

## CHAPTER I

Ronato Rotolo giggled as the knife sliced across the palm of his hand. Though the cut was deep and instantly bloody, he tittered away like a child being playfully tickled by a feather. The sensation of pain appeared lost to his drug-addled, alcohol-diseased mind and body. The viscous crimson fluid pooled and fell from his injured extremity in large droplets.

“I can’t wait to see what happens next. Give me a kiss, lovely one,” Ronato said, his voice an uncontrolled slur with no apparent control of pitch or rhythm.

The object of his drunken affection, the elderly magus Oranto Pirozzi, ignored the foolish warbling of the bleeding fool. A man of medium height with a long, curling, black and gray beard, and a flattened nose with enormous nostrils, he was far from anyone’s ideal of “lovely.” His sunken, dark eyes and stout form also prevented such a sobriquet—but his nearly hideous aspect was perfect for his work.

Pirozzi was a magus, a dangerous one. His renowned powers were the subject of much discussion throughout the Italian states, with many whispers of his consorting with demons and, worse, foreigners. His patrons included wealthy merchant families and even some minor royalty—each seeking his uncannily accurate horoscopes and powerful potions. Pirozzi was a feared man by those few who knew his reputation. Wisely, he kept himself in the shadows, living as a guest with various powerful patrons.

Grasping Ronato’s arm with his gloved hands, Pirozzi aimed the falling blood into a tiny golden, jewel-covered chalice. He studied the quickly filling vessel and nodded his hood-covered head happily. Ronato continued to caper, still seemingly unaware that he was bleeding.

Seconds later, the goblet was nearly filled, resembling a gelatinous wine whose rusty scent wafted over the small assembly of robed figures. Only Ronato was clad in normal, if heavily wine-soiled, clothes. Even his curly, perfumed, blond locks and sparse beard and mustache, exuded a fragrance of spoiled, cheap wine.

Pirozzi nodded towards two of his followers, who immediately moved to Ronato’s side and gently propelled him deep into the cavern. The remaining ten hooded men and women followed, walking with lively steps down the sparsely lit, mildew-scented stone corridor. At the rear of the solemn column was Pirozzi, his step slow, his outward manner calm and resolute. One would think, based on his behavior and ritualistic motions, that he was imitating a Roman Catholic Cardinal performing a ceremony in the name of God. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In addition to being an alchemist, astrologer, and ceremonial magician, Pirozzi was a priest of the darkest powers known to mankind. Call that being Satan, Lucifer, the Great Serpent, Beelzebub, Angra Mainyu, or the Prince of Darkness, his mission was simple—spread evil and darkness throughout the world. For the last two decades, in an almost missionary capacity, Pirozzi had created small cults devoted to power of that arch-fiend. This was not difficult—in every large city, there were always the disaffected and foolish among the wealthy. Men and women who were bored with simply purchasing their every desire. Pirozzi sought those to whom baubles and debauchery palled and no longer suffered the ever-encompassing boredom. To those, he offered small, unique seductions while probing for weaknesses. Within a short space of time, these followers were damned—becoming servants of the terrible, cold, darkness of pure evil.

Originally, he had planned to do as he had done in cities throughout Spain, France, Italy and the Holy Roman Empire—set up a coven and leave. There was always some fallen priest that could lead the sad little Satanists, attempting to prove their evil by behaving badly. Pirozzi never cared what happened after he left. He was a missionary of the Morning Star, a magus who spread the corruption of the Father of Lies everywhere he traveled.

At least, that had been the plan before he had come to the Kingdom of Naples.<sup>1</sup> In this large, powerful city of merchants, clergy, and nobles, there was an almost peasant-like suspicion and respect for the mystic arts. Those who were believed to possess the powers of witchcraft, better known locally as *stregheria*, were treated with awe and respect. Even the terrible, terrifying secret police, the infamous Cupbearers, walked softly around one who wove spells and worshipped strange powers.

