

DEVOUR — THE — DARK

Cat Devlin

A Chapter Preview First Look

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Author Note

Thank you so much for your interest in Devour the Dark! This excerpt contains the full first chapter preview of this book, told from Luka's point of view. It should be considered a "first look chapter", which means that you are seeing it before editing has finished and it's been formatted into the novel. I've made every effort to present this chapter in its final form to the best of my ability, but I am only human, so I humbly ask your forgiveness if you come across any typos.

This chapter is presented here in PDF format and is best read on a mobile device or PC, as a download or in your web browser.

Content Warning

I believe in transparency and protecting your mental health. This book is a dark urban fantasy romance with a strong emphasis on the "dark"—there are themes of gothic horror, blood and violence. This first chapter contains themes that may be disturbing to some readers and is indicative of the content readers can expect from the rest of the book. Please do not read if you will be affected by any of the following content:

- Extreme Graphic Violence & Gore
- Decapitation
- Body Mutilation
- Human Sacrifice
- Mention of slavery, psychological torture.

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CHAPTER ONE

Luka

THERE WERE NO GODS IN RELIQUARY CITY, because I'd killed the last one. Right here in this street, on a downpour night like this one, I'd held his face under the floodwater until the thrashing stopped. Morroc laughed while I did it—until the wet, bubbling realization hit that he was dying.

Even gods, it seemed, were not immune to fear.

I leaned against a wall outside the back entrance to my club, hands in my pockets, watching the street. Below my feet, vibrating up through the rock, the club's bass throbbed. Rain hammered the metal roof overhead; the runoff had choked the gutters, and now the streets ran high with overflow. On my side of the street, lights illuminated the Stacks—ugly, squat tenements cobbled together from scavenged materials, towering high enough to reach the bridge city above.

On the other side, the darkness was absolute. No streetlights, no sound of footsteps, no exhale of breath from any living thing. *Bone Court territory*. The air carried a putrid smell—rotting flesh warred with the

sharp odor of tar. The creatures who lived in that nightmare land stayed over there, and we had laid down black pitch along the border to keep it that way.

They watched me. The cold weight of their undead scrutiny picked through the layers of my flesh to the beating veins beneath. To my heart, iron-rich and juicy. That stare itched as it crept over my skin, urging me to step off the curb. Cross that line, break my word, give them a reason to attack. A low vibration, like the buzzing of insects, stirred beneath the rain.

I ran my tongue over my teeth, slow and deliberate, and grinned.

Come on, fuckers. Come and fucking get me.

Nothing moved. No foot slid across that black line. My lip curled as the shadows held their boundary.

“Boss.” Candy stood in the open entry behind me. His gaze darted beyond, scanning the night before it snapped back to me. He didn’t like it when I stood out here, making myself a target. “The witch, ah, the *guest*—” his lip curled, as if the word disgusted him, “is waiting.”

I pushed off the wall. “Rook took her down to the Mere?”

He nodded. I’d always thought of Candy as more of a *Beetle*, but *Candy* was the name that’d stuck. Two small, black eyes were set into a meaty face, and between them, a wide nose that had been broken many times. His ears were cauliflower lobes; his big fists knotted with scars over the knuckles. He usually smelled like cigarettes and hard cherry candy, but tonight, the sour aftertaste of a greasy, fried fish dinner lingered in the oils that had dribbled into his beard. He rolled a fresh sweet around noisily between his teeth as he locked the

door behind me.

Twenty bars of reinforced steel snicked home into the wall. I glanced around the corner into the security office. "Where'd Delos go?"

He shrugged. "Needed more men on the main entrance. We're busy tonight."

"But we're admitting humans only?"

He nodded. "Hard to tell a fresh-fed from the real thing, though. Somehow, the vampires are getting out to feed, Luka. I caught two tonight already. Said they came through the Manhattan gate."

Two. I crossed my arms as the security screens shifted between cameras in the club. Vampires getting out was a problem. I wanted Morroc's children to starve in their eternal night, but more than that, I had an agreement with New York not to let the bastards run wild, and I didn't need that relationship soured. The New York faction kept a gate open just for us, and that business was good.

Better than good. For the first time in centuries, Reliquary City was waking up.

