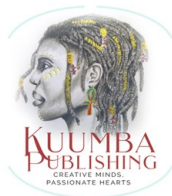


CRIMSON HUNTER

A Red Riding Hood Reimagining

N.D. JONES

SAMPLE



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Blood of the Sun Decree #171

November 1, 2236

BY MATRIARCHAL DECREE, THE REGION OF JANUS
NETHER IS THE RESERVED TERRITORY OF THE CLAN
OF THE BLACK MOON.

Kalinda, Matriarch of Irongarde
Oriana, Matriarch of Steeleross



Chapter 1: White Moon

April 27, 2243

Irongarde Realm

City of Wild Moor

Howls slashed across the beleaguered city like deadly claws. The incessant sound shattered windows. Jagged glass shards fell like deadly rain, cutting and adding to the pools of blood that already soaked the ground.

Oriana lifted her face to the starless night sky, sweat rolling from her brow into dark-brown, unblinking eyes. The orders of her mother, Matriarch Kalinda, reverberated in her mind. *“Wild Moor will be our final stand. You cannot allow the beasts to claim that border city, Crimson Hunter.”*

More howls carved through the darkness, followed by the tk.tk.tk.tk.tk.tk of rampaging paw feet. Oriana lowered her head. This was it then: the final battle of a day-long war. Countless had already died—many by her own hand in defense of her sisters—all by order of Matriarch Kalinda.

Oriana raised her arms, the liquid steel within mixed inorganic with organic—a potent witch’s brew of strength and control.

“Come forth, Ravagers of the Lost.” Red sun magic burst from Oriana’s hands. Wild flames sparked and hissed. Channeling the flames into her arms, Oriana willed the magic to comply. From the sparks and hisses of magic, twin cannon guns formed, replacing her arms from elbows to fingers.

“Shift,” Oriana ordered her Crimson Guard soldiers, trained witches under her direct command as Crimson Hunter.

Sun magic surged, turning limbs into shields and weapons.

Across the battlefield of cracked roads and burned buildings, the howling stopped. Silence descended—an emissary of violence, blood, and death.

Oriana raised her head again to the night sky and cursed the white moon glowing above. A red moon would’ve favored the witches. Oriana would’ve even been grateful for a black moon. But no, in the city she couldn’t allow to fall, a white moon had risen, strengthening her enemies like nothing else in nature could, save the blood and magic of a witch.

If Oriana and her Crimson Guards didn’t prevail, if she ended up food for the beasts—like the ravaged bodies of her sisters littering the landscape—her daughter would be left parentless. That, more than anything else, she could not allow to happen.

She also could not let Kalinda do the unthinkable.

Oriana focused on the enemy, their seething energy and low growls rancid in the tepid spring air. Rows of white werewolves filled the town square. As ghost white as the moon, their color differentiated them from the normal black of werewolves. Their white coats marked them as the vicious creatures they were ... muraco.

Eight feet of pure muscle, the feral werewolves exuded primal might. The length of their fangs, sharp and perfect for ripping, set them apart from other beasts of prey. Their claws were deadlier still.



Magic sizzled. Perspiration drenched the red and black of Oriana's Crimson Hunter body armor, which clung to her as fiercely as her resolve. She looked around at her Crimson Guards who extended from one side of the square to the other.

The muraco horde charged.

Good. She needed the feral beasts within range of her guards' weapons.

"Barragers?" Oriana yelled.

"Ready!"

"Guardians?"

"Ready!"

"Extractors?" Oriana called out to the last group of warrior witches.

"Ready!"

"Steady," she said to her sisters. "They are almost within striking distance. Wait for my command."

The white werewolves were nearly upon them. Fangs bared, their clawed feet carved a path through the concrete. Saliva flew. Red eyes gleamed.

Despite everything, Oriana agreed with her mother. White werewolves, the muraco, were irredeemable, untamable, and feral beyond reasoning.

The werewolves lunged at them in a frenzy. Attacking claws forced the witches backward.

"Extractors, go."

