

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.

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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.

The Forbidden Book

Desperate for more answers concerning the strange being that entered their midst, Kaia sat alone in her small room with the Liber Lacrimae grimoire she had stolen from the banishing room. So far in her illicit reading, she had encountered many beings unknown to her until then. Though aware of a typical lycanthrope (or werewolf, the most widely used term) she had not known about the many mutations of the breed. It turned out that as was the case with vampires, lycanthropes also had varying levels of strength. The final form of a lycanthrope caught her eye. No wonder no one spoke of these things aloud; they were too frightening. Yet to a curious mind such as hers, such things, despite their hideousness, were a blasphemy to remain ignorant about. The evolved Lycans were known as “LS”, short for Lupii Sanguinaria—powerful beasts who roamed the earth like demigods, ravishing nations and usurping the strongholds of even vampires.

Apparently, Lupii Sanguinaria had an advantage over bloodsuckers in the balance of power since along with their own terrible powers, they possessed a majority of the abilities normal vampires have. Kaia read that the LS were said to be extinct in modern times due to the Purple Plague that obliterated their kind in times bygone. A note about the Purple Plague at the bottom of the vellum paper caught her eyes.

Purple Plague—deadly curse composed by a powerful witch, Lilith...

Kaia read on, captivated and somewhat frightened by the scope of evil the beings featured in the book were capable of. She wanted to know as much about magic and as quickly as possible in order to try to reclaim her mother from the clutches of whoever had her. Why would anyone in the magical world want her mother of all persons? She was a normal woman with absolutely no ties to magic. Kimryn had explained to her that she knew exactly who took her and had promised to aid in her recapture. Kaia flipped the page and saw another curse: The Hemphalitic Fever-- A horrific affliction transforming the afflicted into a pain-riddled, leprosy-bearing lunatic. Those

afflicted will inevitably descend into full-blown insanity within two months of being affected and will continue to degenerate until death.

Cure: Variable—up to the discretion of the caster.

Kaia cringed. She definitely did not want to get hit with this one. She was about to turn the page when she saw a barely recognizable scribble just to the left of the margin.

Finely ground Malemorphous Rock.

She didn't know the significance of the rock, but something told her it had something to do with the curse.

As she turned the page, her heart skipped a beat. In red was what they had faced tonight. Amphisbaena: The Serpents. Just as she was about to begin reading, the door burst open. Kimryn appeared at the door with a murderous look on her face. Kaia had heard rumors about Kimryn's wrath, but she didn't take them seriously until now. She tried to get up, but an unseen force kept her in place. A fraction of a second, that seemed like a whole hour, elapsed before Kimryn thrust out her hand. The quiet spell hit her squarely in the chest before she could even enunciate the barrier incantation. Kaia flew backward through the air, her hands outstretched. She slammed into her back hard against the concrete-reinforced walls. For the second time that night, maddening pain shot from her lower back and seared upward. Kaia screamed. Kimryn bounded forward now, her scarred face the picture of pure rage.

“So sorry— please don't— am sorry, Kimryn.” There was a second when it seemed Kimryn would extend mercy and stop her assault, but she raised her hands once more. Kaia put up her hand to cover her face, but it made no sense trying to defend oneself against the likes of Kimryn Dawes, seasoned witch and occultist extraordinaire.

Then it happened—an almighty crash. With her hands over her face, Kaia hadn't seen what had caused the noise. Tentatively, she removed her hands to see Vittorio at the door. Apparently, he had come to her defense by shooting a curse into the wall. The large gaping hole beside Kaia was proof of its sheer power.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Kimryn inquired furiously. Kaia gazed at Vittorio, knowing his answer must be great to avoid punishment. He had not only intruded upon Kimryn’s routine scolding of a witch’s illegal snooping, but he had done so with violence. Rubble from the demolished wall continued to fall beside Kaia, and she wondered if she should move before something fell on her. Vittorio’s pale, handsome face studied her then drifted to the book splayed on the ground.

“It is I who gave her the grimoire, your grace. We were curious about the being that entered our enclosure earlier. Please accept our profuse apologies.” He bowed.

An unnerving silence ensued during which Kimryn simply gazed at him. And when she raised her hands for the third time that night, Kaia thought she would punish him then and there. Instead, she pointed a long, skeletal finger at him.

“Son, don't do that again. There are things in that book that are not meant to be known— dark things, abominations. The fact that I am describing them as such should hammer the point home into your skulls.” She twisted her head to the side like a curious dog. “I would have suspected treachery on your part had your heart made one wrong beat. LEAVE MY PRESENCE!”

Vittorio turned and went at once, and Kaia didn't intend to stick around either; she stood up to go, but the pain ravaged her back, paralyzing her. Falling back to her knees, she cursed her weakness—including the stark terror Kimryn inculcated into her. She would rather be anywhere but here right now, and for a fraction of a second, she contemplated crawling out under the intense gaze of the elder witch. She decided against it. Before she could make a decision, however, she heard something that might have been a laugh, and the quiet footsteps as the witch stalked out of the room.

Remembrance of Things Past

The morning came with no reprieve for Kaia's depression. She dressed hastily for breakfast. The faded jeans fit tight onto her petite body, hugging her curves. As she looked into the mirror, she noticed with some misgiving that the sleepless night had left her eyelids heavy and puffy. She grabbed the mascara set which she had received as a gift from her best friend, Mara who enviably was now enjoying her life as a normal human being, not holed up in a building in the middle of nowhere learning strange spells and charms. She dabbed some skin colored powder onto her eyes.

Although Kaia practically lusted after the typical life of a young adult in Nocteraia— working in a normal job, having normal friends, a boyfriend, attending parties and the like— she had no regrets about her decision to join The Fraternity. In fact, the decision was practically made for her after her mother's mysterious disappearance.

It was almost a month ago that her mother, Gaia went (as she always did) on the St Thalia Hospital's night-shift and never returned. The fellow nurses had confirmed that she did, in fact, arrive for work, but no one knew what happened afterward. Her pearl white car was still parked in its usual slot, no sign of foul play. Everyone was stumped since there wasn't a single clue as to Gaia's whereabouts. Kaia had managed to hold it together for the first couple of days, perhaps it was even naivete that made her hold out for so long. The breaking point came two weeks into the disappearance when she finally realized it was a real possibility she wouldn't see her mother alive again. Kaia didn't know she owned so much tears, crying nonstop for hours, fearing the worst.

