

**THE KINGDOM OF IQUITOS, PART ONE:  
THE SACRED FIRE OF SANDALWOOD FOREST  
By ANONYMOUS©**

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CHAPTER ONE: CALL ME FOSTER

It was another plain old day at Lakewood High. The students began to trickle in like little water particles coming together to form one solid, lifeless ice cube. I was in class, early as always, so I could get a seat near the window. Just in case, something was to happen.

I liked to look out the window and stare out into the beauty which remained in this world. The colourful leaves danced off the branches and into the dirt. Autumn was my favourite season, not because of the vivid colours or refreshing cold winds, but because the season represented the beauty in death. Life dying; it's simply majestic. It gives me hope that there is a beautiful end to it all.

Suddenly the colour intensity of the leaves grew. It grew brighter and brighter till the leaves began to spark with electricity. The leaves no longer danced, but they melted towards the dirt. It was as if they were creeping towards me. They wanted something from me! The floor started to tremble and collapse. The trees roared and then lit up in flames. The melted leaves began to melt together and form into this figure. My heart raced; my chest couldn't contain it anymore. The figure became more and more sculpted as the burning trees screeched and the floor around me rumbled. He had eyes and his arm reached through the glass window, as he laughed sadistically.

"NOOOO!" I flew out of my chair in horror.

"Scarlett calm down" I heard. An arm fell lightly on my shoulder.

"Get away from me!" I yelled as I turned around to find perhaps something just as terrifying. My teacher scared for her life and all of my classmates staring at me; some whispering. A few were giggling and not doing a great job at hiding it, like that bully Malakai who made my life a living hell. As if it wasn't hell-ish enough.

Completely embarrassed and still freaked out for my life, I ran out of the classroom. I could hear the teacher try to calm down the class as I walked down the empty hallway. I knew what everyone thought of me, but I did not like to hear it. I walked into the washroom so I could have a breather, perhaps a few seconds to myself. Maybe one day I would be able to stand myself.

I splashed water on my face. It usually helped. I stared into the mirror, and the sad, pathetic girl looked back.

“Why aren’t you normal you freak?”

I suddenly grew furious at this little girl. Her face made me twitch and clench my fists. I wanted to take her head and smash it onto the faucet that still continued to run. Or maybe take my fingers and claw out her empty eyes that stared so disgustingly back at me.

As I was about to lay my hands on her, I heard something move behind me. I looked back at the washroom stalls and I could feel something there. It was laughing at me.

“Get out of here!” I yelled.

Nothing. I kicked each door in and found nothing. Tired of this suffering, I left. School sucked anyways.

It was weird. I felt safer when it was dark. It was both easier and harder to be human at night. There was no one to compare yourself to; but then again, there was no one to help you look under your bed for monsters. I always tried to wait until my parents went to bed so I could eat, but I was getting too hungry. I try not to witness my dad’s sad or impressive drinking habit, depending on how you look at it. I try to pretend that I don’t see my mother wasting her life away in front of the television or my father struggling to get off his chair after having a few too many. I knew my father would one day drink his way to his fermented death. It was okay though, my mother did not seem to react anymore; she didn’t react much to anything really. Except for when I would come down. A constant criticism on how my clothes did not fit right or that my hair was too messy, or that I was just too ugly and should do something quick to fix it.

“You should really go to the gym more and lose weight. It’s not like you don’t have

time anyways. You are never home and help out with Dad, or care about anyone other than yourself. Don't your friends complain about your weight, or hair for that matter? I.."

I couldn't stand her anymore so I dropped the bread and went back to my room, stumbling over my dad who was half asleep on the hallway floor. Maybe the hunger will get my mind off the pain anyways.

I walked past my locker and towards my first period classroom. I wasn't sure why I was going to school after my freak-out yesterday. I managed to carry my legs into the classroom. I did not make eye contact with the teacher; I knew how awkward she must feel. If I let her know that I do not care whether she cares, then she would not dare to try anything. I got to the window and stopped. There was some- one sitting in my seat.

