

Part One

Khaya woke late again. She was plagued by strange and terrifying nightmares that sent her head spinning and her stomach turning, costing her sleep. In her most recent nightmare, a scarlet moon had hung like a portrait over a deathly quiet forest, with dark shadows for trees and white bones all along the forest floor. Khaya tried to push the haunting image out of her mind as she hurriedly got dressed, affirming that it was nothing and that the lingering fear would fade. The last few weeks of summer were greatly treasured at Flintworth Academy by both faculty and students, and it wasn't unusual to conduct lessons in the open greenhouses or under the various willow trees. Khaya was easily able to slip away from her botany class, seeing as the greenhouses were so crowded with students enjoying the weather. Walking hurriedly through the deserted hallways, she sought the comforts of the library, her single solace in the chaos of the academy.

The library was topped with a domed ceiling, gilded with gold, and decorated with a Renaissance-esque portrait of some ancient Greek battle. There were two floors, the second floor featuring a balcony and several window seats, making it a popular hangout spot for the students. Walking along the massive shelves, Khaya turned towards an abandoned old office deep in the crooks and corners of the first floor. This was where Flintowrth's history was stored, in old tomes and ledgers piled along the floor. There were no windows or furniture, only the records and a motheaten carpet far too large for the minuscule space. It was here that Khaya had found the personal journals of the infamous Blood Moon Guild, a group of students at the academy some sixty years before that practiced the occult. They were regarded as a great myth by the students, more legend than fact. Thus, Khaya had kept the journals a jealously guarded secret for years

before deciding to share them with her closest friends. The bound leather notebooks featured extensive spells, lists of native flora and fauna, and macabre diagrams of satanic scenes. Khaya had spent so many afternoons hunched over the books studying them by candlelight that she had memorized every sentence and grisly illustration. But no matter how much she searched, there were no names, descriptions, or initials to be found that could indicate the true identity of the guild members, or just how many of them they truly were. Khaya's obsession had inspired her to hold midnight gatherings with her friends, in an attempt to revive the spirit of the guild by carrying on their traditions and practices. For several months they had attempted spells with ingredients stolen from the greenhouses and seances with candles from the chapels. They had drawn several strange symbols on the office walls, imitating the journal's diagrams so well that they could have passed for the originals. These nighttime rendezvous were a welcome distraction from rigorous academic obligations and the thought of parents who had abandoned their precious daughters in a strange place in the mountains. Khaya had begun to make a ceremony of the meetings, creating a secret password required for entry, inspired by her ghastly nightmares. Rapidly, and without Khaya's notice, her obsession with the blood-moon guild became so strong that it consumed her completely.

Part Two

Some hours later, there was a sudden knock at the door of the small office. Khaya had lost track of time, spending her entire day looking at the records and reading the journals. It was midnight, time for a meeting of the Ruby legion, as the girls had taken to calling themselves.

"What's the password?" she whispered excitedly.

"Carmines Fuschia!" came the reply. It was Alicent, Khaya's closest friend. She stepped through the office door and came to sit beside her friend on the moth-eaten carpet, crushing her in a hug. People often remarked that they could be sisters, as they both had tall willowy frames, dark skin, and curly hair that framed their oval faces. They differed in personality, as Alicent was pleasant and popular, while Khaya was reserved and went mostly unnoticed.

"I missed you at dinner today, What happened?" Alicent asked, concern coloring her voice.

"I skipped class and spent all day in here reading!" Khaya said the words with relish, having truly enjoyed her time away from class. Before Alicent could halfheartedly attempt to tell her friend off, they were interrupted by more knocking at the door, accompanied by a stifled giggle.

"Passwords?" called Khaya expectantly.

"Fices Manchuria!" came the first reply.

"Chaise francium." came the second. Lila and Phoebe stepped out to join them, wearing matching linen pajamas. They were roommates and similar in many aspects, including their straight dark hair and their inability to take most things seriously.

"I still don't understand why we all need separate passwords," grumbled Lila, laying down to rest her head in Alicent's lap.

"It's fun, for one. And doesn't it make you feel all so special?" Teased Alicent, tweaking Lila's nose affectionately. Khaya was fond of their banter, but she interrupted them to tell them about a new ritual she had read about in the journals.

"It's a ritual for necromancy, and there are some strange Latin words too!!" The enthusiasm in her voice is mirrored by interjections of oh's and ahs from her friends, as she explains the process to them. The girls light candles, arranging them in a circle with the tallest one balancing on an old textbook in the center, before sitting cross-legged with their hands clasped together. The room

seems to dance with the flickering light, throwing the stark shadows of the piled ledgers against the walls. Khaya begins the incantation in a low, lilting voice, echoed by the other girls like a ghostly chorus.