Candy's eyes cut to me and then away. He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

"Go on, Can. Say what you want to say."

"That witch shouldn't be here." He clenched his fists. Relaxed them. Stuck the cigarette between his lips and scowled. "Not tonight, or ever."

He wasn't wrong. The high water running in the streets invoked Morroc's memory, and the undead were clever fucking twats. Maybe a handful were all that had managed to slip out of the Reliquary now, but how long before fear wasn't enough to keep them from coming

across that line *en masse*?

I shrugged and pulled out my lighter. "If she wants to come begging for help, why should I stop her?"

He caught my wrist. "That's not what I meant and you know it," he growled. "You have a vendetta, Boss, and we all share it. But if you kill her on a night like tonight, *here*...when she's come to petition you? It's going to start something, not end it."

As big of a brute as he was, I was still a couple inches taller. Lean where he was thick, dark where he was blond. Loyalty in the faery world was *contractual*, bound by specific rules, and most of the fae who dwelled in my court only cared about what they owed. Candy was different. We were two sides of the same coin, the wolf and the hound, and we'd always shared a deeper bond, a bigger perspective. And a hierarchy. I made the decisions; he guarded my door. We'd always worked that way, even when Morroc had us both in chains.

He knew me too well. I waited until his eyes met mine, until he released my wrist and dropped his gaze. Then I held the flame up for his cigarette.

"Ashera is here under the Old Courtesy. She will have to violate it before I can act against her."

He frowned. "She brought an offering?"

"Her own blood." As precious as that commodity was within the vampire court, I could not ignore the value of the gift. The law of hospitality—the *Old Courtesy* as we called it—bound me to offer safe conduct under my roof, even if I'd rather see her dead. "But I'm not convinced her fiends won't try to test us tonight anyway, so stay sharp, ok?"

"Yeah." Candy sucked deep on his cigarette, still eyeing me. "What do you think she really wants?"

Morroc's crown, for starters. The old necromancer had always seen herself as his successor, and she'd never forgiven me for refusing to turn it over after I'd killed him. There was no world in which I *would* turn it over to her, but she'd followed my rules and made her offering, so I'd at least let her make her case. And if she slipped up and broke the rules of safe conduct?

Well.

I clapped Candy on the shoulder. "Whatever she wants, it's got the creatures worked up. They're out there on the line humming like a swarm of fucking bees. Get Delos back up here, yeah?"

I left him in the security office and followed a narrow corridor down to the main club level. Candy's dissent itched at the back of my mind. We were getting too comfortable, too complacent—and I was restless. Old Courtesy or not, I did not want parley with my enemies. I did not want peace, or a comfortable place to lie down at night. This was Reliquary City; peace made you predictable and weak.

I had been made to hunt, and the Drowned Court would never be a place for anything else. Tonight, though, my quarry thought she was hunting *me*. All of this—the ritual of the Courtesy, the following of my rules—it was too rehearsed, too simple for the witch I'd known. Every instinct warned me of another thread moving beneath the surface of all this, but I hadn't worked out what it was yet.

On the main level, the bass hit heavy, and bodies packed the dance floor. Dancers writhed under violet strobes, human and faery faces slick with sweat and glamourised desire. Beneath the haze of smoke, I felt the violence of their appetites churning. Whispers pulled

eyes toward shadowed corridors. Hands tugged bodies into hidden rooms where the doors disappeared. Behind the beauty, sharp teeth flashed as my faeries drew their prey into a wild dance. Dance well, and you'd wake up in your bed with only vague memories of a fever dream. Dance poorly, and you'd never wake up at all.

This was not a refuge for little girls who got lost in the woods. It was not a twee ring of flowers on an airy mound. We had been warning the mortal world for thousands of years: *don't stray from the path. Don't take our food or drink.*

It wasn't our fault if they didn't listen.

I took the central stairs down to the lower levels of the club. The deeper I went, the more solemn it became, until the music had faded altogether and the neon and velvet gave way to sconces set into naked stone. Here, deep under the city, the air was colder and heavy with moisture. Water seeped through cracks in the walls, leaving a slick of dark algae where it dripped down to the floor.