The first month after Gaia disappeared, Kaia received a rather curious visit from Kimryn Dawes herself who explained to her exactly what had happened and how, through the organization called 'The Fraternity', they could attempt the business of rescuing her mother before it was too late.

Kimryn had enlightened her of the fact that Gaia was the descendant of a rather famous—or more appropriate—infamous witch known by the name, Lilith. Kaia had encountered that very name when she had sneaked into Kimryn's room and read the forbidden book. She was the person who had been responsible for casting a terrible hex upon the Lycanthropes, killing thousands of their kind. Holding that long grudge, the Lycanthropes had declared war upon the witches, their mandate being the extermination of every single remaining descendant of the witch.

They had failed to kill Lilith, given her almost Godlike powers, but the same was not true for the majority of her bloodline who were brutally cut down by the ravenous wolves. The Lycanthropes' bloodlust didn't end with the bloodline of Lilith; their massacre extended to witches in general, innocent people, and even animals. They effectively obliterated those too weak to defend themselves. Even the most powerful breed of the Lycans, LS (Lupii Sanguinaria) participated. Though few, the wolves were practically unstoppable, their wrath transforming Nocteraia into a slaughterhouse of blood, guts, and decapitated corpses.

Of course, Kaia hadn't believed a single word Kimryn had spoken. She had adopted her mother's stance on almost everything and so she rejected all things even remotely supernatural. Despite this, however, she had observed some theretofore inexplicable phenomena with her own eyes, and the bone-chilling fact was that almost all of the occurrences had been in some way connected to her mother. Once, she had entered her mother's room late at night to check on her after she had heard an awful hissing coming from her quarters. Kaia remembered screaming her throat out in fright when she saw the horrifying scene of her mother's small frame floating in midair inches over the bed. It was as if it were an illusion conjured up by some masterful magician in a circus. She had heard her mother chanting weird things in a language she did not understand.

There had been a period following that incident when she had denied what she had seen, passing it off as the phantasms of a sleepwalker or perhaps the typical weirdness of a spooky nightmare. However, she subsequently saw other things that subsequently convinced her of her mother's paranormal nature. And the abnormalities were not attributable to her mother alone; Kaia herself observed some things about herself that shocked her on a most fundamental level. Whenever she was extremely angry, things would topple

over as if someone touched them. Though the telekinesis was weak, it was present nevertheless. Still, she had not been totally convinced of the existence of magic until Kimryn, prompted by her continued stubbornness, unmistakably caused the pigtails on her head to flop up and down without anyone touching them. Kaia had joined The Fraternity without as much as a second thought after that, eager to find her beloved mother...alive.

It was uncertain if her mother remained of this world, and that alone was an unbearable torture. There was a tenseness in her that threatened to break the thin thread between rationality and insanity. She knew she couldn't hold out for much longer until something broke inside her. The melancholia was wringing the vitality from her, plunging her into a dark place she had never been before in her life.

Drying a solitary tear from her eye, Kaia headed out of her quarters and down the long, spiral staircase. As she descended the last stretch of stairs, she noticed for the first time a dark passage under the flight of steps that led to a rather crude door. She had been here in the Fraternity more than a month, and she hadn't thought to inquire about what the door led to. The door had no handle, and odd symbols were upon its wooden structure just beneath the large skull with a snake going through its eye.

Kaia shivered, both spooked and baffled about the existence of the door. But the reason she had not seen it before came to her now as she stared upon the ominous door. It was glowing red! She was sure this detail was different the many times she had gone by it. She turned from it quickly, fearful of being spotted since the door was clearly out of bounds. After all, she had caused enough trouble already, any more would spell nothing good. But even as she thought this, she made a mental note to ask Vittorio about it.

Recollections

Back in her quarters on the southern end of The Fraternity's headquarters, The Edifice, Kaia prepared to go to bed. Her back still hurt from the blow she received a couple hours ago. But although she was hurt, she was grateful Vittorio had intervened the time that he did. Had he not assumed the role of savior, things would have been a lot worse. She had committed a serious breach, one that could easily have sent her to The Dungeons. Kaia shivered as the possibility crossed her mind: the Dungeons were spoken of in whispers among the first year recruits, "Literal Hell" was the most common reference to the place of unspeakable darkness. Kaia had precious little details about the nature of the place, but the many whispers that terrified the halls told her the dark, subterranean lair housed the hordes of odd breeds captured by the Fraternity.

Two weeks ago, Vittorio had told her that Mirabelle, the girl she had replaced to be here, did some unspeakable thing that vexed Kimryn's spirit so much that she suffered the fate of The Dungeons. She was never seen or heard from since. Though Cotton, the Edifice's grounds-keeper, claimed that in going about his duties around the upper levels of the Dungeon, he heard awful wailing issuing from down below. His story was never corroborated, especially given the fact that the bowels of the Dungeons were strictly forbidden to everyone except The Trinity, a company that included Kimryn herself and her second and third in command Szandora and Marco respectively.

The Dungeons always gave her the creeps. However, The Dungeons were the least of her concerns now: her thoughts shifted to the task she had been assigned, scheduled for tomorrow night. Every night was a different undertaking but with the same general context: capturing and vanquishing the odd breeds that roamed Nocteraia, wreaking havoc by maiming and killing its hapless denizens. But this time, due to the perilous task she had been assigned, she got a weird feeling Kimryn gave her the assignment to punish her for stealing away the Liber Lacrimae. Vittorio, who told her of the

task on Kimryn's behalf, informed her that he had tried pleading with the coven leader to allow him to accompany her, but she vehemently refused, saying she wanted him for some other mission.

That night, Kaia tried to sleep, but thoughts of the deed entrusted to her kept haunting her mind. Why her, the newest member of The Fraternity? Why not Kimryn's third in command, Marco: a seasoned hunter who was particularly efficient in slaughtering odd breeds? Or better yet, why not Szandora, the second in command? Szandora was the thin goth-looking witch who possessed the strange power of magnetism.

