

CHAPTER ONE

September, 1806

The vampire shrieked, extended his claws, and pounced like a cat onto the wooden floor of the warehouse.

Two women followed, landing on his left and right, sinking low as they spat at the intruders.

They were three naked creatures, their hairless bodies glowing bright under the silver moonlight rays that peeked through the holes in the roof.

“Why are they hairless?” a voice asked.

The accented French sounded Germanic in tone, with harsh emphasis on the consonants.

“That is an interesting question,” a calm voice answered, in the drawl of a native Parisian. “I asked my second teacher that same question thirty years ago. He had no answer. I still await a reason.”

The speakers were an odd pair, unlike in every way. A director in the *Commedia dell’arte* would have happily cast this pair as *Il Dottore* and *Colombine*—the dour head of the household and his sneaky servant.

The first was a tall, rapier-thin man with dark hair which blended in with the darkness of the warehouse. He was handsome in the fashion of a nobleman from the days of ancient knights and kings, despite a jagged scar across his right cheek. However, most who met this man found themselves caught by his light blue eyes. There was an almost lupine air to his gaze, and few met it for longer than a few seconds.

His name was Franz von Karnstein, and he was an Austrian nobleman. His family, one of the oldest in Europe, possessed a somber reputation that many used as a warning against naughty children. “Lock your doors or the Karnsteins will get you,” was a saying heard across many locations from Austria and Hungary, all the way to France and Italy.

Dressed in black clothing and bearing a simple metal cross, Franz von Karnstein resembled a Puritan crusader rather than the heir to one of the oldest titles in Europe.

His companion was a solidly built man with a lined, hard face and a sinewy body. His light hair and dark eyes, eerie calm and superhuman control, gave him an air of mystery. Dressed in simple, well-cut clothing from an earlier age, he thought that outward displays of wealth or opulence were unnecessary and ridiculous. Most would have labeled him a revolutionary, like those that had overthrown the Bourbons from the French throne thirteen years earlier. In a sense, they would have been correct, for he was a strict Republican who held deep sympathies for the original beliefs of the Revolution.

His name was Jean-Pierre Séverin, and he was, among other things, a sword master and the head of the Paris Morgue. A confidant of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, Séverin was an important, if mostly unknown, member of the Imperial government.

“I think it does not matter,” Karnstein said while placing a hand on his sword hilt. “At least, not at the moment.”

Séverin nodded once. “Yes, I believe you are correct,”

The lead vampire snarled, revealing rows of serrated, yellow fangs, and a long, lolling black tongue that slithered across his bloodless lips. His red and yellow eyes grew wider and he reared back, like a cat preparing to leap. His female followers moved in the same manner, their motions precisely matching their master’s actions.

The lead vampire leaped forward, his snarl rending the air, aiming for Karnstein. The nobleman stepped aside, his sword arm slashing out with a speed nearly as impressive as that of his undead opponent. A heavy cavalry saber appeared in his hand, the sharp steel slashing across the monster’s exposed neck.

The vampire shrieked as the blade bit deep within the undead flesh. Black ichor splattered across the creature’s skin as viscous bubbles appeared across his oversized mouth.

The vampire shook and then snarled, a liquid sound that evoked images of a drowning animal growling as it fought back. Rearing back a second time, the monster prepared for a second strike, his ragged talons glistening in the spare light.

Nearby, the female vampire on the left leaped towards Séverin, her hairless, emaciated, body resembling a sexless statue carved by a mad, if somewhat talented, artist.

The swordmaster lunged forward, piercing the vampire's right shoulder with a long, silver rapier. The undead woman howled, her head convulsing with inhuman violence. The delicate neck bones cracked and reassembled as the monster shuddered and moved towards the older Frenchman.

Within seconds, she would be upon him, her vicious claws and oversized incisors ripping his flesh.

The third vampire woman sailed above the humans' heads, landing in a low crouch mere feet away from their exposed backs. Pulling her shoulders back, she pointed her skeletal skull towards Karnstein, preparing for another pounce.

The Austrian nobleman slashed the air before the male vampire, missing the undead monster by a foot. The creature stepped forward; his glittering eyes widened as the handsome nobleman's other hand rose into view, a massive musket pistol gripped in his fist, cocked and prepared in advance.