"Blood of the moon, color the dark

To the calls of felled angels, hark

Spirits of the dead that walk in this place

Are now welcomed to inhabit this space.

oriuntur spiritus tenebrarum, audientes haec verba!

oriuntur spiritus tenebrarum, audientes haec verba!!

oriuntur spiritus tenebrarum, audientes haec verba!!!

A low dark murmur ripples through the ground, making the candles tremble and the walls creak.

A guttural rasping emanates from a shadowed corner, and the air becomes taut and charged with a dark energy. The shadows begin to twist and move all at once, like a feral beast waking for the hunt. The guttural sounds rise to a crescendo, until all at once the shadows leap out of the walls in one swift movement, so fast that they take the fire from the candles as they do. Everyone is blinded by the sudden darkness, hearts in their throats and gripping each other's hands hard enough to hurt. All at once, Khaya feels a foreign presence.

"There is someone here." She announces gravely. There is a sharp intake of breath to her left.

"Are you sure?" comes Phoebe's trembling voice. Khaya nods, drawn to the dark entity with a force like magnetism, awed and terrified of it all at once. She sees what looks like the form of a woman, shrouded in long clothes and sitting upright with a straight posture.

"What is your name?" She asks the entity, awe filling her voice.

"I am nameless, for I have been forgotten." The voice is reedy and thin, and the sounds of guttural, rasping breath continue softly.

"Why are you here?" Khaya continues her questioning.

"To deliver a warning." The thin voice becomes stretched taut as it whispers gravely, and the figure turns its head slowly as if observing each girl.

"You have a strange darkness within. It doesn't belong to you." She seems to be addressing Khaya, and the other girls turn to look at her, ghostly figures in the dark.

"Stay away from those journals, do not heed the call of the blood moon." The voice becomes agitated as it speaks the words quickly.

"Do not heed the call of the blood moon. Do not heed the call of the blood moon!!" The figure rises painfully slowly and starts stalking toward Khaya, moving faster and faster as it begins shouting those treacherous words again and again.

"DO NOT HEED THE CALL OF THE BLOOD MOON!!" Khaya tries to jerk out of the way, but it's as if she's been captured, a fly in amber. She sees the other girls break the circle and scramble to cower in a corner, shouting for her. The figure bursts forward at an unnatural speed, passing right through Khaya in one icy exhale. Khaya's world turns on its head and she loses all feeling as her consciousness slips away.

Two months later, the blood moon rises. It's clear to everyone around her that Khaya has been on a rapid decline since that night in the library, and although there are rumors and whispers, no one but the girls of the Ruby Legion know what truly happened. They keep their lips sealed out of fear, and they grow desperate the more Khaya's health deteriorates. She doesn't eat, growing so weak that she spends all her time confined in bed. What little sleep she can get is interrupted by

chilling nightmares, so terrifying that she is always woken to by her own blood-curdling screams. Her hold on her sanity slips, and soon she stops responding to her name, her only spoken words being those written in the journals. As the faculty of the academy begin to fear the worst, they make plans to take Khaya into the small town at the bottom of the mountain as soon as a forecasted storm blows over. As the storm brews on the horizon, desperation and distress spread like wildfire.

That night, the rain begins softly and the rumble of thunder seems miles away. Lila and Phoebe wake suddenly to the sound of someone entering their room. Alicent stands in the doorway, tears streaming down her face, bloodied hands clutching her shoulders in her thin nightgown. Khaya is at the foot of the bed, clearly lucid and strong in her stance. Her eyes are clear and focused, and she is wearing a twisted smile and holding a bloodied letter opener.

"Time to go into the woods!" she uses a mocking, sing-song voice, ill-fitting to the current situation. Phoebe and Lila get up and go to comfort Alicent, who is trembling so hard she can barely stand. When she is subdued enough to stop crying, she tells them that she had woken to Khaya standing over her, letter opener in hand. When she refused Khaya's demands to follow her into the woods and tried to fight her off, Khaya attacked her viciously with the letter opener until she relented. It becomes clear to the girls that they have no choice but to follow Khaya, and they try their best to hide their sheer terror for each other's sake. They don't dare to run or scream, as Khaya holds the letter opener tightly against Alicent's throat, and so she leads them steadily into the dark. Behind them, the sky breaks open releasing the storm in furious earnest.

It seems that the girls disappear without a trace. Not one strand of hair or footprint or drop of blood is to be found. When the police are called and still no bodies are found, things start to get deathly serious. Criminal investigators find the Blood Moon Guild journals in Khaya's disheveled bed, as well as several pages filled with cramped writing. Blotches of ink and tears in the paper make it very difficult to read, but upon closer inspection, they prove to be the passwords Khaya created for each girl in the Ruby Legion. Fices Manchuria, Chaise francium, and Carmine Fuschia scribbled furiously, over and over again. A forensic linguist is the one to discover that these words are an anagram, and when taken apart and carefully rearranged, the passwords form the words human sacrifice.