A third of the wall of the Crimson Guard vanished, only to reappear behind the werewolves, shoving steel blades into thick hides. The werewolves bellowed, swinging around with lightning speed—claws curved, vulnerable throats their targets.

Slice. Slash.

Blood spurted in an unrefined arc, splashing the werewolves in their favorite liquid, their stained fur a demented painter's morbid canvas.

Oriana filled her cannons with magic, shooting over and again. The battle raged, each side losing warriors in a battle that should've never been. She ran, darted, and jumped, blasting anything with fangs and fur. Oriana fought until her body burned raw with magic, nothing to draw on but her stubbornness and will.

The werewolves fared better, the white moon strengthening them. From the way her magic tingled, the sun would rise in less than an hour. Oriana and her unit of Crimson Guard soldiers were bedraggled and outnumbered, having defended Janus Nether's three cities all day.

Wild Moor was their final stand. When the sun rose, the battle would be done, no matter how many witches were still capable of continuing the battle, no matter that the sun would recharge their magic, giving them a much-needed edge. It would be an advantage they would be unable to capitalize upon.

"Barragers, do your worst."

Twenty-five witches converged on the werewolves, their metal blades, blasters, and phasers shoving their opponents backward. It was a magical rampage on par with the werewolves' frenzied slashes. Neither side gave an inch, a destructive storm that leveled city blocks.

Mindless, they fought. Mindless, they killed. Were her Crimson Guards any less feral than the white werewolves? No, they weren't. With this battle, they couldn't afford a sliver of mercy. So, Oriana commanded her guards to, "Push forward. Keep fighting. The sun will soon rise. Will we be here to greet it when it does?"

"No survivors," Kalinda had said. "*We need to send a message to any witch or werewolf who thinks to defy the Matriarchy.*"

Bloodied and exhausted, Oriana led the charge, her cannons *booming* a welcome to the new day. When the sun crested the horizon, the werewolves didn't falter. The strength of the white moon still blazed in their veins, un-dimmed by the slashes of red and gold in the morning sky.

The battle was neither over nor won, but Oriana had failed. The rising sun had been her stubborn mother's deadline.

"Guardians, retrieve. Barragers, crumble. Extractors, entangle and retreat."

Crimson Guards obeyed her command. The Guardian Unit sent their magic outward. Photonic blasts of magic shriveled the bodies of their dead sisters, setting their ravaged souls free. The Barrage Unit slammed their war hammers and maces onto the ground. Shockwaves sent the white werewolves flying backward.

By the time the muracos shook off the assault and charged the witches again, the Extraction Unit had the witches tethered by a multi-looped lariat.

As if out of nowhere, a single werewolf appeared, likely from the small, dark alley to her left. He ran toward Oriana. His muzzle and claws were covered in blood. But that's not what shocked Oriana into temporary immobility.

What in the hell is a black werewolf doing here with the muracos? And without his silver snare?

He slashed at her.

She held up an arm, blocking the attack. Her belated response to his appearance was too slow. Claws sliced into her left cannon. Instinctively, she shot at him with her right. A blazing bullet of unfiltered sun magic scored his left side, knocking the black werewolf away and down.

Oriana hadn't returned the black werewolf's attack with a kill shot the way she should have. After what had happened with ... *No, no, no, don't think of him now.*

She stumbled backward, eyes on the face of an enemy who shouldn't have been an enemy at all. "Get us out of here, extractors."

In a blink, they disappeared, extraction magic transporting them from Wild Moor to Irongarde City. They crashed to the ground. Oriana stayed where she was—on her back, eyes open, seeing nothing but her failure. Not the cityscape with glistening skyscrapers, the groaning witches around her, or even the sun—too new in the sky to heal her wounds.

"Are you okay?" Solange, captain of the Hunter Division and Oriana's best friend, leaned over her, dark eyes scanning her face. "Except for the arm you let that werewolf damn near take off, you look fine ... Unless my tired eyes were deceiving me, that black werewolf was—"

"Your eyes are fine, and I didn't *let* him do anything. How bad is it?"

"It's bleeding, nasty-looking, and probably hurts like hell, but you won't die from it."

An accurate assessment, especially the hurting like hell part.