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<sup>1</sup> The Kingdom of Naples was a French client state in southern Italy created in 1806 when the Bourbon Ferdinand I sided with the Third Coalition against Napoleon and was in return ousted by a French invasion. Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon’s elder brother, was installed in his stead. The French occupation army was led by then-Colonel Joseph Léopold Sigisbert Hugo (promoted later to the rank of General), the father of Victor Hugo. He was the one who arrested *Fra Diavolo* and had him hung on 10 November 1806. When Joseph became King of Spain in 1808, Napoleon appointed his brother-in-law, Joachim Murat, to take his place. Murat was later deposed by the Congress of Vienna after being defeated at the Battle of Tolentino on 3 May 1815.

This changed when Stefano Bove, of the famous spice-trading family, revealed a family secret. After a night of rather dull group sex and murder at the Bove villa on Lake Avernus, the silly, spoiled man-child had led the magus into a copse of trees. Pushing aside a heavily overgrown bush and weeds, Stefano had revealed the mouth of a small cave.

“*Voilà!* According my late grandfather—Satan take his dark soul!—this is cave is the legendary *Porte dell’inferno*, the Gates of Hell. His father said that the demi-god Hercules walked down this cave and into the pit. I explored it and all that’s down there is a big stone coffin...” Stefano explained as he then followed the passage into the depths of the Earth.

The find within changed Pirozzi’s plans forever. He had been shocked that night—this being as significant a moment in his life as the day he had sacrificed his first infant at the Scholomance.

Months of planning passed, almost in an instant, as he prepared for this momentous moment.

Following the line of followers down the cavern, Pirozzi knew he could walk the distance with his eyes closed. He had practically moved into the *Porte dell’inferno*, ignoring the constant drafts and drip, drip, drips of water across the gray stone floor. The ceiling was only slightly higher than their tallest member, Tito Orsini, until one arrived at the room containing the sarcophagus. That chamber was high—over twenty feet in height, free of cold breezes and rising damp. Also, there was a warmth to this room, as if the walls themselves were heated from some hidden furnace.

The room was unadorned, plain, gray, rough stone walls with a sloping roof that rose up like a small dome in a Gothic cathedral. The chamber exuded a wrongness, almost feeling as if the very Earth itself had been scooped out by some unseen, monstrous clawed fist. Every time Pirozzi and his followers entered this chamber, they felt a burdening sense of disquiet that threatened to overwhelm their senses.

The massive stone sarcophagus in the center of the room merely added to the feeling of dread that threatened their minds. The casket was made from a dark stone that appeared to absorb the brazier light rather than reflect it. Almost ten feet long, the coffer appeared to have been exuded from the depths of the Earth into this chamber. There was no means to move the sarcophagus, although the lid yielded through the lightest of pressures.

Revealed within was a corpse, a desiccated, dust-covered assemblage of dried skin and bones with some pale wisps across the skull. None of the coven were certain if those delicate, web-like tendrils were the last traces of hair or an accumulation of pale grime. Pirozzi did not allow anyone to find out, having already identified the occupant of the ancient burial vessel.

Stepping through his followers, Oranto Pirozzi held the chalice of blood before his body like a priest carrying the cross to an altar. He nodded and Tito Orsini and Stefano Bove gently propelled Ronato Rotolo to the magus’s side. The drunken nobleman appeared lost and unfocused, no longer laughing and speaking. His dark eyes swam in his head, sliding over the black-robed gathering, the cup filled with his blood, and silver knife in Stefano’s beefy hand.

“In the name of the Lord of Earth, Lucifer Morningstar, Prince of the Air, curses upon our enemies. Hail Satan!” Oranto Pirozzi said, his voice sonorous and deep.

For some unknown reason, there was no echo in this chamber, another unexplained oddity of *Porte dell’inferno*.

“Hail Satan!” the coven chorused, each performing a reversed version of the sign of the cross as they spoke.

