

CHAPTER 1

FLABBERGASTING FALAFELS

It was a dark and gloomy Wednesday night in Nocturnia. Countess Frivoleeta Fang sipped at her Scream Tea and tapped the dining-room table with her long black fingernails as the clock struck 4 a.m.

‘Drake, my darkness, you do know it’s our annual Barbaric Ball in just three nights?’ cooed Countess Frivoleeta. ‘We still have invitations to send, catering to sort out and – oh, did you book the Howling Wolf Band?’

Count Drake’s eyes widened. ‘Erm . . . I’ll phone them tonight, dearest rat brains.’

‘And Drakey, you’ll need to wear your best suit for the ball. None of those

Hawaiian graveyard shirts you like so much. We really must find a way to unstick all that goblin slime from last year's ball too . . .'

(Goblins were notorious for leaving slime trails – stickier than the stickiest super glue, they were impossible to remove!)

'Not another Barbaric Ball,' moaned Amelia Fang, slumping back into her chair. 'They're always full of old monsters wearing too many frills and far too much Eau de Decay.'

Amelia had just turned ten and would much rather be hanging out with her best friends, Florence and Grimaldi.

'Amelia Fang! I won't have any of that bat-chat from you,' said the countess sternly. 'Firstly, Eau de Decay is the finest perfume in all of Nocturnia. It's made from fermented

bat spit with a hint of rotten banana, after all! And secondly, the Barbaric Ball is a family tradition. It's our chance to show everyone how fang-tastic we are.'

Hosted by the Fang family for generations, the Barbaric Ball was THE annual event in Nocturnia. Only the most ghoulish and ghastly were invited, and the ball was Countess Frivoleeta's pride and joy.

'But I get so bored,' Amelia grumbled. 'It would be much better if someone my own age were there!'

'You know the ball is only for grown-ups,' said the countess.

'Then surely I don't



have to go?’ said Amelia hopefully.

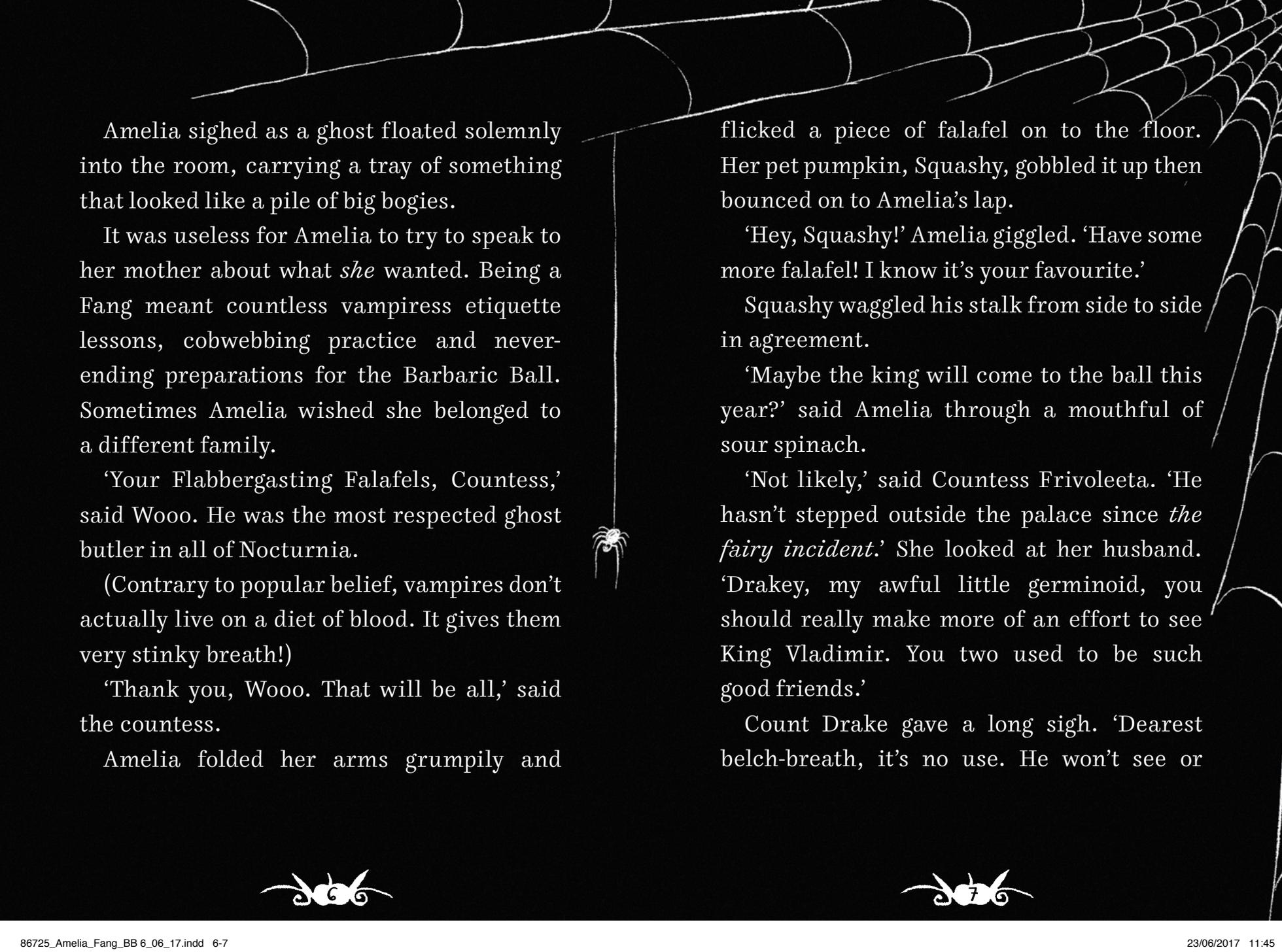
‘Of course *you* have to go. You must learn the ropes so that you can carry on the Barbaric Ball tradition!’ said her mother, with a gleeful grin.