Kaia shook her head trying to avoid recalling the first time she had gone hunting with Szandora. It had been four of them, she, Vittorio, Szandora, and Marco all out in the dead of night for her recruiting session. It was to be a simple mission, but things took a nasty turn when a particularly malevolent Lycanthrope attacked.

In hindsight, given her new information about wolves from the Liber Lacrimae, it might even have been an LS (Lupii Sanguinaria). Kaia had stood rooted to the spot in the battle with the wolf, shell-shocked. She didn't even see when the beast lunged at her from behind. It had been Marco who put his bulky body in the way, blocking the wolf that was about to charge into her. The wild beast dug through Marco's hand, leaving a terrible gash. Then, what was to be the spectacle of the night, Szandora, who had been on the outskirts observing the battle, appeared in the midst of the chaos, her skeletal, tattooed hands aloft. Kaia remembered feeling a powerful tingling sensation all over her body, her hairs standing on end. Then she saw the gruesome effect—the lycanthrope froze on the spot before blood spilled from all its orifices in crimson torrents.

Kaia recalled that at one point during all this, she hadn't been able to see a thing because of the fountain of blood spraying into the air, but she did hear the unearthly scream of the beast as it died, followed by the almighty 'pop' when the creature burst open, exposing the stuff of nightmares. Even Vittorio had looked away from the grotesque image. She hadn't seen anything so violent in her life. She hadn't known it at the time, but Szandora actually manipulated the beast's blood through the power of magnetism. Before then, she didn't even know that blood was magnetic in nature because of the iron it contained.

Kaia ceased her macabre reminiscences in total dread. If back then was anything to go by, then her mission was hopeless. She was a weak and powerless witch— if she could even be called that. And tomorrow there would be no Marco nor Szandora to save her. Even Vittorio, her support system as of late, was barred from aiding her. It would be a dance of death with her and the depraved adversaries she had just read about in Kimryn's *Liber Lacrimae grimoire*. All alone.

Before The Fated Night

In the midst of the sloping Nocteraia forest, a castle stood conspicuous amid the greenery. It was called Twilight Castle due to the magic woven to prevent the wanderlust from happening upon the sprawling abode. The surrounding luminosity was bewitched to never exceed twilight, completing a cycle from half-light to total darkness. Reclined in his lavish Jacuzzi within Twilight Castle, Satin pondered the message he had just received. He drained a bottle of Merlot and alighted from the warm water. Two concubines approached with a robe and towels. Satin took the robe and covered himself before making his way through the massive gothic house to his room.

He had some work to do tonight: the message from his source was quite clear. Tonight was the night his old adversaries would make a move. Being the powerful entity that he was, it would be ludicrous not to have a source on the inside informing him of their every move. Satin smiled. If only they knew the destruction they would soon face, they probably would be better off killing themselves now. All at once, a mixture of excitement and anxiety gripped him. It was due to the fact that it had been quite some time since he battled worthy opponents, and tonight would be the night all that would change. Although he knew the extent of his strength, he refused to succumb to the sin of complacency having learned the hard way years ago. It was always prudent to acknowledge every opponent as worthy, regardless of the level he perceived their strength to be. Once in his room, Satin let his robe fall, he then ran his pale hands over the scar that spanned the length of his torso. Never again will he ever traverse so close to death.

He walked over to the mantelpiece and picked up a crude-looking ring. The ornate annular object was his insurance, the final fit to the puzzle of his immortality. He ran his finger over the smooth surface, stopping at the bright green emerald gem embedded within it. He slipped it onto his left index finger, relishing the infusion of power overtaking him. As if in sync, an unnatural wind swept across the room. It continued as Satin dressed in an inconspicuous plain white T-shirt and jeans. Though he tried to comb his hair

back, it rebelled against him, resuming their spiky turgidity atop his head. Resignedly, he opened the window and flew out into the cold night.

Final Preparation

The main hall of The Edifice was divided into four sections, each serving a different purpose. The section Kaia now entered was called Atrium A, a vast, open cylindrical structure with the top mushrooming into a geodesic dome. This dome was embellished, or in Kaia's mind, defaced with a rather sinister fresco, called 'The Witches Sabbath' that portrayed four women sitting in a circle, while an entity resembling a goat ministered to them. The walls were otherwise smooth and somehow managed to maintain its pristine look despite the fact that the building was more than six hundred years old. Atrium A was where the first and second years all ate and conversed. It was also the area in which general meetings were held. Meetings consisted mainly of the goals and targets of The Fraternity and disciplinary matters.

"Hey there you!" A familiar voice floated to her, disrupting her thoughts. It was Kelly, a sprightly, pretty girl not much younger than her. Kelly had joined The Fraternity just over two weeks ago. She had ambushed Kaia from the side as if she had been lurking there for some time, waiting for her to get off the stairs.

"Hey Kel, had breakfast already?" Kaia asked, surprising herself in how even her voice was.

"Yep! Eggs and pancakes again!" She made up her face as if she smelled some putrid scent. "You'd think if it were totally up to them eggs and pancakes would be the only food in the entire universe," she continued.

"Yeah, not sure why they always serve that," Kaia stated. "Anyway, how many of the basic spells have you learned so far? Remember tonight's the practical for newcomers." Kaia resumed her walk between the massive, circular tables around which first and second years sat eating and chatting. The room wasn't full, but it still contained a sizable number of budding magicians fueling up for the day. Kelly followed.

“It’s not tonight,” Kelly informed. When she refused to elaborate, Kaia fixed her with a questioning stare.

“Postponed, Szandora left a while ago actually. She said there will be some hunting missions tonight.” She stopped, her face wearing a grave expression. Kaia too halted. Kelly continued, her voice dour. “Sounds pretty serious too. That woman never comes to speak to us like that. Scares the bejesus out of me.”

It was clear Kelly was unnerved by Szandora, but whatever her reason was for being daunted by the woman, Kaia was sure it wasn't even remotely close to what she had witnessed that dreadful night when she slew the Lycan beast so barbarously without the bat of an eye. But she agreed; it was quite anomalous for Szandora to make such an announcement. In fact, it was downright weird seeing her talk at all. She would saunter around the grounds as silent as death, donning a smile that might as well have been that of a Jack O Lantern. Kaia reflected a bit, realizing that the majority of the members of The Fraternity was so shady, that she had to ask herself if she was in league with the good guys or the bad guys. At this point she didn't really care. For now, all she wanted was to get her mother back.