Rook and Cosmo stood guard at the arched entryway leading into the Mere's chamber. They shared a brief glance as I dismissed them and sent them back upstairs. I didn't want any witnesses tonight. Whatever the witch had to say to me, I preferred to keep it between us and the dead.

The Mere had once been a large cistern, a water reservoir for the ancient city that once stood above us. Now it was both throne room and temple, though I was no god to worship. Instead, a vast, black lake stretched out before me, the bones of Velmourne's old empire still visible in the delicate rib-vault ceiling and elegant columns stretching overhead. The moment I entered,

the surface went still as a mirror.

Nothing reflected back but the pale flash of skulls bobbing in the water.

“They’re like koi,” Ashera said without greeting.

The old witch stood at the edge of the carved basin, where so many others had stood and contemplated their fate before her. Some cast pennies into my lake. Locketts, bars of gold, even jewels. And some made a different offering, a more permanent one.

“So many beautiful souls, Luka. You’ve cared for them well.”

The necromancer’s hands hung at her sides, her bony, tattooed fingers loose and open with no sign of spell-casting. She seemed thinner and frailer than when I’d last seen her, a withered old stem drowning in voluminous black robes from head to toe. Her once-raven hair was thick with silver, worn loose and unbound—a last grasp at vanity against the sagging wear of years on her face.

I ran my thumb along the edge of the doorframe, tracing the rounded ogee. “My hoard isn’t for sale, if that’s why you came.”

“Oh, I asked if I should take them away from you.” She eyed me slyly. “But your dead tell me they aren’t inclined to leave just yet. I supposed you should take that as a compliment, Drowner.”

“Much as I enjoy flattery,” I said, smiling faintly, “my court isn’t pleased you’re here. You asked for Courtesy and you have it, but the clock is ticking on when it ends. Why have you come, Ashera?”

“To say...I’m sorry.” She sighed, glancing over her shoulder at the lake before looking back at me. “I never wanted us to be enemies, and I regret it came to that. I

meant to visit you before now.”

My eye twitched. “Let me guess—you just couldn’t get away. Did your precious vampires lock you in a dungeon? No?” I scoffed. “Or maybe you were hoping someone else would take me out and do the dirty work for you. It’s not like you could do it, is it?”

She pressed her lips into a tight, flat line.

I shrugged. “Well, you’ve seen me. Sorry to inform you, but I’m alive and well and your god is still dead.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she clicked her tongue in disapproval. “But he’s not dead, Luka. Not while that crown exists.”

My glance flicked to the crown in annoyance. It was just a small thing, black and glittering, set on a stone plinth above the lake’s surface. And yet it was everything. The only thing—and I hated it. I’d already tried a dozen ways to destroy it, but the crown still sat there, unscathed, looming over my hoard like a specter.

“Then he can sit there and watch the world go on without him.”

“Or...” Ashera tipped her head in shrewd assessment. “you could take it for yourself.”

“I don’t need a dead god’s crown to rule my court.” I stripped off my black suit jacket and tossed it onto a stone bench.

“But aren’t you ever tempted?” she pressed.

I slid onto the seat, leaning back and spreading my arms wide. “Did we not serve the same master? Maybe you remember him differently than I do.”

Ashera’s lips pursed, like a mother scolding an unruly child. “How are you any different from him, Luka Velthar?” She waved a hand at the cavernous chamber, and the lake behind her. “You drown men—in exchange

for what? A wish?”

“At least my petitioners have a choice. I don’t force them into any bargain they didn’t seek first, and I always honor my word.”

“And what is that worth when a man is dead?”

Round and round we always went, just like this. I was growing bored. “We all have our violent delights. What’s yours, I wonder? Greed? Ambition? Or is betrayal the only game witches care about?”

She looked away in distaste. “Luka, I *am* truly sorry—”

“No,” I interrupted sharply. “I don’t want more apologies from you. Your magic is failing, just like his was failing, because you are feeding them. I will not be obligated to pity you because you chose a losing game. You should have done *better*, if you cared at all what I think.”

“You’re an arrogant asshole,” she snapped. “And you’ve made mistakes too. You should not have kept that crown so close.”

There was the steel I knew was in her, a far cry from the fragile old woman she pretended to be. She clasped her hands together, linking her fingers so the tattoos overlapped into a pattern, like a shield sliding into place. A brief sulfur-sharp stirring of magic rippled through the air.