Solange helped Oriana to her feet. "It isn't over. Go see Matriarch Kalinda. We've lost too many sisters to the muracos. I don't want to lose any more, if they are left to storm Irongarde City."

"Neither do I, but you know what she'll do."

Solange nodded, blood and sweat matting braids to her scalp. "Our hand was forced. They left us no choice."

Two nights ago, Oriana had told herself the same when he'd come after her, snapping, threatening ... and breaking her heart. *He forced my hand. He left me with no choice but to respond with violence.* The words echoed in her mind. But her heart wasn't convinced.

Oriana shook her head, adrenaline seeping from a body that wouldn't keep her upright much longer. "Why are witch lives worth more than werewolf lives?"

"Because they're our lives to protect, and we choose not to be ravaged by werewolves who sometimes wear the face of a beloved." Solange squeezed Oriana's uninjured hand, looking over her shoulder to their sisters, who were in various degrees of pain and disarray, and then back to her. "We'll get each other up and to the healers. Don't worry about us. Go see the Matriarch so we can begin to put this day, and the ugly ones that preceded it, behind us. Are you planning on telling the Matriarch about him?"

“I haven’t decided.”

“I always knew he was a bastard. But this ...” Solange nodded to Oriana’s left arm. Blood and red tendrils of magic leaked from the deep claw marks. “He’s not feral. But he fought with the muracos. His silver snare didn’t even activate. Is it possible he found someone to remove his rage disrupter?”

“We both know of one witch who has done it before, and she’s still missing. I don’t know how their paths could’ve crossed, though, not that it matters.”

“I understand why you didn’t, but you’re going to regret not killing him when you had the chance.”

Oriana shook her head sadly. “Like me, he’s in mourning. He probably blames me for what happened. I didn’t get a chance to speak to him about the night of the attack. I wanted to do it in person, to explain what happened.”

“That’s no excuse for siding with the muracos.”

“I know.” But Oriana didn’t want to talk about another problem that would likely end in more violence and bloodshed.

“Take care of that arm before you see Keira, or she’ll have nightmares. Hell, we’ll all have nightmares after today.”

Oriana hugged her friend. “You were great today. Thank you for a safe jump back here.”

“It’s what we extractors do. Our landing could’ve been better, though.”

“Considering the day we’ve had, the landing was perfect.”

They’d lost too many Crimson Guards during a single twenty-four-hour period. They would hold a mass funeral, but that would come later. Solange was right, she needed to see Kalinda—her mother would certainly never deign to leave her iron fortress to come looking for Oriana—because she’d failed her mission. Her failure would grant Kalinda the excuse to destroy Janus Nether. The region’s ruin would carry a socio-political message many conservative witches, like Kalinda, supported: Witches ruled Earth Rift, not werewolves.



“You need to have that arm examined and fixed. I’ll call my healer.”

Oriana sat across from Kalinda in her mother’s dining room, the living quarters comprising the entire top floor of Iron Spire, the Matriarch of Irongarde’s fortress home. A pitcher of water and a glass had been placed in front of her and platters of food in the center of the table. She’d consumed every drop of water, but couldn’t stomach the thought of eating, especially not meat, after seeing what the muracos had done to her sisters.

Within an hour of reporting the details of the battle at Wild Moor, her mother had extinguished the only shining light in Irongarde Realm. Janus Nether had been a beacon, a symbol of hope, and Oriana’s dream for a better Earth Rift.

Oriana pointed to the cold, hard, metal and glass walls around them. “Tell me, Mother, what is left of us that is still human? Certainly not our hearts.”

“We’re witches.”

Eyes that had never reminded Oriana of her own, despite what everyone said, looked at her with annoyance. Her mother understood love through a prism of power rather than self-sacrifice and vulnerability.

“What I did today saved us all. You were too soft-hearted to make the hard decision, so I made it for us both.”

In the short time available to them before the battles, they hadn’t been able to evacuate everyone from Janus Nether’s three cities. How many had missed the last scheduled transport or didn’t leave because they hadn’t known the deadly scope of the state of emergency?

