keys, onions, and other things.

Outside the wind is rising. It howls like the dog in the village they had struck to make it silent. Who will strike the wind?

The villages naturally believe that all who are brought here die, drained like bottles. Or else they are turned into undead devils, and subsequently roam the countryside, preying on the sheep, or small unguarded children, which in fact lammergeyers or starving wolves have picked off. One day perhaps, the village may rebel against the castle. But probably they will not, for Scaratha power, though so isolate and scattered, is yet omnipresent and much dreaded.

Ismira blows out the kitchen candles. She takes one with her, and goes about the castle again, replenishing the lights. Later, when her brother has had tonight's fill of the girl, he will ramble through the passages enter the great hall, take down old swords, and musical instruments to play. The castle is a rare treat for Yane—how not, when he is hardly ever here.

As she retires to her room beyond the kitchen, Ismira hopes the sun will not have made him ill, and that he has enjoyed Thental. But when she falls asleep, Ismira dreams of riding his horse away and away, her own black hair and cloak rippling in the race of their speed. Dimly in the distance she thinks she sees the acres of a sea, the domes of the East, the moonlit columns of Rome. *I am Ismira*, she sings in her sleep, *nor was I born in Soriath—*

### **The Chess-Game**

It was how the Scaratha taught their young the rules of existence—that is, the *vampiric*, more-valued young, although the others, the lesser, but so-useful breed, were allowed to stand by and watch. In this way Ismira had been part of the audience at the chess-games, played out on the huge board half-way down the mountain-hill.

They commenced at dusk, often not concluding until midnight, all by torchlight—and in the village below, no doubt the people covered

their heads in fear. This was before the war among the Scaratha had wiped away all but two of the castle's indigenous population.

Scaratha chess was not like humanly employed chess, of course.

There were no pawns, for humanity was all made up of pawns, as far as the Scaratha were concerned. Here, the Scaratha hunted each *other* over the squares, which then were kept vivid with paint. A knight might take a queen, a queen a priest, as they pleased. Physical figures performed these actions. Deliberately, always, the *wrong* moves were educated into the Scaratha young, so they should learn to break all the other rules of the world.

Only at the very end would the victors fasten on their conquered own. This was not like a war. None died. They milked their victims, in mutual delight, of blood. Tokens, *love* tokens, which still meant someone had won. Blood to the Scaratha was not a food, but a covenant. From human things they took it as of right; from their own they took it as the sigil of conquest. And life was all a game, like chess. The spilled blood had dripped, during these playings, through the paint into the chessboard, then coloured red for blood and black for night. Because of the nourishment of those libations, when finally allowed by neglect, flowers came to break cracks in the squares. The flowers were very strong, tougher from being kept down, from fighting back. Only harsh frost could kill them now, and in the spring others would come, rising from death as gods and vampires allegedly did.

### **How Fair the Day**

Waking early as always, Ismira gets up. She sets about the business of the morning, equably, quietly. She anticipates nothing of it, but it has a surprise for her after all.

She is in the great hall, clearing up the mess of spent candles and replacing them with fresh, when Thental steals in like a slim white ray around the door.

Sometimes these girls do venture down, while Yane lies sleeping in the dark. Then, by now besotted with the vampire from Soriath, they talk on and on of his virtues to Ismira. It is her task too, to give them

food and drink, to keep them healthy, bathed and appealing, for her brother.

When she turns to Thental, however, Ismira is briefly bemused. It seems to her the girl has impudently put on Yane's dressing-robe of chessboard red and black, edged with gold.

But no. The gold is Thental's dishevelled hair, and the white her own skin, some of it. The red and black, which are thick on her naked body, are rich red blood and skeins of black hair, that seems to have been torn out at the roots.

Thental lifts her head and smiles at Ismira.

"How fair the day. I've done what I came for. Just as I swore I would, I did it. He had my sister a year back. I never forgot, never. I can cry always just thinking of her. I told them this time, let it be me, I'll go. And so they let me. See this? My little dagger, razor sharp. The hilt's silver, that helps with killing a demon-thing. I bartered for it off a pedlar. He bedded me for it. Sensible trade, worth every jolt." Thental raises the dagger high. If it was ever silver, now it is not. It is blood-red, like most of the rest of her. "What a lot he had in him," Thental remarks of this blood, conversational, moving nearer. "Some of it after all was mine. What he drank from me last night. I stabbed him through as he slept. Then I hacked off his head—quite a job I had of that, but I managed. It's how you must do it with that kind—your *kind*—I'll do it for you—" she runs headlong at Ismira. Ismira, Scaratha though not vampire, kills the girl instantly with one swift sidelong blow that breaks her neck.

Then Ismira stands there, staring at the wreckage, thinking about the other wreckage which will be all that is left of Yane in the tower.

Presently, Ismira sits down.

She considers graves, digging them, which is easy, she has dug a couple, if some years ago. She thinks of her glorious brother, she thinks of the human heritage she has never had, the vampire Scaratha heritage she has also, being second rate, never had.

Yane's horse is in the stable. The snows have not yet begun. The sun, for Ismira, provides no difficulty—though later, she can always make believe it does . . .

Ismira goes over to Thental, the fragile white flower which grew strong enough to crack the paving of the chessboard, but which the

frost of Ismira's hand then finished. Human flowers do not recover from that, nor vampire flowers, so Ismira has discovered.

Ismira dips her finger in the still-wet blood Thental has thoughtfully brought with her, Yane's blood. Ismira licks the finger. It means nothing to her, nothing at all. But, as with the sun of this fair day, she can always pretend.