

PROLOGUE

A heavy oak door groaned on rusted hinges as Szandora slipped through, the damp night air clinging to her cloak like a shroud. Stepping inside Twilight Castle was like entering a mausoleum. The air hung thick with the scent of dust and decay, the only light filtering through tall, grimy windows draped in cobwebbed lace.

Moonlight, pale and spectral, cast long, skeletal shadows across the cavernous room. Candelabras, adorned with flickering black candles, dripped wax like petrified tears onto the faded crimson carpet. In the center of the room, a heavy oak table, polished to a dark gleam, groaned under the weight of ancient tomes bound in cracked leather and adorned with tarnished silver clasps. Szandora couldn't help but shiver. This was a place steeped in a bygone era, a monument to Satin's long and blood-soaked history.

"Am I to be worried you summoned me here, after what, thirty years?" she finally asked, her voice echoing in the vast emptiness. A haunting silence reigned as Szandora waited, her breathing labored. Though she knew Satin well, she never got used to his dark presence. He wasn't just a vampire; he was an emissary of death with wisdom like a pale-faced god. Szandora always felt small in his company, his crimson eyes stripping her layers away...judging her. A flash of form startled her. It was as if the shadows solidified as Satin spun himself from them, his back turned to her. The firelight danced on his broad shoulders, casting a macabre silhouette against the dusty windowpanes. He remained unmoving, an enigmatic statue in the tapestry of gloom. Finally, his voice broke the oppressive silence, a low rumble that resonated through the room like the echo of a crypt door creaking open.

"Thirty years," he began, without turning around. "A lifetime for most, a mere blink for one such as I."
He paused, and Szandora sensed a hint of guilt in his voice.

"I apologize for the abrupt summons, Szandora. But time is of the essence."

He finally turned, his crimson eyes cutting through the darkness like twin rubies.

"Szandora, my dear. A peculiar matter has arisen, one that requires your abilities."

Satin's voice, usually smooth as polished marble, held a tremor. Szandora raised an eyebrow, her reflection flickering in the firelight that danced across her obsidian eyes.

"I'm listening," she said, her voice a silken thread in the oppressive silence of Twilight Castle's grand hall. Satin paced before the massive fireplace, his movements more agitated than she'd ever seen. His pale hand, adorned with an ornately carved emerald ring, twisted the band compulsively. Even in the flickering firelight, Szandora could see the deep lines etched on his face, lines that spoke of centuries lived and countless lives taken. He looked troubled, deeply troubled.

"As old as I am," Satin finally spoke, his voice gravelly, "there is something that has escaped my notice over the centuries. Something of grave importance to us vampires. I wonder if you've heard of a title called The Scarlet Incantatrix?"

Szandora descended into deep thought, furrowing her brows as she pondered what significance the old myth held to the primeval vampire.

“I don’t remember how the myth goes. But yes, I do know of it.”

Satin stopped pacing, his gaze locking onto hers. The crimson depths held an urgency that sent a jolt through Szandora.

"It is no mere myth," Satin whispered, a serpentine hiss. "I happened upon proof of this recently. A rather peculiar coincidence."

Szandora fidgeted on the spot, stunned into silence. The hall seemed to grow darker as the implications of Satin’s words sent a chill down her spine.

"What do you mean?" she pressed, her voice a low murmur in the cavernous hall.

Satin sighed, a sound like wind rustling through dead leaves.

"I will spare you the details. But there's a child, Szandora. A toddler I encountered on one of my excursions. She was in her father’s hands, whose life I’d consumed."

He stopped, a flicker of pain crossing his face. Szandora knew all too well the burden of memories he carried, the stains on his past that time could never fully erase.

"And?" she urged gently, her witch's intuition tingling with curiosity and foreboding.

"I admit I felt her strange aura pressing into mine even before I ever laid eyes on her. A peculiar disturbance in my spirit, which I ignored. But as I gazed upon the child," Satin continued, his voice

growing stronger, "I discovered ancient symbols. Arcane markings that matched the descriptions of the Scarlet Incantatrix's mark."

Szandora's heart pounded in her chest. A prophesied being, a mere child, vulnerable and marked for who knows what. The night was getting more disquieting by the second, and she could sense Satin had yet more surprises as she gazed at him wide-eyed.

"How do I fit into all this?" she inquired, dreading Satin's response.

Satin shifted, faster than sight, the billowing shadow that he was appearing by the window, peering out at the full moon.