“In the name of Asmodeus King of Demons, Belial Lord of Pride, Beelzebub Lord of Flies, and Azazel the Black Goat of Darkness, we call on the powers of the Pit! We offer to you the blood of kings!”

Pirozzi slowly poured the collected blood across the dusty grinning skull of the mummified body in the box. That was one of the more difficult parts of this ritual—finding a subject with the blood of kings in their body. Happily, he had found that Ronato’s family were blood relations to Henry de Lorraine, 5th Duke of Guise and one-time Doge of Naples. It didn’t matter that the House of Guise had ruled the city-state for less than a year—the blood was still present.

“Return to us, Nosos, Lady of Corruption, daughter of the Tenebrae!”

Oranto Pirozzi howled, feeling the dark energy building about the chamber. Somewhere in the distance, a dog howled mournfully. Then, there was a loud crack of thunder that echoed down the tunnel, but died just as it arrived in the underground room that was the *Porte dell’inferno*. A stillness seemed to fill the world, as if all of creation was waiting on a knife’s edge for some action.

That was when Pirozzi nodded and Stefano sliced open Ronato’s uninjured hand. The drunken nobleman whimpered, a weak squeak reminiscent of a mouse. Otherwise, he did not struggle, allowing Stefano and Tito to place his newly bleeding hand directly over the face of the moldering corpse.

“Look!” Tito Orsini whispered, staring with rapt eyes at the body in the casket.

Pirozzi waved the rest of the coven back and gazed within, his eyes widening in shock. The limbs, formerly mere tatters of crumbling flesh over brown bones, appeared to be reforming. The face, formerly a grinning skull with sharp incisors, was now covered with a papyrus-thin brown layer. A set of nearly non-existent black lips hid the terrible teeth from view as the crimson stream of blood ran in rivulets over the skeletal form.

It was the eyes that held Pirozzi fixed in place. Moments earlier, they had been mere gaping holes, dark empty pits that held no signs of life. Now, sinister pinprick-sized red lights appeared in the empty sockets, giving the impression of some demonic being rising from abyssal depths. The blasphemous stygian malevolence grew with each passing heartbeat, as if the plutonian depths of outer darkness suddenly expelled a horror from the endless void. Pirozzi, who thought of himself as a sinister being, a demon in human form, felt like one of the squalling infants he happily sacrificed to the Gods of the Netherworld.

Suddenly, there was an explosion of movement and skeletal arms tore Ronato free from the gentle bonds of Stefano and Tito. The desiccated ebony lips latched onto the drunken man's throat and he sighed—releasing a sound of pure ecstasy over the hushed chamber.

Scarlet streams of blood escaped from the tattered mouth, though, with each passing moment, the transformation grew more evident. The emaciated mummy appeared to fill out, grow more life-like. At the same instant, the drunken, though still vital, Ronato appeared to shrink, darken and wither. Within seconds, the body that tumbled to the stone floor was a mere husk—a shriveled collection of dry sticks and papery skin.

The being in the sarcophagus thrust aside the wasted form that had once been Ronato Rotolo. The nobleman's mummified remains shattered and collapsed upon striking the stone floor, shattering like dried twigs across the ground. The red eyes slowly scanned the coven, examining each member in turn, though not lingering on any for more than a heartbeat.

Finally, the crimson orbs settled on Pirozzi. In voice that was a harsh, hoarse, husky croak, the being asked: "You are the one who summonsed me?"

Pirozzi preened, happy to be recognized by this terrible, powerful being.

"Yes, I am he who summonsed you to service. I am Oranto Pirozzi, a graduate of the Scholomance. You are Nosos, the Lady of Corruption. We have much work for you to do. First, the French control the city and you must kill the new King Joseph..."

Pirozzi's speech was cut off as the decayed hands grasped his head and twisted, filling the air with a loud, meaty crack. The dark magus, the man who had viewed himself as the Dark Angel's favorite magician, died, his head facing the wrong direction.