Oriana pushed the cut fruit around on her plate. Feeding her body would help expedite the healing process, but she put her fork down.

“You think me weak because I refuse to be the kind of matriarch who would unleash her ultimate power on cities of innocents.”

Oriana also hadn’t fought the black werewolf as hard as she should’ve, blocking instead of attacking. She’d omitted that detail from her report.

“You’re my child, I know you aren’t weak.” Kalinda’s eyes and lips softened, reminding Oriana of how beautiful her mother was . . . on the outside. Her oval face was a lustrous dark-brown, radiating a youthfulness that belied her sixty years. It was a shade darker than her hair, pulled taut in a bun. “You’re sentimental, kind-hearted, and a dreamer. If we lived someplace else, perhaps on a planet where our magic and blood, our very essence, didn’t drive our males to madness, then your idealism would benefit all and my ruthlessness wouldn’t be necessary.” Kalinda came and sat beside Oriana. “He would’ve killed you.”

“I don’t want to talk about that night.”

“It’s only been a couple of days, so that’s understandable. Whether you want to hear it or not, he would have killed you.”

The Matriarch’s hand rose to cup her cheek. The same hand that stroked her face so tenderly had cast down Armageddon on not only the City of Wild Moor but on all of Janus Nether.

“It does you no good to dwell on the past, punishing yourself for acting from the most primal of instincts—survival. If you hadn’t, you and Keira wouldn’t be here. You can’t possibly regret trading your daughter’s life for his.”

Her mother had a way of condensing emotions into binary categories—desire or disgust, hope or dread, joy or grief, love or hate.

“After this is done, I’m returning to Steelcross with Keira.”

Kalinda’s hand dropped to her lap, her face hardening into the emotionless mask Oriana knew well.

Standing, Oriana gripped the edge of the table to keep herself from falling face first onto the floor. When she was steady, she caught her mother’s gaze. Except for the crease between Kalinda’s brows, her countenance remained unchanged.

“I’ll take care of the surviving muracos before Keira and I return home.”

“I thought we’d gotten past our argument from the other day. Don’t punish me by staying away and keeping my only grandchild from me.”

At that, Kalinda’s expression altered, as did her voice, breaking at the end. The hard matriarch was gone, leaving behind a mother and grandmother afraid of being alone and lonely in her iron tower of obedience and magic.

Oriana didn’t know how she felt about her mother. Weariness and grief prevented her from distinguishing truth from lie. Perhaps they were all lies and only one truth—Kalinda’s love for her family and Earth Rift. Or maybe Oriana only thought them lies because, sometimes, truths were harder on the digestive system than deceptions.

“I’ve been up all night. I’m going to bed.”

Oriana exited the dining room, taking the lift to her suite one level below. Rarely at a loss for words, Kalinda had said nothing. For this Oriana was unsure if she should be relieved or concerned. Probably concerned, she concluded after showering and dressing. Wearing long sleeves so the sight of her injury wouldn’t frighten Keira, she slipped into her queen-sized bed with her daughter.

Keira scooted closer, snuggling against Oriana’s chest. Her warm breaths were humbling wisps of innocence she cherished more than the magic and steel that had saved their lives.

“Mommy.” Her two-year-old’s low, groggy voice melted her heart. Keira’s eyes were closed, and she wasn’t fully awake. Oriana had almost lost her daughter. Keira’s physical injuries were gone, thanks to Kalinda’s personal healer, but magic couldn’t mend all wounds.

“I’m here. You’re safe.” The same words she’d spoken two nights ago in her suite in Steel Rise, an unmoving white werewolf at Oriana’s feet and blood decorating the walls.

Oriana kissed Keira’s forehead, feeling more like a mother and less like the Crimson Hunter and Matriarch of Steelcross. Yet, she was all three, her roles in society decreed by law.

While Oriana may find a few hours of well-earned rest, her duties as matriarch of the realm of Steelcross and co-ruler of the planet of Earth Rift, left little room for respite.

Oriana, Kalinda, and Kiera were three generations of Blood of the Sun witches, the matriarchy a family inheritance.