"I am commencing my redemption arc. I've lain too many to waste over the centuries. The dead in me are rebelling, and even I must one day pay karma's debts," he paused, his pale, spidery fingers tracing through his greasy black hair. "I will see to it that the Scarlet Incantatrix matures into her rightful role: To revert Nocteraia to normalcy, unifying the factions. It will make for a difficult but interesting journey. Dark characters will seek to corrupt her divine vessel for evil. "

"What is the plan then?" Szandora asked, stepping closer to him. She knew the unification of vampires, witches, and werewolves was a task akin to juggling razors in a hurricane.

"She is young now," he continued, "but when she reaches a certain age, she will be drawn to the witch fraternity to develop her witch side. You, Szandora, will infiltrate the witch fraternity from now. You, with your unique footing in both witch and vampire society, are perfectly placed to succeed. You can become the girl's unseen guardian, but more importantly," his voice dropped to a low growl, "you can be our eyes and ears within those walls, for years to come."

Night-Time Stalk

It was a cold December night in the enchanted city of Nocteraia, calm as the fields of heaven. No wind stirred the trees—upright and as stiff as death lining the countryside. The full moon shrugged off blankets of wispy clouds and peered down at the city beneath. Its reflected light cast a spell of silvery hue upon the city, but it was swallowed up by the dark of Nocteraia's environs. The place was unnaturally dark. Perhaps the blackened hearts of the odd breeds that roamed the streets were so unholy that they had somehow changed the quality of the nightfall.

In the very heart of the city, a silent threat to that calm walked. He blended into the night as if it were his second skin. The camouflage was perfect; his intentions were shrouded in nothing but mystique, a thirst for destruction he longed to unleash upon the world. Blood-thirst. Satin was his name. He walked briskly through one of the many alleyways of Nocteraia, his black shoes clicking like a time bomb on the concrete. He lifted his head skyward as the peculiar feeling of euphoria engulfed him. Satin relished his vampiric gift, however accursed it might be. For him, the pleasures to be derived from its usage far outstripped its disadvantages. He would continue to drain the city of life, his motivation being the witches' aggressive stance against his breed. Unlike the vast majority of his kind, however, he was almost unstoppable, for very few people knew the secret to killing someone like him, a timeless thing of the night with whom death itself danced.

Although his sense of perception was topnotch, Satin stole frequent glances behind him where a ridiculous young woman was stalking him, huddling close to the shadows so as not to be seen. He laughed silently, for the woman had a syringe (no

doubt filled with some poison) in her twitching hand. But her heart held no venom, only a naive resolve to see the night through. Perhaps she hoped to kill him with blows fueled by adrenaline, coupled perhaps with some spells hurled with strained conviction. Satin scowled. It was a pity she didn't know she was here by his design, and that in a matter of minutes he would confront the shallow coven of witches that sent her.

...

Kaia trudged nervously through the rank air of one of Nocteraia's circuitous passageways. She wondered how long she could maintain her ruse before she could pounce. She was closing in now; she could feel the unnatural cold hugging the back of her neck. She gripped the syringe with greater resolve. With determination framing her soft features, her heart raced at the prospect of saving the city from one of the motley of beasts that plagued it for centuries.

She did not dare come here unaided, that would have been suicidal. A glance behind revealed her ally flanking her in the shadows. When she refocused her eyes ahead, she stopped in her tracks. The beast was gone. For a fraction of a second, she thought her vision had failed her, but when she squinted to get a better look, she dismissed it. He was gone. The mission was failed. Kimryn, the leader of her coven 'The Fraternity', would kill her.

Kaia raised her fist as she pronounced the summoning spell, indicating to her ally that he could relinquish his cover. However, as she uttered the first syllable, a shadow passed above her, stalling her incantation. The preternatural darkness that fell around her was so profound that it was like a thing of substance physically affecting her. Her eyes mysteriously stung, and her every breath was shallow and painful.

As if compelled, her head rose, only to meet the cold, steady gaze of her nemesis. His face recalled a white snake, pale beyond comparison with eyes of different color: one green as polished emerald, the other as blue as sapphire. The terror had not yet fully diffused through her bones when he pounced, faster than she had envisioned in the many times she had played this very scenario over and over in her head. She instinctively raised the syringe containing potent potion, but it was too late. The sleek figure knocked her off her feet with its body, in a gesture that scoffed at gravity.

As the newest recruit within the witches' coven at The Fraternity, she quickly learned that not many predators matched the deadly prowess of a fully mature vampire, and as such, she (a mere fledgling) had zero chances of surviving a head to head battle. Of course, tonight wasn't meant to be face to face.