“Careful,” I warned.

Her lips twisted into a grim smile. “Can’t you feel it, Luka? The crown’s poison seeps into your lake even now, and your dead hear the god calling to them. How long before they no longer answer to you? How long before your power is gone too? He will destroy your hoard, even if his taint takes years. Can you destroy his

crown?”

I ground my teeth as my gaze snapped back to the water, but unease coiled in my gut. Every way I'd tried to destroy the crown had failed; the metal remained intact. Nothing affected it. It had been easy to explain it away as a trophy, but I did not *want* a trophy from Morroc. He wasn't a sacrifice meant to decorate my hoard; he was a blight I wanted to erase from existence.

There had always been a creeping dread in the back of my mind that that there was a *reason* it could not be destroyed. That it was alive, somehow, that he could come back. Now the dark witch was all but confirming it. The water rippled too, sloshing against the walls of the lake, as if acknowledging the taint that had begun to seep into its depths.

I glared back at her, but Ashera held up a hand.

“As long as that crown exists, there will always be a danger. To your hoard, to your court. But I can help you destroy it.”

The cold weight of dread settled on my shoulders and with it, the knowledge that this would never end. Even if this was a ploy, the crown was a prize my enemies would not ignore. They would keep coming for it until they got it. And if Morroc was still alive, still trapped inside...

There was nothing I would not do to make sure he stayed dead.

She lifted her chin, confidence growing now that she had my attention. “Witchblood is almost gone from the human realm. But I have a granddaughter in New York. She is strong, Luka. With the three of us, our magic would be enough. If you won't accept my apology, then at least accept my help with this. Let me put right this

wrong.”

I almost believed her, until she said that word: *granddaughter*.

That single word conjured a memory of a night in Morroc’s ballroom, and bile surged in the back of my throat. She had led two women, naked and black-haired, up to his dais. He sprawled lazily on his throne, waiting for his gifts. A bored god was a dangerous one, and these soft, nubile young women were exactly the thing to finally stir his interest.

She had known they would. Had counted on it. Morroc’s faith in his witch had been failing for some time. His own power was flagging, his children hungry with a thirst he could no longer quench. She had brought the only gift that mattered.

Witches. With delicious dark magic running through their veins.

Twins, by the look of them. She’d stood then like she was standing now, chin held high, cold purpose in her rigid gaze. Dread prickled my skin as she pushed the one forward toward her master.

The woman stumbled, but Morroc caught her. She gasped as he yanked her onto his lap and grabbed her breast, twisting the nipple. Then she screamed as he sank his fangs into her soft flesh and tore her breast from her body. He threw back his head and roared in triumph, shaking the fleshy organ in his teeth before he wolfed it down. I stood close enough to wear the splatter of the woman’s blood across my face, to see the glazed shock fade from her eyes as her body jerked with the monster’s feeding. The other woman’s voice rose into a high-pitched rabbit squeal, drowning out the sound of Morroc’s noisy slurping. Ashera caught the screaming

woman by the hair and drove her to her knees to watch.

To wait to be next.

I scowled, nails digging into my palms. “Does this granddaughter know what you did to your daughters?”

Ashera’s gaze snapped to mine immediately. The truth was undeniable, sketched in wide-eyed surprise. *Yes, I knew. I’d always known who they were.* Her expression shifted to profound guilt, and then, as quickly as it had come, a cold sneer replaced the pain. There was no warmth in her sunken eyes, and no more need for performance.

“You always thought you were the only wolf, Luka. But he was the *first* one, and we were all beholden to serve him. I did what I had to do.”

Behind her, the water rippled in disapproval. My lip curled. “But now he’s gone and Morroc’s poor, bloodthirsty children are starving. What will they do when they learn you have a granddaughter?”

“You will *not* tell them.”

I smiled coldly. “Oh, I’ll do whatever I have to do.”

“Someone *will* try to take that crown, eventually. The vampires, or the Ruined, they will all come—”

“Let them *try*,” I snarled. “*You* can even try. Isn’t that why you’re really here?” I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, and let a little of the Gift flow into my voice. Just enough to *suggest*, to pull at all her carefully tucked threads of desire. “Did you think I would forget you wanted it first? How you raged when I refused to give it up?”