His smile was both inviting and refreshing at the same time. His unfamiliar friendliness awoke me from the trance I was put in. I quickly peered down, and sat quickly in the seat behind him. As I was staring at the back of his head, I was trying to figure out who he was; a new student, but from where? What is his story? What gives him the ability to maintain that sense of innocence and hopefulness? While the rest of us remain on ground, withering.

Okay, I had to stop wondering about this guy. I wasn't even able to notice all the other students giving me looks as they walked in. I pulled out my books and reached for my pencil deep in my bag. I finally managed to get a hold of my pencil, but of course that snake, Malakai had to throw a paper airplane in my face! Terrified as hell, I dropped my pencil on the ground as a few of the kids snickered. I eyed the pencil as it rolled ever so slowly along the floor, and of course it had to land at the new guy's foot!

Even as he bent down to pick up the pencil, he did so graciously! Now come on, that's impossible! As he turned around I sat waiting with my clenched fists suffocating my finger nails. His dirty blonde hair shimmering in the sun, tussled as he turned around in his chair and smiled. That magnificent smile I hated so much. He blinked and his eyes grew greener by the second; they were reciprocating the envy I felt towards his gorgeous self and lack of anything weighing him down. He might as well be floating in the classroom with flapping wings, overlooking us all.

“Thanks,” I said as he handed me my pencil that was bitten all along the metal eraser-containing portion.

He smiled and as he turned around he said, “Nice gloves.”

I looked down at my black, faux-leather gloves that seemed to be on since I was a child. Sometimes I forget why I have them on... but then I remember.

I sat down at a lunch table near the window of the cafeteria. It gave me something to look at other than the idiotic animals who tried to socialize as they ate their junk. I looked outside and, I think I smiled. It was strange. The sky was just so clear and the sun shone through the large, tall windows. Birds flew around the red oak trees that were just on the other side of the glass. I could look further than I have ever remembered to look before. It seemed like there was something further beyond this urbanization waiting for me.

I closed my eyes to take in this moment. The floors then started to shake. I looked around me this time and no one was there. They all seemed to have vanished beneath all the rocks that covered the unstable floor. I was standing at the top of this cliff, which seemed to grow higher and higher each second. Branches with sharp thorns started to break through the cliff and shoot up into the sky. They started to chase me as if they had eyes. My heart beat grew as I found it harder and harder to breathe. Where was I?! This was not a usual hallucination. I couldn't outrun the mutant branches. I tripped on a rock and fell to the ground. One of the branches got a hold of my feet and started to drag me down the cliff. I dug my nails into the ground but it did not help. I kicked and screamed till someone woke me.

“Scarlet! Are you okay?”

I blinked twice. I stared at my teacher. I did not want to look around and see my world change again.

“Scarlet! You were twitching and kept muttering some words – something about a resurrection.”

I started to hear the whispering and snickering around me. Talking out during a hallucination, this was a new one. How was I going to show my face after this?

“Yeah I’m okay, I just...”

“Get out of here you freak!” someone yelled as others began to laugh.

I looked around and saw myself in a room full of a different species. It was as if I were a caged monkey in a circus. I don’t belong here. I grabbed my bag and ran.

I ran through the front doors and gasped for air. What just happened? The school won’t leave me alone after that; the students, the staff, the doctors. I just wanted to blend in and hide in the shadows of the others. Why is that so hard? Why is it all, so hard? Before I knew it, my feet started picking up its pace and began to run towards the street. I wasn’t sure where I was headed but I knew I was getting out of here, for good. Then I stopped. He stood there in front of me. He just stood there, smiling softly.

“Get out of my way! I’m warning you!” I said as I tried to keep the tears in.

“Or you will do what?” he asked playfully with a grin.

I did not know what to say, because I probably would not do anything. I probably was not capable of doing anything to get my way. What did he want from me? He was so peculiar! I decided to ask, “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” he asked.