Kaia hit the ground awkwardly, landing flat on the space between her rump and the base of her spine. Pain beyond pain shot from her landing spot up her back and to her sides. She yelped in anguish as her hand whipped round to soothe her throbbing lower back. Scared, tense, and confused, she looked around to locate her adversary who had apparently deciphered her intentions. She saw nothing but the syringe a few feet from her that she had dropped in the fall. She attempted to rise from her disadvantageous position in fear that her quarry would pounce from the darkness again but was quickly reminded of her injury by a piercing pain. She only managed to make it to her hands and knees. After a few attempts, she stood, readying herself on some insane level to defend herself against the monster. It was hopeless; her trump card was the syringe full of venom, not her undeveloped magic. Then she saw the black robe on the ground a few feet behind her.

It took her a few seconds to register that the robe was not only a robe but her adversary sprawled on the ground, motionless. Kaia

knew she had raised her syringe too late and could not have incapacitated him. So why was he on the ground? For the second time tonight she attempted to summon her ally. But again she was stalled, for a figure flew down from the black sky, landing quietly beside the vampire. Her ally was here. Clearly, he saw what had transpired.

“You alright, Kaia?” Came the measured voice of Vittorio, a second-year recruit and the closest thing to a friend Kaia had managed during the month and a half she had been in the Fraternity. Vittorio's face was as pale as a ghost, his penetrative green eyes observing her.

“I’ll be fine once I get outta here.”

He nodded. “Let’s go.”

Minutes later, they arrived with the body floating in midair by their combined magic. Before them now was the Fraternity’s headquarters: a trio of imposing buildings known as ‘The Edifice’. The Edifice was located smack in the middle of a dense forest on the outskirts of Lucteraia: a small town south of Nocteraia. Here the vampire would be ritually banished; another bloodsucker would be off the streets.

Half an hour later, five members of The Fraternity sat yoga-style before the incapacitated beast. The crude banishing circle always gave Kaia the creeps. The red sigil inscribed within the double-rimmed circumference always emitted energy that made her skin crawl. One would have thought a month of practicing this kind of ritual banishing would make her impervious to its effects. Wrong. In fact, the more she participated in conjuring its insidious energy, the more she realized why it was considered forbidden or ‘taboo magic’ as Kimryn, the leader of the Fraternity, put it. It pulled something from her, something she felt she couldn't replace. Not to mention the fact that that it

made her severely depressed once a banishing session was completed. As a mere first year recruit, Kaia failed to understand why she was made to participate in this kind of advanced magic. She held no special skill, commanded no prodigious abilities. So it came as a surprise when Vittorio told her that she had been the first person to be allowed to participate in taboo magic so soon after entering the Fraternity's ranks.

It had been a chaotic last few months. Kaia would have scoffed at the possibility of the existence of a world where power wasn't measured by monetary wealth and physical weapons but by the honing of different aspects of magic. Yet here she was deep within that very world, performing witchery. The start of this journey began when her mother had disappeared without a trace from their Earthly home. Her presence here in the Fraternity was a means of reclaiming her beloved mother from the clutches of evil, whatever that was. Despite the *mélange* of melancholia and rage threatening at frequent intervals to reduce her efforts of seeing her mother again to absolute failure, she remained resolute. Perhaps it was this resolve that the elders here saw in her that enticed them to entrust her with certain responsibilities. It was a bittersweet scenario: on the one hand, Taboo magic was soul-altering and lethal, while on the other hand, it was that same brand of dark magic that could most aid her in rescuing her mother. She lusted for power and fretted when it refused to come quickly enough.

“Ready my dears,” the leader of the coven announced. “Hands of purgation aloft.” Kimryn raised her hands. The others followed. Kaia noted a huge black book beside Kimryn that she’d never seen before.

“What’s that book?” Kaia whispered to Vittorio, whose ashen face was directed at the entity inside the circle.

“Huh?”

“That book. I’ve never seen it used here before.”

“Oh that,” Vittorio acknowledged without turning his head.

“It’s one of the three forbidden books.”

Kaia gazed at the mammoth black codex, its red-embroidered letters glowing in the semi-darkness.

“Why would a book be forbidden though?” she followed up, curious.

Vittorio shrugged. “Well, I am not sure really. Kimryn keeps them under lock and key inside her room, so I’m guessing it has some pretty powerful stuff in there.”

“Oh. I see,” Kaia stated, eyeing the book lustily. She didn’t recall a time her curiosity was ever tamed. And tonight was not a night to start.

Flanking Kimryn were Marco and Szandora to her left and right respectively. Marco, the burly unrefined wizard with bald head sat silently with his eyes fixed on the body before them. So did Szandora, the goth-looking witch who embodied the image of a true sorceress. She invariably wore black mascara which made her look malefic. She wore black lipstick too, her overall snake-like face never failed to frighten Kaia. Together, the trio of Kimryn, Szandora, and Marco was known around the Fraternity as ‘The Trinity.’