Her lips pressed thin. “That’s in the past. Neither of us wants that crown in anyone else’s hands. We’re on the same side, Luka.”

“*Go on*,” I pressed. My voice slipped into honeyed

whisper, pulling at the strings of her greed. The invisible binding of the Old Courtesy pulled taut between us, tenuous as a silken thread. I could not break it first, but if she did—if I goaded her into it—I would no longer be bound to honor it. Candy’s warning surfaced in my thoughts, but I shoved it down, and instead I stirred the fire of wanting alive inside the witch. I gestured to the water. “See how close my *koi* let you get before they drag you down with them. Try and take it, Ashera. *If you can.*”

For long moments, she said nothing. But she’d always been clever, and her silence betrayed her now as she weighed the cost of breaking our bargain. Her eyes shifted, counting the distance to the crown, plotting a path across the water. Wondering if the dead could truly stop her. Her lips pressed tight, fingers clenching into fists. Finally she turned to face the crown, as if to allow herself just that much. The black metal gleamed, pulling all the light around it inside, and shadows moved beneath the surface of the water like soldiers falling into ranks for battle.

Then the witch turned back to me and smiled.

“*Lukulfr*,” she commanded, invoking my true name. Her arm rose, and those tattooed fingers flicked at me as if she were jerking a leash. “*You will get it for me.*”

A breath stirred across the lake. It rippled outward, waves slapping against the edges of the basin. The torches flickered and guttered. I shuddered as the tether of Courtesy slipped free, and then the cold echo of my name rushed down my spine, seeping into every joint. A hundred years ago, that aching pain had driven me to my knees. Had forced me to bow my head, to watch in humiliation and terror as she fed me to the god I hated.

Only by the grace of his madness and boredom had he allowed me to live, but the ache had never receded. She'd held that binding on me just enough to keep me pliant, to ensure I didn't dare rebel.

Now, I welcomed the old, familiar pain one last time. In all the years of my captivity I'd grown used to it, learned I could still function under it, that it could not break me. I rolled my shoulders and cracked my neck, a deep growl of satisfaction rumbling in my chest. Then I pushed off the bench, and in three strides I closed the distance between us. My fingers wrapped around her neck and lifted her clear off the stone. She was so frail beneath the heavy robes; she weighed almost nothing.

"That was the wrong choice, *witch*."

Her eyes widened. "How—"

Confusion. Then understanding—then absolute horror—flashed across her expression as she realized the mistake. My fingers tightened, nails extending into claws, black smoke curling around my arm as I squeezed. "You thought you could use my true name again, in my own hall, with so little magic left in your blood?"

"Luka...don't do this..." she gasped, clawing at my hand.

"You made me his slave," I snarled. "And I could do nothing but promise vengeance for every creature you killed." I smiled. "A favor, in exchange for their blood."

She beat her fists against my chest, but there was no strength in them.

"Your mistake wasn't coming here. It wasn't even invoking my true name." I licked my lips as her eyes flooded red with burst blood vessels. "It was not running when you had the chance, because there is no world in

which I would ever let you live.”

“Luka...” Her lips twisted, gasping for air. “You need...me...you...must..see...”

But she had no more words. Her throat gave way and her throat collapsed under my grip. My eyes bored into hers, and I squeezed until I saw the light go out in them. Until her neck was just a fleshy, broken sag of skin.

My claws dug into her shoulders, and I ripped the lifeless head from her body. Blood gushed over my hands with the wet snapping of tendons and bone. The body fell away with a wet thump as I rotated the severed head by its silver hair and held it up to face the crown, sitting silently on the shelf.

“I will kill every fucking thing that remembers you existed,” I promised.

The crown did not gleam. The light surrounding it grew dull, shadowed. Yet far above, the rain became a torrential downpour. It drummed hard on the pavement, and a vibration rose in the noise. It hummed as it poured through the aqueducts, sang as it seeped into the cracks of the walls. The black, still surface of my lake thrashed and rippled in violent, angry fervor, and the skulls, once floating peacefully, rolled upward until their empty eyes stared back at me.

I had killed a god, and now I had killed his witch. All that was left was war.

THANK YOU

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