"Scholomance graduates," the brittle voice rasped, "they never shut up. I do not serve humanity."

The crimson inhuman eyes slowly examined again each member of the coven—the men and women standing frozen in open-mouthed shock. They were used to petty evils, even terrible acts like the rape and murder of children. The swift death of their leader, a sorcerer of inhuman power, had terrified them into inaction.

Now, the frightening, demonic eyes pinned each man and woman into stillness, causing them to feel like insects in a specimen jar. The overwhelming inner power of the undead creature seemed to fill the chamber, causing the weak witches of the dead Pirozzi coven to quake in terror.

"You," Nosos said while pointing a crumbling finger at one cloaked figure. "Stand by my side."

The object of this order was Fortuna Orsini, the young, pretty, impressionable, but otherwise forgettable wife of Tito Orsini. She was a tiny creature with a girlish, round face, a stub nose, long, glossy, straight brown hair, wide innocent eyes, and a surprisingly shapely figure. Fortuna was a gentle creature who participated only minimally in the coven's activities, and even then, with little enthusiasm. Pirozzi and a few others had tried to break her spirit, finding her ultimately an uninteresting object. Other women in the group, like the red-haired, buxom, Baroness Paluzzi, or the sensual, seductive dark-haired Claudine Brazzi, had garnered greater interest, and ultimately greater power and position in the cult. Fortuna was treated as little more than a servant by the members, even her husband.

Fortuna moved with slow steps to the side of the stone casket, her eyes downcast. A few slow smiles crossed the faces of the members, relaxing slightly as the least of their dark circle was brought forth, presumably as the next victim of this undead being. Nosos's red demonic eyes locked with Fortuna's soft green orbs. The young woman stiffened, trapped under the hellish energy of that piercing gaze.

"Stay right here. Do not move," Nosos said, her voice even rougher than before.

Fortuna nodded, staring at her tiny unshod feet, expecting her imminent demise. The fleshless inhuman head swiveled back to the coven, studying their hidden smug, barely hidden smiles. The thin black lips peeled back, causing the sharp blood-stained teeth to glint and glimmer in the brazier light. A dry cough emerged from the cracked, skeletal throat, one that continued for several seconds. The black lips peeled back even further and all present realized the undead creature was laughing.

Suddenly, there was an explosion of dust and grit and the creature vanished from sight. A shriek of agony filled the air, emerging from the now flayed face of Tito Orsini. Screams of agony rent the chamber, never drifting any further, nor echoing in the slightest. A chorus of wailing cries were each cut off by pulpy, sodden slapping sounds as meaty, sopping carcasses struck the stone floor. The rending sounds of ripping flesh and glutinous lactation assaulted Fortuna's senses as the members of the coven were consumed by the undead entity.

Then all sounds ceased, and the young wife—now widow—realized she was alone with the demoniac being. No signs of life were evident in the room, with only a barely audible occasional dripping sound as viscous blood oozed from the scattered corpses. Fortuna's eyes, staring at her tiny toes, never rose. Her body shivered, gently convulsing like a lost lamb in a rainstorm.

The silence broke as a mucilaginous fleshy percussion ponderously traversed the length of the chamber. A pair of scarlet streaked pale legs halted before Fortuna's downcast face.

"Fortuna," the being before her said in a warm, husky, purr that surrounded and caressed the young woman. "Look at me."

Fortuna shivered and shook as he eyes slowly rose, widening in shock at the sight before her eyes. Her lips opened, but no sound emerged as she stared into the bottomless depths of Nosos's eyes.

"Mine," Nosos whispered and ran her blood-soaked hand through Fortuna's lovely locks.

Closing her eyes, Fortuna leaned her head against the caressing hand and opened her mouth as a pair of blood-soaked lips covered hers for a hard, passion-filled kiss.