I almost stopped crying completely and began laughing hysterically, but I did not get to that point of hysteria yet. I questioned to myself, what was his game? He just needed to leave, soon. “Please!” I yelled, “I need to leave soon before someone comes looking for me.” I do not know what he was doing. The new guy was obviously more messed up than I was.

He smiled, but it wasn’t the same smile. He smiled as if he was trying to hide his wretchedness. “You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen Scarlet.”

I wasn’t sure why, but I started to cry. This was just one other part of my life that didn’t make sense! Another part of my life where I am stuck and unable to move. Another part of my life where I am powerless and stepped on by a greater being. Each tear that hit the floor made the ground tremble beneath my feet.

I jumped a bit when his hand lifted up my chin and his other hand wiped the tears from my face. He looked in my eyes and said almost in a whisper, “Please stop crying, you

are making the Earth tremble.” He then smiled as my eyes widened with shock and confusion. I opened my mouth to say something but I couldn’t. “Come with me,” he said as he held out his hand to mine. I did not know who he was or where he came from or where he wanted to take me, but I didn’t care.

We started to run. I said goodbye to the school behind me. Everything flew by us in a slow blur.

We stopped at the opening of a nearby forest. He looked at me and told me his name, “Foster, Alexander Foster. You can call me Foster.” I wanted to smile back at him, like the way he did so graciously, but I didn’t know how to, so I just remained expressionless. I have never been so oblivious to my surroundings before. I wasn’t quite sure where I was but the wind blowing through the trees seemed to sing a song, a message of some sort. The wind blew through his golden hair and through his light cotton t-shirt which lay on his body. The wind and the trees, they were trying to tell me something, but I didn’t want to listen. All I could think of was how the name Foster fit him so perfectly. His lips started to move again, slowly. I think I heard him; he said “we need you back home.”

I managed to connect my brain function to my vocal box and say something. “Home... what do you mean home?”

He chuckled a little. “The forest will be glad to have their queen back.”

Was I hearing right? Queen? This Foster is obviously more messed up than I thought. But I liked it. It made me more intrigued. I wanted to know what was going on in his head. Why wasn’t he speaking faster? This whole thing was moving in slow motion.

“Haven’t you noticed those crazy disturbances happening more often Scarlett; the destructive and frightening disturbances, getting more intense?”

How did he know what only I was experiencing? No one else ever experienced it. My parents always told me that there was something very mentally wrong with me, or perhaps that God was punishing me. My mom always thought I was someone who angered God a lot and that is why I am the way I am. But why... how does he, Foster, know what is going on in my head? I didn’t ask him how he knew, because I think, I didn’t want

to know. I just answered, "Yes."

His smile disappeared and his forehead wrinkled as his look of concern and distress rose. "It has begun..." he muttered to himself. I wasn't quite sure but his sad facial expression and apprehension made me feel anger.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He looked at me and smiled bravely. "Not to worry, my queen. I will explain everything if you decide to come with me," he proposed.

"Go where?" I asked. I thought I already went with him!

"Back to the Kingdom where you belong; back to our forest. You must trust me Scarlett! Do you trust me?"

I looked into his big green eyes that shined intensely with hope, compassion and excitement. This all made no sense at all, but also made a great deal of sense at the same time. "Yes I do."

He took my hand and we walked further into the forest. We stopped in this one area surrounded by broken trees; chipmunks and rabbits frolicked around the old trees and dense vegetation which surrounded us. We sat down and he said "I will explain everything once we get to Sandalwood Forest. For now remain seated, as I cast the circle."

I watched him get up almost in one motion. He took out these magical fruit and put them in front of me. They looked absolutely delicious and mouth-watering. I could not help myself, I reached for one, but Foster quickly shouted "No Scarlett! Not yet!" and then he giggled to himself. How embarrassing. I usually am not one to be tempted with food, but these fruit looked so yummy. It had red fleshy skin, which hung from a green stem. Whatever this fruit was, it seemed like it would taste like gum drops and rainbows. I tried to stop looking at them and finally turned away when Foster sat back down. His presence, oddly made me feel more... less scared. I looked around us and there was a circle drawn around us, with what I thought was salt.

