

ASCENT OF THE WICKED  
BOOK ONE



NIGHT

REBECCA MAIN

COVET THE NIGHT

*Ascent of the Wicked Book 1*

REBECCA MAIN



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ASCENT OF THE WICKED

Covet the Night

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# Dark Court

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VRANA

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GUNWYN

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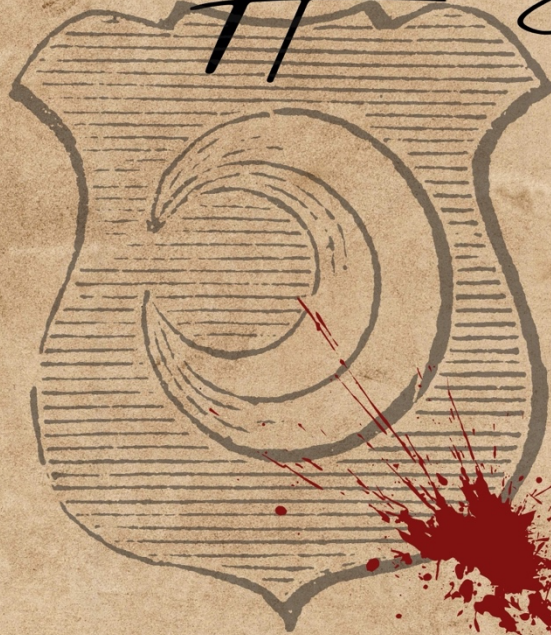
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*Hierarchy*



# I

The room was the finest Gwen had ever seen. Bathed in hues of rose and burnished gold, the cast of incandescent light from the chandeliers above gave the room a decidedly romantic air. Or perhaps it was the women who adorned the divans and chaises. Their beauty was effortless. Breathtaking. Otherworldly. Gwen's eyes flitted across the four of them. A small smile tugged at her lips as she listed off their signature shade of red hair.

*Cinnamon. Auburn. Cherry. Copper-gold.*

Gwen peeked in the mirror at the fifth and final woman, who stood behind her brushing out her curls. Her gold fingers grazed Gwen's neck as they dealt with a small, knotted section of hair before continuing their pampering.

*Crimson.*

Gwen's eyes closed as she relaxed into the chilled touch. A tickle of excitement was growing inside her. It was a pleasant change from the discomfort she'd grown accustomed to over the past couple of months and also a fond reminder of her mother.

The brush's dense bristles swept down the curve of her skull with care and drew a contented sigh from Gwen's lips. Eyes opening, her sights were captured by the woman at her back—Laurel.

Laurel smiled at Gwen slow, like a cat stretching in an especially nice bit of sun. She boasted coffee-colored eyes bound by a striking silver ring around her irises. The sight of the mercurial ring sent a shiver up Gwen's spine.

*Vampyré.*

Outside of their frighteningly cold touch and pallid skin, it was this subtle flash of otherworldliness that signaled these immortal creatures possessed a bite worse than their bark. And Gwen was set to become one of them. Her heart skipped a beat. She wouldn't be *just* a vampyré but a vampyré of a Royal Household within the Dark Court—a place where supernaturals of all kinds lived outside the bounds of human society.

Two weeks ago, Laurel had walked into Gwen's life just as she'd begun to celebrate its end. She'd shown Gwen an entire world hiding in shadows and plain sight. It was terrifying and exhilarating... and the most fantastical two weeks of Gwen's short-slated life because Laurel had promised in honey-soaked words and silky whispers as they traveled the city of Vienna together that it never had to end.

When Laurel invited Gwen to join her family of immortals, Gwen didn't hesitate to accept. Her reasoning was simple: she was marked for death anyway. Why wait for her cancer to do her in when she could take matters into her own hands? Although acute myeloid leukemia—or AML—was treatable if caught early enough, that hadn't been the case for Gwen.

Nor had it been for her mother.

A little over a month ago, Gwen was given little less than a year to live with an aggressive treatment plan, and now? Eternity was hers—if she could pass the Roux sisterhood's initiation tests.

Laurel set aside the boar bristle brush in favor of her nimble fingers to plait Gwen's hair. Gwen watched, mesmerized by the speed and dexterity of Laurel's fingers.

When Laurel caught sight of her wonder, her smile grew.

"You're so fast," Gwen murmured.

The women of the room laughed, their supernatural hearing picking up her softly spoken admiration. Gwen blushed but chuckled along.

"The comb, please." Laurel's hand appeared over Gwen's shoulder, palm facing upward.