“Have any of you seen this mark?” Vittorio inquired as he started to settle into his position, pointing to the forearm of the vampire where a crude tattoo greeted their eyes. Kaia gasped at the ghastly image of a gigantic snake that seemed to be popping from his hand. The grossness of the imagery was completed by the fact that the snake had its tail in its mouth. Kimryn instinctively rose from her position at the head of the circle to

get a better look. She said nothing. Finally, she raised her head from the image. Her hazel eyes conveyed the gravity of the situation.

“Amphisbaena.”

The words barely left her lips before the figure—that was supposed to have been bounded by the infernal energies of the magical circle—did the impossible. The being rose mystically as if the name Kimryn had just uttered had stirred it to life. It took a while for everyone to register what was happening before them. The vampiric form rose with all the authority and effortlessness of a god resurrecting from a self-imposed slumber. When they did gather their wits and started to hurl hexes at the monster, the chanting was in vain. The vampire—or whatever was in their presence—swished his cloak, sending all of them hurtling towards the stone walls. Kaia was saved from the brunt of the force as the being was facing Kimryn when he attacked. The only thing Kaia felt were bands of energy pushing her backward, her heart seeming to be stuck in the back of her throat. The Trinity, however, was literally blasted away though Szandora had the keenness to conjure a cerulean tetrahedron shield to combat the devastating wind pressure.

The interloper bared his teeth in what might have been a twisted laugh, then vanished. Kimryn was the first on her feet, but it was Vittorio who spoke first.

“What the hell was that?” he inquired, his head darting from one Trinity member to the next.

Szandora scoffed. “Emphasis on the ‘hell’.”

The eyes in the room seemed to ask the same question.

“Something that could have killed us but didn't.” Kimryn walked to the spot where the strange being had stood and nodded. “Yes, definitely Amphisbaena.”

“Amphisbaena?” Kaia repeated. “What's that?”

Kimryn sat back down. She glanced at Szandora, who gave a slight bow.

“Vampires come in various forms, Kaia. First, there are the Loyals—who become vampires after being bitten by one. Then, there are vampires who've lived for centuries—those who have drunk so much blood and having promiscuously absorbed so many forms of energy, that they evolve over time into powerful entities called Amphisbaena. These vampires are the epitome of power. It's almost as though they are a different breed altogether.”

The group remained silent. Of course, it was only Kaia—and possibly Vittorio—who didn't know this information. The other two at the circle: Marco and Szandora, being among The Fraternity's highest ranked members were definitely privy to such knowledge.

“Amphisbaena,” Kimryn continued, “is the final form of a vampire. Such a state is only attained through the consumption of blood for millennia, coupled with an ancient and most diabolical ritual to seal the final transformation.”

Vittorio began, “So how do...”

But he was cut off. Kimryn's cautionary hand halted any further inquiries.

“That's enough! That is all I am prepared to say on the subject.” She alighted and started to leave. “I think we're done here. The beast has gone. We'll scheme another interception shortly. Back

to your quarters now.” Szandora and Marco followed her through the door.

“What was that just now?”Kaia asked Vittorio.

Vittorio shrugged.“Weren’t you listening?”He stood as he spoke.

“She said it was an Amphisbaena vamp. Get up, Kaia. We better go now before a member of the Trinity returns and think we are loitering.”

Kaia nodded, eyeing the black book.

Vittorio gazed down at her.“Aren’t you coming?”

Tearing her eyes from the book, she stood.”Yeah, right after you. Just let me make sure my back is in order.” In truth, she still felt a throb in her back, but it was nothing to rave over.

Vittorio narrowed his eyes as he analyzed her, then nodded and walked off through the massive oak doors, switching off the lights on his way. Kaia watched him as he disappeared from view down the steps. This was her cue. Kaia dashed to the other side of the circle. She was tempted to switch on the lights but found prudence in acting in darkness. The last remnants of the banishing circle glowed a faint red, but this backdrop against the darkness made the pentagram even more insidious. A hideous outline of a goat’s head lay inscribed within the circumference, its eyes embers of amber. At its base was the book— her target. Grimacing, she slowed somewhat, then pivoted herself slowly, scooping the book up into her hands. She almost dropped it at once; the rough leather was as cold and as greasy as a corpse, and she could see the distinct red lettering embossed on its surface.

“LIBER LACRIMAE I”

She stuffed it under her frill bodice and scuttled through the door.