“Interesting,” Kaia responded, feigning surprise since she basically knew in advance that there would indeed be a mass hunting mission, given the undertaking which she had been entrusted. She decided not to tell Kelly that this was probably her last night alive.

“It’s the first time I’m ever hearing of the missions interfering with normal school schedule,” Kaia said truthfully, sitting at her typical table at the very back of the hall. She uncovered her eggs and pancakes and started eating. Kelly sat.

“Exactly what I'm saying. Must be some powerful people they're hunting,” she intoned, helping herself to a cup of butter tea from a large wooden keg. The noise in the room heightened as a wave of Fraternity members entered. A quick glance in the direction of the noise told her Vittorio was among them, his abnormally pale face standing out of the bunch of four second-year recruits. They stuck together like magnets. Kaia wondered where their second year, female counterparts were.

At the front was Hale, a tall handsome young man with short, black hair combed back neatly. He was laughing, showing off some of the whitest teeth Kaia had ever seen. They seemed to gleam every time he opened his mouth. As far as she could tell, he was a good guy. Once, during her first week at The Fraternity, he had assisted her with a couple of incantations she had been having problems with. It had been a troublesome levitating spell that required immense concentration. Kaia remembered Hale suggesting that she think about a colored vertical line going through the object she wanted to levitate, then imagining it rising up on it. Kaia didn't know why, but it had worked excellently after the very first try. Her feather had risen a good four feet into the air, then fell since she wasn't able to maintain her concentration for long. Beside Hale was the short, stocky frame of Michael. He grinned as Hale mouthed something to him. Kaia knew nothing about Michael. Beside him was Vittorio, looking like a vampire with his pale face. He walked upright and stately. His overall demeanor and physique were a stark difference to his peers. Vittorio almost always wore a suit and tie as if he were attending a high profile meeting. He now looked directly at her as he sat a couple tables from them.

The other member of the Quartet was a dark-skinned, medium build young man known to her as Gamma, Kaia didn't know if that was his real name or not, but if she could guess, it was not since Vittorio once told her that he had an uncanny ability of burning through things with his penetrative stare like Gamma radiation. Of course, Kaia hadn't known about Gamma radiation at the time since Physics wasn't her strong suit back in High School. She had to be enlightened by Vittorio.

“He’s so cute.” Kelly chirped in wonderment with her hand on her jaw.

“Ahhm, I think Vittorio has enough women on the list attracted to him,” Kaia replied.

“Hey slow down there, Kaia! I wasn’t referring to Vittorio, he’s kinda cute too but a bit too... what’s the word I’m looking for?” She paused awkwardly.

“Sophisticated?” Kaia tried.

“Exactly,” Kelly said, wagging her finger frenetically. “Hale's the one am referring to. Can't you see he's a god?”

“Yeah I guess he's alright,” Kaia said.

Kelly observed her with her black eyes. “It seems you head that list of women crazy about Vittorio though,” she exclaimed.

Kaia blushed. “He’s a great guy.”

“Well, it seems the feeling's mutual. He hasn't taken his eyes off you one bit since he entered,” Kelly observed, looking behind her.

Kaia peered out of the corner of her eye, and sure enough there he was with a glass of butter tea in his hand staring straight at her.

“Anyway, I have some stuff I need to do before tonight,” Kaia stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

Kelly nodded. “Likewise. I have to learn those spells before tomorrow night, and I haven't learned half of them yet!” She alighted from the wooden chair. Kaia tried to do the same, but incredibly intense pain shot up from her lower back. “Owww!” she howled, clutching the spot. Incapacitated, she plopped heavily back into her seat. A cursory glance around informed her she had an audience.

“Woah! Everything alright there, Kaia?” Kelly inquired.

“Yeah all's well, just...didn't sleep well last night. I tell you about these beds, they're so tough, they hurt my back.” It was a lousy lie, but it seemed to work nevertheless. Kelly nodded in acknowledgment. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

The pale, serious face of Vittorio floated up to them. He stared down at her with his deeply penetrative eyes which asked her the question before he spoke it. “You alright?”

“Yeah, I'm fine...I think.”

Kelly interjected. “No, I don't think she's fine at all, she practically just broke her back.” She paused, pressing a finger on her lips then continued. “Is there is a spell for that by the way? The pain, I mean.”

Vittorio smiled. “There are spells for everything, Kelly. The problem sometimes is finding them and what they cost in return for their use.”

He turned back to Kaia. “I need to talk to you, Kaia. It’s of great importance.”

“Well am gonna...you know...go now. See you around Kaia.” With that, Kelly waltzed off into the ever-swelling crowd and up the stairs. Kaia waved at her. Though she wanted to get up and go somewhere for them to talk, she decided to forgo risking the embarrassment of the pain downing her again. Kaia stayed put.

“About what?” she asked, though she had a pretty good idea it involved the gravity of the task she had been assigned.

“Come,” Vittorio said, proffering a hand for her to take, which she did. No pain crippled her as she rose and followed him.

Final Preparation II

Vittorio decided they would go to Kaia's room since it afforded them the most privacy. If they were spotted anywhere in the halls by any member of The Trinity, it would spell bad news, especially Kimryn since she had noted their closeness with eye-narrowing curiosity. Being spotted by Cotton the groundsman would be almost as bad; not only would he hasten to inform Kimryn of the unbecoming behavior of a second year being seeing at night with a first year of the opposite sex, but he would most certainly embellish his tale with a few entertaining fabrications.

Once in the room, Vittorio gave words to the worry on his face. "I'm not going to lie, Kaia, you're in some deep mess. Believe me, if I could go in your stead, I would. But Kimryn practically forced me to make myself available for another operation. I cannot..."

Suddenly, something about Vittorio's unwavering support for her raised a red flag in her mind. Holding up her hand, she stopped him mid-sentence.

"Stop. I appreciate your concern. Believe me, I really do. But what is your goal? Why are you so concerned? I mean, you don't know me or anything and yet you want to put your life on the line for me. Why?"