Gwen passed the opal comb in her lap to her sire-to-be. The delicate ornament was placed expertly to hold several braided strands together in an artful manner.

"Oh, that's just perfect, Laurel," said the woman with cherry-red hair. Her pointed canines were on full display in a wide-set smile.

Lily, thought Gwen.

"Thank you, sister," Laurel replied demurely, fingers still busy at work.

"You have the most stunning set of cheekbones, Gwendolyn," Lily continued, resting her chin on a fist as she draped herself over the back of a divan. She preferred the use of Gwen's full name rather than the shortened version. Gwen didn't know why. "But you could do with a bit more meat on your bones. We might be dead, but nobody enjoys looking at a skeleton."

The women laughed again, and Gwen's hand drifted to her face as she forced herself to laugh along quietly. Her fingertips traced the sharp line of her cheekbone self-consciously. Catching Laurel's eye once more in the mirror's reflection, she watched the beautiful vampyré give a subtle shake of her head. Gwen's hand dropped back to her lap.

The other women were unaware of her illness, and Laurel was determined to keep it that way.

The Roux sisterhood desired souls who had nowhere else to turn but braved the world, nonetheless. They wanted women whose loyalty would be unquestionable while still possessing that certain *je ne sais quoi* that defined their revered family. They wanted women with *fire*, and the symbol of that fire to be their flaming red locks.

Gwen checked all the boxes, but Laurel said it didn't matter. The Roux didn't want "spoiled goods."

A brief flare of shame tightened her chest, but Gwen shook herself of it quickly. Laurel didn't think she was spoiled, and that was what mattered. Gwen had no intention of bearing her secret to the sisterhood and ruining her second chance at life even if said life was without a heartbeat and composed of a strictly liquid diet.

"I wish a moment alone with my charge, if you please, sisters."

The lounging women rose one by one. First was Violet, the woman with long auburn hair and a square jaw. As the matriarch of their sister line, she led their numbers by default. Next was Poppy. She was just shy of 390 years old, yet eternally the sweet age of sixteen. Poppy was also Violet's sole surviving child out of two. Bringing up the rear with arms linked were Lily and Hazel. The former's copper-gold hair was cut in a fashion-forward asymmetrical bob and glinted in the light. Lily tossed a wink over her shoulder before closing the door behind them. And then they were alone.

"How are you feeling, pet?" Laurel asked, her hands coming to rest on Gwen's bare shoulders.

"Excited. Nervous," Gwen answered. A hasty smile rushed to her lips, followed by a minor grimace. "A bit sore and tired."

Laurel nodded. She knew in great detail Gwen's growing ailments: fatigue, achy joints, bouts of fevers, easily bruised, sometimes nosebleeds. And sometimes more.

"You've done so well keeping your composure. I can already tell the others love you very much. They absolutely adore you, pet!"

Gwen's breath hitched. "Really? You aren't just saying that? We've only had a day together—" Laurel pinned one eyebrow pointedly high at Gwen's slip. "I mean *night*. We've only had one *night* together. Can they really love me?"

Laurel grinned and slipped around Gwen to perch atop the gilded vanity. "It's easy to give love when trust is already earned. Our sisters entrusted me to find the perfect fit for our sister line, and I did just that."

Gwen smiled but bit her lip as a heaviness set into her bones. "Were you able to get the medicine?" She strived for nonchalance, but desperate hope crept into her voice.

When Laurel learned of Gwen's cancer, she'd been momentarily disappointed before hardening with determination. There was no magic that could stop death or reverse her fatal diagnosis, but she'd been certain she could find something to help. She'd promised some kind of solution to delay Gwen's inevitable decline, at least until she'd completed the Roux's initiation. Gwen had wept in gratitude.

"I was able to procure a tincture for you. It won't stop your decay—that kind of magic has long since been gone—but it will help slow it down, which is all we really need." Laurel pulled an opaque green crystal vial from a concealed pocket. It was filled with a milky iridescent substance that glowed in the room's warm light. Gwen reached for the tincture but came up short as Laurel pulled it out of reach. The vampyré clicked her tongue and stared sternly at her child-to-be.



Gwen curbed her desperate enthusiasm and put on an air of patience. Inside, her heart hammered at the sight of the vial. It was her salvation.

"This tincture comes with certain caveats, just as we assumed it would."