Karnstein said in a phlegmatic tenor, "*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti, Amen.*"

He then pulled the trigger. After a thunderous roar, a tongue of flame, and gray smoke, the vampire's head exploded in an appalling cloud of ichor, bone, and dust. Gore spread across the floor, spattering in a massive, viscous, black pool.

Nearby, Séverin lunged forward with his free hand, a wicked wooden stake held tightly in his scarred fist. The weapon pierced the exposed flesh, sinking between the visible ribs, piercing the heart.

The female vampire moaned softly, quivered once, and fell away, her body crumbling into a fine pale powder.

The third vampire screeched at the death of her sire and sister, and moaned as a wooden shard emerged from her chest. She toppled forward, her undead existence over before collapsing.

"*Idiota!*" a feminine voice said. "You left your back exposed again!"

"I did not," Karnstein said, "and stop called me an idiot,"

"Then stop acting like one," came the amused reply.

The woman stepping into view was a vision of loveliness, the type used as inspiration by poets and artists since the dawn of time. She was tall for a woman, with a wide, oval face, olive skin, full lips, heavy, dark lashes and straight black hair that she wore in a tight pony tail down her back. Her figure was the classic hourglass, with an astonishingly narrow waist, wide hips and high, full breasts. A battered, outdated tricorne hat sat atop her head, somehow appearing elegant despite being a fashion shunned even by street beggars.

"If there had been another vampire holding my attention," she said, approaching Karnstein while lowering her old crossbow, "that monster would have been consuming you as we speak."

"There were only three," replied the Austrian, pulling out a rag and cleaning his blade. "No others lie within this building or below."

"We were both exposed, Franz," Séverin intervened. "However, I knew the precise location of every item or person in this room. Did you?"

Karnstein shook his head, sheathed his sword and reloaded his musket.

"I did not," he admitted. "But I did know there were only three of these damned creatures in the building,"

The woman, whose name was Sylvia Dardi, exchanged a resigned look with the older swordmaster. Both knew the Austrian baron possessed certain skills and abilities beyond comprehension. He could, after a brief prayer in ancient Sumerian, exorcise demons, and he could spot the world's supernatural beings even from a great distance. The latter talent taxed his mind and body and, they both believed, endangered his very soul.

"Very well," Sylvia said, also sheathing his sword, "but I do not like the risks you take in battle. A saber and a pistol against a vampire? You are completely *pazzesco!*"

The corner of Karnstein's mouth lifted slightly, the closest he often came to a grin.

“But it worked.”

Sylvia rounded on him, pushing her face close to his and placing both hands on her hips in obvious annoyance.

“But what if you’d missed, *idiot*?”

Karnstein threw back his cloak, revealing a pair of muskets across his hips.

“The monster would have found me prepared... and stop calling me an idiot.”

Sylvia grinned, pulled his face down to hers, and kissed the handsome Austrian for several seconds.

“Then stop acting like one,” she said, laughing.

Séverin sighed and shook his head.

“Before you begin alternating between squabbling and embracing,” he said patiently, “let us leave this location. These were not the monsters we sought.”

Sylvia looped an arm through Karnstein’s while nodding.

“You’re right, Maestro,” she said, “these pathetic creatures were little more than *animali*. They could not steal away women and children unseen in the night.”

Séverin nodded and led the pair towards the shattered wall barely visible in the distance.

“Quite so, Sylvia. I would wager that if we searched below this floor, we would find a nest of shattered animal bones. Vampires such as those three are mindless creatures who crave blood from any source. Ending their undead existence was merely an act of mercy.”

“We are still no closer to the source of these attacks across Paris,” Karnstein said, his words taut with anger.

“Oh, but we are,” Sylvia said, grinning in his direction. “The Maestro and I discovered the identity of the pair who terrorize this city.”

Karnstein raised an eyebrow quizzically and asked, “Oh? Why was I not made aware of this information?”

“Because my dearest, *idiot* *fidanzato*, you arrived late at this rendezvous and we had no time for chat,” Sylvia replied.

Sensing another lover’s quarrel coming, Séverin intervened: “We believe that, based on the available information, the abductions and murders were the acts of a vampire and a ghoul. I know of only one such pairing,”

“The Ténèbre Brothers,” Sylvia said, shaking her head and sighing.

“*Ach du lieber Himmel*,” Karnstein said and crossed himself.