Kaia listened to herself speak as if she were out of her body. She was getting emotional, and the predicament was getting to her. Despite this, as soon as she uttered the words, she knew she shouldn't have. Kaia looked at him as he gazed off into space as if deep in thought. He didn't appear hurt by her pronouncements. In fact, he didn't appear anything, his expression was unreadable as always like a blank sheet of paper. He then smiled. She spoke again, sorry that she met his benevolence with a hint of doubting his motives

"You know what, don't answer that. I— I'm just in a bad place right now."

With that, he reached into his bag, withdrew a black book, and placed it on the bed in front of her.

“What’s this?” She asked, regarding the book.

“It contains a list of forbidden spells I have acquired. They're extremely powerful but nevertheless still straightforward to use. For them to work you just have to say them out loud with faith and conviction. Beside each, I have made a note as to the visualizations that could aid you upon saying them.”

He paused, and Kaia suddenly felt ashamed of her prior outburst, one that Vittorio completely ignored.

He continued, “It's the best I can do for you right now. Well, along with that other thing I already did.” He looked at her with an expression somewhere between pity and genuine concern then rose and walked out of the room.

He didn't elaborate on that “other thing he did”. Kaia wanted to call out to him to stop and just stay with her until it was time for her to head out, but she stopped herself, thinking it would be selfish to asking him to risk being seen with her after everything he had already done. What was that “other thing” he referred to? Kaia racked her brain and could come up with nothing further he could have done to protect her. Yet she recalled the hint of a smile that crossed his face as he said it. She couldn't shake the feeling that it was something huge. She opened the book that laid on the bed before her and saw a host of incantations from pain relievers to complex spells that severely harmed those on which they were set. The spells were not listed alphabetically but by their degree of difficulty: ‘One’ being the easiest to perform and ‘six’ the most difficult. The book was segmented into four sections: Elemental Magic, Sympathetic Magic, Invocation/Evocation and General Craft. Kaia couldn't possibly learn anywhere near a satisfactory amount of the vast book before tomorrow.

There were blocking spells, ripping spells, vanishing spells, there was even a rather funny one that involved tickling the opposition to death. Despite her gloom, Kaia had a hard time not laughing out loud when she pictured a mature Lycanthrope laughing its head off in the middle of a battle. How did that even become a forbidden spell? However, a graver question arose in her mind as her eyes flitted over the myriad of diabolical hexes. How did

Vittorio get his hands on this? Did he steal it from Kimryn's quarters? He did say there were three forbidden books housed there. Kaia turned to the cover of the book, but there was no title.

She flipped through the book and saw interesting spells here and there, but most of them were of maximum difficulty, so it came as no surprise that her attempts at performing them failed. Deciding to take her chances with some of the spells in the 'General Craft' section (the majority of those had a difficulty of three or less) she took a deep breath. She had to learn at least a few and perfect them before tonight else she would be practically walking into death. A few minutes into intoning the less complex spells, however, she realized with dread that she could not get a single one to work. Each utterance of the word pairs was met with silence. Her frustration was getting the better of her now. Cold sweat was starting to trickle down her face as the night pressed on ever closer to the moment of truth.

The first spell that caught her eye on the opposite page was a spell to manifest dark bodies known as termed 'nyctoids'. It was an evocation that could serve both as offense and defense. Kaia gazed, slightly disgusted by the product of the spell that was sketched beside the spell itself. Nyctoids were oily black midgets with eyes and teeth an effulgent white. The spell was easy enough to pronounce: Tenebrae Aeterna. A fine scrawl beside it listed the etymology, literal meaning of the word, pronunciation, visualization aids, and difficulty. It was Latin for Eternal Darkness. TEN-EE-BRAY
AAE-TER-NAY. Difficulty:3.5

The book stated: "If one wishes to unlock the power of this ancient spell, the caster must enunciate the spell with power and conviction. Concurrently, the caster should fuel the magic with the emotion of anger and a lust for destruction."

"Tenebrae Aeterna!"Kaia shouted. Nothing happened save the obstinate silence.

She recited the strange words under her breath until deep into the night as the moment of truth inched ever closer. And after her despair had all but zapped her of energy, the unthinkable happened: a sinking feeling inside her stomach that made her double over, though not from pain but from the odd sensation of losing some aspect of her that she might not regain. In this sense, the feeling was similar to the banishing of monster with the Trinity she had

come to hate. Furious that not one of her spells had worked, Kaia slammed the book shut with an almighty thud. But something caught her eye immediately: Two rarefied forms stirring at the other side of the room. It was clear from their lack of substance that they were undeveloped. A wave of nausea swept over her as the forms ran amok inside the room, ripping everything that they could get their stubby hands on.

Lupercalia

Kaia shivered against her coat as she progressed on foot in the frigid night. Armed with only a shaky memory of basic spells taught to her by The Fraternity's training regime and more recently the slew of spells contained within Vittorio's book, she clung to a delusional hope that she would make it through the night. Though it seemed like Kimryn had simply sent her off on this mission to her death, she at least offered a purpose for her outing, a rather odd one at that. Tonight was apparently a special day in the calendar of the Lycanthropes, a feast day called Lupercalia, where the savages would eat the flesh and drink the blood of humans and animals slain days before. From what Kaia could understand from Marco The Jackal, (Third member of The Trinity) the festival Lupercalia was a sick cornucopia of blood and flesh that sank to the lowest levels of depravity. Based on the intelligence that was gathered by the Fraternity, this particular Lupercalia festival was significant since the Lycanthropes would use it to usher in their new ruler. Therein was her task: to spy upon this abominable ritualistic festival and identify the distinguishing features of the new Lycan King. But more importantly, she was to steal the ancient heirloom that would be passed down from old king to new king. And how nasty was the old king of the Lycans who the witches abhorred so much? Evander was his name, a known Lupii Sanguinaria who commanded a ridiculous amount of power. So great was this man-beast's might that the strength of the vibratory effects of his howls was rumored to cause earthquakes.

Kaia had listened with fear and trembling as Marco spoke about the history of the Lycans—of which he himself had been a part some time ago, obliterating anyone who threatened to usurp their reign as the supreme hunters of Nocteraia. Kaia had never understood why the Lycans were considered the rulers of the city, but she figured that it was in some way related to the object she was tasked with stealing tonight. The reason for Marco's desertion of the wolves was a mystery, but Kimryn was convinced enough of his betrayal of his kind to accept him within The Fraternity.