Gwen nodded. The news did not subdue her hummingbird heartbeat. Laurel had warned that finding the perfect catch-all for her cancer would be impossible. As such, Gwen had kept her hopes locked away and resolved to suffer silently through the initiation if need be—anything to live. But seeing the tiny vial now made her mouth dry up. She didn't care what the caveats were. An extra leg? Purple skin? She'd gladly accept them.

"Of course," Gwen replied after wetting her lips. "Tell me."

Laurel gave an approving nod. "There are three tinctures in total. Each is strong enough to last a week, and by week's end, you'll surely feel its effects waning."

"What will it do exactly?" Gwen received a frown in return for her interruption. She whispered a quick apology, and Laurel continued.

"They'll nullify the worst of your symptoms and keep your cancer from progressing. *However.*" The word hung heavy in the air between them as Laurel stared Gwen down, deep coffee-colored eyes meeting chocolate brown. "Once the tincture has run its course, your cancer will rebound and advance twofold."

The words sank into Gwen like an anchor, pulling her down from her short-lived high. "Rebound?"

"Twofold," Laurel answered promptly and without sympathy. Yet, as Gwen's face fell along with her pallor, Laurel leaned forward and placed the vial in Gwen's hands. "That's why there are three vials, Gwen. One for each initiation test. To my knowledge, they're set to be spaced roughly one week apart from each other. Should all things proceed accordingly, you'll only feel the adverse effects toward the tail end of each vial."

Gwen inhaled and gripped the small vial, running her thumb over its curved body down to its pinpoint end. "I've managed my pain so far." Gwen's voice started soft but grew stronger with her conviction. "I'll deal with it as it comes, just as I do now."

"You haven't forgotten what I told you, have you?" Stern creases lined Laurel's forehead. "About why you must keep your health a secret?"

"I haven't forgotten," Gwen assured her. If the sisterhood found out, Gwen would be slain by Madame Roux for her deceit—and so would Laurel and the rest of her soon-to-be sister line.

Laurel's shoulders sagged in happy relief.

"Good, and there's one last thing you must know before you take your tincture," Laurel said, stopping Gwen from tipping the vial's contents into her mouth with her chilled hand upon the living girl's wrist. "There will be many temptations for you at court, one such temptation being elixirs and tonics to enhance certain sensations or alleviate aches and pains. You are not to take any of these, my pet. They won't mix well with what you're taking, particularly the potions and salves meant to heal. You're only human, after all," she said with a sympathetic smile, fingers rubbing small circles on her fair skin. "Too much magic will cause your body more harm than good, and this—" She swept her eyes meaningfully to the vial. "—is extremely potent."

Gwen rested her hand atop Laurel's. "I won't do anything to jeopardize the tincture. Not when it's giving me a fighting chance. And Laurel." She tightened her hand around the vampyrés. A sudden lump formed in her throat. "I cannot possibly begin to repay you or thank you enough for everything you've done for me."

A sparkle lit Laurel's eyes. "Don't thank me yet," she said. "You'll have the rest of eternity to express your gratitude if you survive the initiation. Now, drink up."

The cork released with a tug of Gwen's fingers, and she tossed back the milky contents without hesitation.

She expected some kind of taste to the iridescent solution, be it bitter, sour, or sweet, not flavorless and ice-cold. Her eyes widened as the tincture coated her tongue and slid down her throat. It seeped into her system with icy tendrils, quickly soothing her bones and muscles as it raced through her body in seconds. Last to settle was an alien wellspring that generated an abundance of energy and stamina in the

center of her chest. The back of Gwen's hand grazed her lips as she processed the peculiar sensation, well aware that Laurel studied her reaction closely.

"Well?" Laurel prompted, cocking her head to the side. "How do you feel?"

Gwen blinked, still in shock from the numbing sensation the tincture provided and the strange warmth that had taken up residence in her chest. "*Wonderful.*"

"Excellent!" Laurel cried, a wide smile slashing across her face to reveal lethal canines. "I'm so pleased to hear it works. I'd hate to dirty my hands and make the sorcerer's family suffer further. "

The happy smile perched on Gwen's lips locked in place as her brows tilted inquisitively. "I—" An awkward laugh stumbled out her mouth. "I don't quite understand."

Laurel slipped off the vanity's edge, smoothing down the black velvet encasing her body. "I couldn't very well let the sorcerer *live*, pet. He knew too intimately of our predicament and had several friends in court. He had to be disposed of."

Gwen's attempt to cover her horror was unsuccessful. Laurel's lips thinned down to a line.