‘But what if I don’t want to?’ mumbled Amelia. ‘I want to study Pumpkinology when I grow up, and help poorly pumpkins.’

Countess Frivoleeta burst out laughing.

‘Darkling! Don’t be silly. Oh, you’ll make my eye make-up run!’ She checked her face in the mirror behind her, then blew herself a kiss. (You may have heard that vampires don’t have reflections. That is pure glitter, and no one loved theirs more than Countess Frivoleeta.) ‘You’d ruin your delicate vampiress hands with all the digging. Now, sit up straight, ready for dinner,’ she continued. ‘Wooo!’





Amelia sighed as a ghost floated solemnly into the room, carrying a tray of something that looked like a pile of big bogies.

It was useless for Amelia to try to speak to her mother about what *she* wanted. Being a Fang meant countless vampiress etiquette lessons, cobwebbing practice and never-ending preparations for the Barbaric Ball. Sometimes Amelia wished she belonged to a different family.

‘Your Flabbergasting Falafels, Countess,’ said Woo. He was the most respected ghost butler in all of Nocturnia.

(Contrary to popular belief, vampires don’t actually live on a diet of blood. It gives them very stinky breath!)

‘Thank you, Woo. That will be all,’ said the countess.

Amelia folded her arms grumpily and

flicked a piece of falafel on to the floor. Her pet pumpkin, Squashy, gobbled it up then bounced on to Amelia’s lap.

‘Hey, Squashy!’ Amelia giggled. ‘Have some more falafel! I know it’s your favourite.’

Squashy wagged his stalk from side to side in agreement.

‘Maybe the king will come to the ball this year?’ said Amelia through a mouthful of sour spinach.

‘Not likely,’ said Countess Frivoleeta. ‘He hasn’t stepped outside the palace since *the fairy incident*.’ She looked at her husband. ‘Drakey, my awful little germinoid, you should really make more of an effort to see King Vladimir. You two used to be such good friends.’

Count Drake gave a long sigh. ‘Dearest belch-breath, it’s no use. He won’t see or



speak to anyone any more.'

'Such a shame,' said Countess Frivoleeta. 'Ever since he cancelled your weekly Eyebowls game, you've been completely obsessed with those silly word-crosses . . .'

'Crosswords, dear,' said Count Drake.

'If the king DID accept our invitation to the ball, do you think he would bring his son?' asked Amelia. Her eyes lit up for a moment. 'Or is Prince Tangine not allowed to come either, because he's not OLD?'

'Prince Tangine is the future king, for serpent's sake! He is ALWAYS invited,' sang the countess.

'But remember, Amelia,' Count Drake remarked, 'the prince's mother DID get eaten by a fairy. I'd be surprised if the king ever lets him outside the palace walls.'

'Grieving gobblepots, I'd go mad if I couldn't go and see my friends,' said Amelia.

'Enough chitter-chatter. Now, Amelia, eat up before your falafels get cold, then off to bed,' said Countess Frivoleeta, prodding at Amelia's cheeks. 'We must keep your skin looking pale and death-like!'

'But Muuum, it's the final of *The Great Gothic Gravestone Carve Off* tonight! Can't I stay up for just a bit longer?' said Amelia.

Suddenly a huge
BOOOOOOOOOOOONG!
echoed through the house.

'Drake, my little sweat gland, are we expecting visitors?' said Countess Frivoleeta. 'Wooo!' she called, without waiting for her husband's reply. 'Please answer that immediately.'

Moments later, Wooo appeared holding a gold envelope.

'You have a letter, Countess. It appears to be from the king.'