As Kaia trudged ever closer to the locale, cold nipped her so much, she had to huddle deeper into her black furry coat. She looked up and saw the full moon, thinking about the misconceptions people had about werewolves: that they transform into beasts only under the waxing full moon and that they were incapacitated (if not killed) by silver-hewn projectiles. Of course, all of those things were fallacies. None of those things was true for the Lycanthropes she would have to get up close and personal with mere moments from now. Perhaps the misconceptions had been true at some point in the past, but if they were indeed accurate, then the horrid beasts had since evolved to a level of sophistication that allowed them to shed their façade of humanity at will. No longer could one identify a Lycan by staring; one could only know for sure if it transformed before his eyes. And those, mind you, were the normal wolves. The Lupii Sanguinaria species or Blood Wolves had different characteristics altogether. Kaia shivered again but this time it was not from the cold.

Kaia finally reached the city. Though she could have traversed the network of dark alleys to reach her destination on the other side of the city, she decided that if she were to die tonight, she should experience some happiness prior. The dazzling neon lights and the idyllic nightspots interspersed on Nocteraia's nocturnal roads were nothing short of magical. She now passed the Dulcetium, a structure that hosted live performances by the instrumentalists from the Triskai. Her mother had routinely carried her there to see the performances, being the avid fan of the great Triskian composers. Reminiscing on these things brought a dense pang of sadness upon her, and as if the despair were a bag of weights, her shoulders drooped and her lungs strained under unrelenting sorrow. Kaia tried to take a deep breath but failed, her attempts coming out as short, painful rasps. She halted, gazing up into the darkening skies. If this were any other context she would have given at this very moment. Now she had no such luxury, for her mother's safety was the flickering light at the end of the tortuous tunnel. Laboring onward, the weird architecture of the Philosophers' Library rose so high that it seemed to kiss the ebony sky.

The city never slept. Eyes of light were opened everywhere despite the name of the place in the ancient tongue of Noctaire: City of Darkness. Cab drivers flew by her aplenty, honking their horns, soliciting passengers. Further into the suburbs, she passed some liquor-drinking teenagers loitering

beside a building from which loud, raunchy music blasted. Apparently, a party was in full swing. Dingy coffee shops lined the streets, mostly occupied by couples. Bars too were open as one would expect—the denizens of Nocteraia, and perhaps the Triskai at large, needed a place to drown their melancholia. Kaia eyed the bars lustily; she too needed to dilute her troubles with a few strong shots. But of course, that wouldn't be necessary since the place to which she plodded to would most likely drown her problems for her. Permanently. Finally, she ducked into a dark alley—an act that marked the last leg of her odyssey. After crisscrossing through the maze of bricks and cobblestones, she deserted the city altogether and found herself close to Golgotha Hill, the wolves' lair.

Walking another fifteen minutes way off the beaten track, Kaia heard the faint chanting of the beasts. Or was her mind playing tricks? She trembled nevertheless, slowing. She was a skittish mess as a new wave of panic swept over her like a blanket, though not to keep her warm but to entrap her with cold and fear.

“Am I really going to do this?” she asked herself as the reality came crashing down. Kaia stopped and knelt on the grass, half out of exhaustion and half out of her terror. Did she really understand what it meant to walk into a haven of bloodthirsty wolves? Worse, it was supposed to be their special feast day, hence she assumed they would be particularly decadent. Before she left The Edifice, she hadn't fully appreciated the gravity of the situation she would be faced with. Now she did, and her body was telling her that with authority. It was also a determination as to which was worse: the unimaginable pain Kimryn Dawes' dark magic could inflict on her or the brutality the Lycans could mete out to her. Given that she had no support here, she thought the latter was graver. She could turn her back and walk away, but that would also mean turning her back on her mother. Kaia would have no hope of rescuing her without the help of The Fraternity.

Kaia rose and edged up Golgotha Hill. About a half of a mile down the hill and into the flat, dense forestry, was smoke rising from where Kaia assumed the festivities were on in earnest. Kaia strained her eyes to get a sense of what was happening, but trees blocked her vision.

Given the overall forbidding look of the place and its isolation from society, no one dared tread here. Hence, there was a high chance the wolves would

not expect someone to come skipping down Golgotha Hill into their lair. Perhaps their belief that no one would intrude was the reason they made little to no effort in trying to conceal their debauchery. But there was another possibility: they simply did not care. And according to Kaia's reading, they could afford not to.

Satyrion

Halfway down Golgotha Hill, Kaia saw that the cover of the forest began immediately where the hill ended. She decided it was unwise to enter blindly; anyone stationed at the fringe of the forest most likely kept watch at the foot of Golgotha Hill itself. She veered off the track and took a rocky route parallel to the forest. She planned to enter the woods some distance from the beaten track of Golgotha Hill.

Despite the purpose of her mission being to steal a mysterious heirloom, Kaia had precious little information about the object. All she knew was its name: Malemorphous—a rare, enchanted stone. It was made of a mixture of graphite and a rare metal called Iridium. Together with the magical powers it supposedly granted, a Lycan in possession of a Malemorphous indicated high rank. Satisfied she had ventured far enough, Kaia took a deep breath and entered the forest. Immediately, the darkness seemed to collapse around her. Twisting her head this way and that, she exhaled a sigh of relief she still breathed, which probably meant no one was watching her progress. Kaia trekked slowly toward the site.

About three minutes into the dark verdure, a tall, unsightly statue of some kind caught Kaia's eye. It almost entirely blocked her vision of the moon as it loomed overhead above the shrubs and trees. It possessed a chiseled and well-contoured head atop a long, wooden cylindrical support. Its eyes glowed a deep, dirty green, deeply embedded within a wolfish face. Smoke billowed around it, causing the eyes to appear to flicker. Kaia was pretty sure it was an idol being used by the Lycans in their festival. When Kaia refocused on her route, she was somewhat shaken to discover that she could discern forms moving around a bonfire. She was closer than she thought. She decided not to go too much farther from where she was. All she was prepared to do now was watch until the new Lycan King was revealed. She would note his features and report to Kimryn. She decided not to even bother trying to fetch the heirloom; she would be content if she could describe it to Kimryn.