"Do not upset yourself over the life of one measly sorcerer," Laurel chastised with a measure of cold brevity that Gwen had yet to experience. "Rejoice," she insisted, "for the man's family will live for his work."

"Yes, of course." Gwen pasted her smile back in place.

Laurel's look softened, but a measure of sternness remained. "Death will be your constant companion—"

"It already is," Gwen mumbled.

Laurel heaved a sigh, eyes tilting upward and holding on to the coffered ceiling.

"Do learn to mind your tongue and place, pet." Laurel leveled her sights back on Gwen. "You may court death now, but soon enough, you'll be its mistress. Learn the difference, sooner preferably rather than later. Bodies will be dropping at your feet in no time at all."

"I know," Gwen whispered, her throat bobbing with uncertainty.

Laurel had made no attempt to sugarcoat the finer details of immortal life when they'd explored Vienna. She'd needed to be certain Gwen was not only a fit for the Roux but that she could handle the sacrifice required of eternal life: human blood. Homicide was a common occurrence within the court, used as leverage, revenge, or entertainment. Gwen had assured her she could adapt, but the knowledge that she cost someone their life troubled her conscience. She shoved it to the back of her mind.

"I know," Gwen repeated more confidently.

Laurel's smile was slow to come, but when it did, Gwen felt her own lips follow suit.

"It needn't all be intimidating or scary," Laurel told Gwen in a stage whisper, the smile still at large on her face. "Besides, you'll have me there to help you along every step of the way, as well as Lily and Hazel. Poppy will most certainly tease you out of any slump you fall into, and Violet will make sure no harm comes to you. Ever. You have our love and protection without question. Oh, we're so happy to have you be our sister, Gwendolyn. You'll be the perfect addition to our little family."

Whatever worry or distress Gwen harbored earlier faded at the sincere declaration.

"I won't disappoint you," she replied, ignoring the cracked quality of her words.

A knock sounded on the door to the sister line's private parlor and boudoir. Laurel and Gwen looked to it expectantly.

"Enter," Laurel called.

Lily's cherry-red curls popped into view. Excitement flushed her cheeks lightly.

"It's time."

A nervous flutter erupted in Gwen's stomach as Lily dipped out.

"Ready?"

Gwen attempted to smother her grin without success as she stood and answered. "*Semper Paratus.*"  
*Always ready.*

Laurel released a pleased laugh. "Oh yes, you'll do just fine."



Gwen stood alongside four other women, her palms damp and stomach still aflutter. Around them stood the Roux sisters in the cleared common room. While Gwen and her counterparts were dressed in Grecian gowns in shades that ranged from soft cream to angel white, those of the sisterhood donned black—black satin, black silk, black velvet—and held candlesticks.

There were twenty-two vampyré sisters in total and five initiates. A tremor of excitement chased up Gwen's spine as the current head of their household, Peony, stepped forward. She retained the honorific of Madame Roux, and per Laurel's schooling, her authority was on somewhat tremulous ground after centuries of holding power, hence the initiation. Peony sought to strengthen her position and appease the sisterhood by bringing in new blood. Laurel didn't know whether the move would work or not, but the palpable thrum of excitement from everyone in the room left Gwen to think her plot had succeeded.

Madame Roux's dark red hair was slicked back and fell down her back in one sleek sheet. Her eyes, lined in kohl and dominated by the vampyric signature silver ring, drew over each of them, inch by inch. She was eager to commence and test the women's cunning, fortitude, and, above all else, loyalty.

"Welcome," Madame Roux said, stepping closer to the circle's middle and the women who occupied it. "No doubt your soon-to-be sires have told you much of our family's esteemed history and have gone on in great detail and pride of their own sister lines. But allow *me* the pleasure of telling you of Coral. The first of our household and namesake of the Roux.

"Centuries ago, only men knew the gift of eternity, and they sought to protect it as best they could. Outside the vow of secrecy all supernaturals kept to maintain our anonymity among mortals, vampyrés lived by three strict codes. The first: grant mercy to the childe left untamed by their sire and deliver unto them a swift death," Madame Roux recited, walking down the short line of initiates. She relished seeing their pink-tinged skin and the flush of excitement in their eyes. "Two: drink not from each other, for such wickedness puts undue power into one above all others. And the third..."

The matriarch stopped. Her dress, made in the image of the glittering night sky, sparkled in the candlelight as she peered about the sisterhood's circle. A few caught her eye; their lips twitching in an effort to break their stoic facades and release gay smiles. Madame Roux empathized.

"No female should be turned, for their sensibilities are too delicate, their emotions too volatile, and their desires too unyielding."

"*Semper Paratus*," the sisterhood chanted in seductive repose, and a thrill of excitement swept the room.

Gwen's eyes widened, her anticipation driving higher with each passing moment. The spectacle and grandeur of it all left her nearly breathless. She glanced briefly to her left and right to catch the other initiates' reactions. Only the woman on her right acknowledged her glance. No taller than five-foot-three with oxblood hair, her eyes sparkled with uncontained amazement. She spared Gwen a brief, wobbly smile that she returned before giving her full attention back to Madame Roux.

"Women possess a unique power that is equal parts devastating and unignorable when wielded correctly, which is precisely why the code was upheld. *Fear*"—Madame Roux said the word with vehement detestation and prowled the perimeter of the sisterhood's circle—"is for the weak, and we of the Roux are above such menial emotion."

"*Semper Paratus*," the sisterhood chanted.

"It will come as no surprise to hear our founding mother knew intimately of her power, nor that she won her immortality by using the very thing man condemned and outlawed us for: our sex."

"*Semper Paratus*."

Madame Roux came to a stop again, her ruby red lips curling devilishly for the initiates.

"The key to our survival is our vigilance. It is the strong bond of our sisterhood. It is our masterful and merciless use of our sex." Her husky voice rose as the sisterhood intoned, "*Semper Paratus*," over and over and over again.

A wave of chills washed over Gwen at the impassioned speech. Her eyes remained wide and unblinking as Madame Roux drew closer.

"In you, we see the flame carried inside us all. A flame that, when tended to properly, will grow to an inferno." Madame Roux's eyes flared with her passion, streaking crimson before calming to their original state. Her stare dug deep into the initiate's hearts and souls as she prowled closer to them. "Roux—*red*. Red for the fire that lives inside us all. Red for the blood that keeps us whole. Red for our wild passion. Red for our dominance. Red—*Roux*. Honor us, and we shall honor you."

The room fell quiet save for the steady hammering of the hearts of the initiates. A breathy laugh sounded nearby, and Gwen's eyes flicked to her left. At the end of the line, ginger curls swayed from a quietly laughing head. Gwen swiftly planted her gaze on the ground. She was tempted to do the same.

A hysterical giggle stood at the back of her throat, ready to release at any given moment for the sheer madness of the experience. She was going to be a *vampyré*. She bit into her wayward tongue as she pressed her lips to a fine line. Gwen had never felt so alive nor closer to death than at this moment.

"You shall face three tests to prove your worth to the sisterhood of the Roux. Pass, and you shall be awarded everlasting life and a name befitting of your new family. Fail, and you shall be forgotten. Your name stricken from our lips and hearts because we may only stand the test of time by moving forward," Madame Roux proclaimed.

The sisterhood stepped forward, closing rank around the initiates and taking up their soft chanting once more.

"We of the sisterhood ask that you go out among the court and retrieve something of *true* value. A secret. A favor. A magical token. Whatever it may be, make it worthy of the Roux."

The circle split and formed two long lines, leaving a path to the mammoth mahogany door at the Roux's royal suite entrance. Madame Roux moved to stand at its mouth and gave each initiate one last long, searching look. Gwen drew herself up straighter beneath her intense regard, her amusement fading.

Her first test: find something of true value for the sisterhood. Gwen licked her lips in anticipation as several thoughts piled up in her head. What would she do? Where would she go? How could she be sure of her prize's worth?

Madame Roux nodded in satisfaction at whatever she found staring back at her and stepped aside.

"Go. Return no later than dawn or consider your lives forfeit. And do be mindful who you cross in the court."

The woman with the ginger curls took a hesitant step forward before finding her stride and walking purposefully down the aisle of candle-bearing sisters. After her followed another, and then the woman directly to the left of Gwen.

Gwen followed on her predecessor's heels, noting with a mixture of excitement and anxiety that the candles were being extinguished as they neared the door. It was as if the night itself was chasing after them.

*Little does the night know, Gwen thought, it's the other way around.*

When at last they reached the door and left the safety of the common room, Gwen chanced a glance over her shoulder to spy the sisters one last time, but all that greeted her was darkness.



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Do you believe in magic? Rebecca Main does. Her magic wand is a well-worn pen that's been known to weave stories that transport readers to other worlds. Other enchanting pastimes of Rebecca include traveling and showering her two cats, Dorcas and Pudge, with love.

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xoxo,

Rebecca

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