After some time standing in the forest, Kaia realized the guttural chanting of the beasts (apparently in worship to the strange, gargantuan canine-headed idol) was slowly but surely making her disoriented, or was it the smoke? She couldn't tell. Unsteady on her feet, Kaia knelt on the cold ground for support. As she did, another frightening observation startled her. There beneath the wooden idol strewn about like garbage, were the bone-chilling images of dead and decaying corpses. As though her realization of this had alerted her senses, Kaia retched as their overwhelming effluvium slammed against the insides of her nostrils. The scent had been there all along, but it seemed as if in her concentration upon the task at hand, she had been oblivious to it. Overpowered by the foul smell, she backed deeper into the woods.

The Lycans continued their frenzied jamboree, chanting and dancing in unison around the sinister wolfish statue. It was the severed heads that gripped her, never had Kaia seen a person's head without its body. Now there were dozens of them on display, the eyes of each of them open in a dead stare with dried blood smeared across their foreheads. The vomit rose from her stomach again; she yanked her head away from the morbid scene and retched. Gazing around, Kaia's eyes were now drawn to an ostentatious couple waltzing around the great canine-headed graven image. The man was tall and dressed relatively dapper in a black three-piece suit and matching shoes and tie. He danced with a pretty woman with long red hair. In fact, her hair was so long that it was just shy of caressing her buttocks, the outline of which was easily discernible through the flimsy, medieval white dress which she donned.

Something about the strained sophistication of these known savages unnerved her. Kaia now saw that everyone was dressed similarly—the men in black and the women in white. However, what caught her eye about the couple in particular was the fact that they, unlike the rest of them, wore ornate crowns on their heads. Kaia gasped in recognition; along with Kimryn's description of the man and her own observations now, she instantly knew the man's identity. To make sure she was correct, she sought out the couple again who had made their way to the other side of the statue. She strained her eyes against the night to get a good look at the man as they made their way from around the idol. When they emerged once more, she could clearly see beneath his crown that half of his hair was as red as blood and the other half as white as snow. Indeed, she had been correct; he was without a sliver of doubt the known Lupii Sanguinaria, Evander, dancing with his red-headed wife, Heiress Proserpina.

All Kaia had to do now was wait until the mysterious heirloom was handed down to Evander's successor—whoever he was—and hope that he then puts it somewhere in plain sight. The dancing and chanting stopped suddenly. Evander had risen his hand, and everyone else pulled wooden stumps to sit on. He waited for a few seconds until there was complete silence. Kaia hoped they had finally gotten to the inauguration ceremony. As the silence stretched, Kaia got uncomfortable. She had the sense that if she shifted too suddenly, the beasts would be onto her in a second. Only the Lord knows what would have happened next. Worse, her heart was banging inside her chest.

“My people,” Evander began. “We have gathered here on this special night—the night of the wolves of Golgotha Hill, the night of Lupercalia. We congregate here not to simply have fun for our own vain sake but for the sake of our hero and our God, the great Gog, who has preserved us from the curses of the witches and from the malevolence of those principalities who try wholeheartedly to stop us.”

Before Evander could continue, an almighty roar erupted from the horde of beasts. He continued in his deep, grating voice. “Also, we have gathered here on Golgotha Hill, on the very ground where our hero, Gog sacrificed himself to protect our kind, to pay homage to the legendary man-god.” He gazed up reverentially at the humongous wooden statue, and rested his long hands upon its cylindrical base.

He resumed, “Gog, my fellow wolves, was the prototypical Lycanthrope of antiquity whose diligent experimentation as a normal man led to him transcending the human condition.” Another rambunctious applause ensued, louder than the last.

Walking from the base of the statue, Evander led his red-headed bride directly in front of the assembly of wolves, then continued once more.

“And last but not least, we have come here in the name of war. The witches and the vampires are slowly making gains on us. They are getting stronger. They have devised ways of getting close to our level of power. I daresay I have become old, my powers are nowhere near what they once were. Believe me, I am not proud to say it, but I am a mere shell of my former self. With that said...”

Evander raised his voice for climactic effect. “She-wolves and gentle beasts, I hereby announce my resignation as Lycan king!”

Kaia sensed this was an indication he was about to announce his successor. She had to admit, everything was going better than expected so far. In just a few more minutes and she could be out of this godawful place and maybe even celebrate surviving the mission at one of the bars she passed before.

There was a collective sigh of disapproval from most of the wolves after Evander's announcement. The Lycans turned to each other in surprise, expressing their discontent. Evander held up a hand and all went quiet once more.

“My resignation, my dear people, has come at a most opportune time. You see, there is now someone more capable than myself in our midst to carry on our operations.” He paused, running a hand through his dichromatic hair. “This man embodies all the qualities of a King, and if I might be so presumptuous to inform, he has been perfecting a most impressive power for a very long time, a power that even I, the great Evander, could not. You see, my body just cannot withstand that much energy flowing through it. All rise as I pronounce the name of your new Lycan King.

SATYRION!”

The Unveiling

No sooner had he announced the name of his successor than an extraordinarily tall man (easily over six foot five), whom Kaia had not seen participating in the festivities, emerge from the darkness of the other side of the woods. His face was thin, snakelike, and as white as a ghost. He wore no shirt. His entire muscular torso and thick arms were covered with tattoos of strange symbols. As he made his way forward, his long silver hair fluttered in a fleeting breeze. If there ever was an image to depict a Lycan in his human form, this was it. He wore huge galoshes that reached up to his knees.

To Kaia's surprise, she saw that he was not alone; something else followed him out of the darkness, something big. Kaia literally gasped as she saw the largest wolf she had ever seen bounding behind him on a thick chain that rattled on the ground. Kaia wondered how the shirtless savage could possibly control such a mammoth animal if it ever wanted to be liberated from his grasp. The furry, black creature was quite literally as tall as a horse. Satyrion waved at the raucous crowd. His face had a sternness to it that she found uncommon, even among wolves. When Satyrion got close enough, Evander greeted him with a long embrace. Evander spoke once more.

“Oh, and how rude am I? Alongside Satyrion is his wolf, Styx. There is a most enthralling tale of how Satyrion acquired this impressive beast, but that is for another time. The six-foot lupus will serve not only as protector of our walls, but it will be the subject of a future experiment that I shall discuss later.” He pointed to the mass of carrion strewn across the ground. “Happy eating.”

Kaia's beating heart reached a deafening crescendo as the revelations came streaming in. Evander did not reveal the heirloom. Maybe it was a good thing, she thought; she could truthfully report that she had no opportunity to confiscate the object since it wasn't handed down. Kaia was about to leave, but something told her to wait just a minute longer to see if she could glean some more information. In any case, she was already privy to the identity of the new Lycan King and so would not be going back to The Edifice a total failure. However, knowing Kimryn's haughty disposition, Kaia knew she would punish her in some way, even if it wasn't directly. Evander was speaking again, she realized.

“Wait up folks, one final matter before the festivities begin.” He smiled a dirty, twisted smile that chilled Kaia to her stomach. “The unveiling of the power handed down to us by our ancestors that I referenced earlier—”

With his statement hanging in the air, he bowed his head and pushed his hands on either side of his body so that the gesture resembled an accentuated bow. In an observation Kaia must have all but imagined, the whole place seemed to get a shade darker, then something moved above her, frightening her into a standing position. Whipping her head upward, she saw one of the large emerald eyes of the forbidding idol pop itself loose from the socket before floating magically downward, halting just in front of Evander, who seemed to have summoned it by telekinesis. Kaia kept forgetting that Lycans had some ability to perform magic. When the emerald eye was close enough, Evander grasped it with his left hand. A bright light-green effused from between his fingers as he held the gem.

“Though I, along with your new Lycan King, Satyrion have progressed farther than any of you have within the realm of darkness, acquiring the ultimate state and being more than able to hold our own against any opposition, this is the stone that will become the crux of our power. With it, neither

bloodsucker—whether Loyal or Amphisbaena— nor any witch can defeat the least among us. We shall no longer fear the possibility of the majority of our kind being wiped out by an onslaught of witches or vampires.”

The night experienced the rowdiest cacophony yet.

Kaia listened to Evander's pronouncement. She recalled the names of those classes of vampires called Loyals and Amphisbaena from the night the vampire escaped the magical banishing circle. She remembered how Kimryn herself had declared in a shaky voice that he might have been an Amphisbaena. If what Evander said was true, then the wolves really were almost like dark demigods incapable of being defeated or conquered. Finally, she understood why Kimryn wanted the relic so much.

Evander handed the stone to Satyrion whose thin lips twisted into a feral smile. The large black wolf lifted its monstrous head into the air, and for a second Kaia thought it would howl, but it didn't. The frightful creature simply resumed glaring at the proceedings with its intense crimson eyes. Satyrion whispered something to Evander, who now came forward again to address the crowd.

“My wolves, while you eat, allow me to inform you that a most fortunate thing has happened. You see, your new King Satyrion has already proven his worth. This new development will reveal the power of our breed in a most telling way. Satyrion’s wolf, Styx just got a whiff of a most unfortunate witch intruding on our most secret meeting, crouching right outside our lair!”

There was a pregnant pause as the Lycanthropes registered their shock of someone so brazenly encroaching upon their stronghold. Then, there was a collective swine-like bellow. Kaia's blood ran cold, her heart twirling like a tornado encased in flesh. She tried to stand, but fear paralyzed her. She didn't even

have time to fear what happened next. Satyrion raced off in blinding speed straight at her. She managed to unlatch her feet from the mire of panic and started a mad dash back to the drunken city. Hands, feet, and heart pumping, her hysteric flight transformed the forest into a daze of whizzing forms and lights. Sprinting a haphazard path through the death-trap that was Golgotha forest, she knew she couldn't maintain her speed.

“Please please please!” Kaia pleaded with any gods able to deliver her from the jaws of the savages pursuing her. Were those footsteps behind her? Were those branches being torn from the trees in pursuit?

“Shit shit shit.”

Kaia didn't look back; she continued weaving in and out of the trees. Her breathing was becoming short and raspy. Something clipped her right instep, and she fell face first upon the cold ground. She prevented the brunt of the fall by sprawling her hands in front of her. Still, her head had caught the ground with a thud, momentarily knocking the wits from her. I'm dead, she thought as pain seared through her injured forehead. Kaia managed to get up before dashing again for the road and out into the open. But it was not to be as she fell again, and this time she didn't get up. Satyrion's sallow, snake-like face appeared inches above hers, his long, chiseled teeth leering. A scream gurgled up from her. Not a second later, those same teeth found their way deep into her right hand, drawing both blood and a piercing scream from her due to the excruciating pain it brought. He had half-transformed into a wolf. Before she knew it, she was being dragged back to the wolf pack.

In a few seconds, Kaia went from a budding witch to a normal young woman thrashing in a primal fight for her life. She kicked and flailed against her attacker who continued his relentless dragging. The velocity of her frame against the rough ground ripped her clothes and was now peeling away the skin above her ribs as it rubbed bare on the forest floor. Trees and dirt whizzed past her in her unwelcome transit via the Lycanthrope's jaws.

Panicked, she tried to remember some spells. To her surprise, she actually recalled a particularly powerful one that Vittorio had highlighted in his book of forbidden curses.

“Tenebra Aeterna!” she bellowed. As she said the words, a sinking feeling enveloped her as the spell drained the required energy from her body, congealing into the magic she just intoned. She hadn’t perfected the spell prior, but she knew no one who could teach her better than the fear of death. The dark bodies ambushed Satyrion from every angle imaginable, causing him to relinquish his hold on her. The black midgets threw themselves onto his massive frame. Kaia chased off once more but felt her own energy waning as she became even more disoriented. She gazed back as she staggered through the woods and saw the ‘Nyctoids’ amass themselves onto Satyrion, draining him of energy. Just when Kaia thought she had won the battle with Satyrion, the Lycan king and Lupii Sanguinaria showed why he had earned the titles.

With an almighty effort that sounded more like a grunt, he lifted himself from the weight of the dark entities and sent them flying in every direction. Kaia’s last sight of him was when he shot off in her direction.