"You must take off your gloves Scarlett, eat the *Marcuja* fruit and then hold my hands as we leave Earth and enter the other realm," he said as he began to bite into the plump fruit that seemed to throb and swell with each passing second. As his teeth bit into

the red fleshy skin, I could see the oozing blood orange center seep out of the opening he made and drip down his lips. I longed for the fruit... but then, I looked down at my hands.

“I can’t take off my gloves and hold your hand,” I said, regretfully.

“Do not worry Scarlett, nothing bad will happen. You trust me, don’t you?” he asked warmly.

I breathed in deeply and began to pull off my gloves, one finger at a time. Beads of sweat started to roll from my forehead, down my cheek. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen and my anxiety grew as my gloves slid off. My hands, they were so naked - and ugly. They were so cold and needed to be buried in something quick. I couldn’t stand to look at them any longer. I reached for one of the fruits and took no time to swallow. When my teeth sunk into the fruit, it felt as if I were a vampire, piercing into a human’s skin for the first time. The sweet flesh – the intoxicating gooey center oozed down my mouth. It was incredible. My pupils dilated in delight. Foster smiled at me and wiped some of the sticky fruit off of my face. He must have known how much I enjoyed the fruit. I was almost angry at him for not letting me eat the Marcuja earlier. The sky suddenly felt heavy, with us under it. I felt us sinking into the Earth and rising towards the sun at the same time.

“Hold my hand Scarlett, quickly!” Foster said as he held out his hands to me.

I looked at my naked hands that were shaking and covered in blood-orange syrup. I moved them closer towards his, and felt the energy grow at unimaginable intensities. I could see the energy sparking between our hands and feel the warm heat grow. With nowhere to move, the energy flowed into my hands, into my arms and all along my body as our hands finally met. At first it was painful, but then the energy became soothing as it continued to flow into my body, racing through my veins and awakening my senses. I felt his hands clench mine tighter and I closed my eyes. The pressure became too strong and all I was able to see what flashing lights and long strings of energy flying by us. His strong grip was the last thing I remembered.

I awoke in the branches of a lush, brilliant green tree. My consciousness slowly grew as I still felt a little dizzy. As I wiggled my limbs little by little, I looked out into the sky. It was a magnificent sky blue which seemed to not have a single cloud in sight. The sun was blinding; I have never been so close to it. I sat up and looked beside me to find Foster, but he was not there. I decided to climb down the branches and get down to the floor. As I looked down at my legs, I noticed my clothing had changed. I was wearing some sort of deep-red coloured dress, which fit snugly around my torso and flowed outwards beneath my waist. The sleeves reached down to my wrists and had gold embroidery along the cuffs. There were no gloves on my hands, but it was okay. I stepped down the branches carefully. As I got down closer to the ground, I heard the chirping of exotic birds nearby; birds I have never heard sing before. I could hear the waves of flowing water hitting against rocks somewhere nearby. I was anxious and excited to see the world below me. My sandals hit the rich grass and as I turned around a gush of wind flew through my dress and through my wavy hair, making it dance in excitement.

My jaw dropped and eyes widened as I slowly panned my head across the land which I saw before me. I observed magnificent birds flying over me. There were animals I have never seen before, play amongst each other as they basked in the sunlight. I saw little huts in the far distance across the river that flowed through the dense land. I saw what seemed to be a mother deer and her young, drink water from the flowing river. One of the young deer pushed his brother or sister playfully and they began to chase after each other in the thick grass. I felt the sun bake into my skin and the lingering winds play with my wavy hair. I closed my eyes and smiled, as I basked in this glory. I have transformed.

“Scarlett!” I heard in the distance. I looked to my left and saw Foster walking towards me with something in his hand. His clothing seemed to have changed as well. I wasn’t quite sure what he was wearing but it shimmered in the sun. As he got closer, I saw his emerald-green velvet tunic, with similar gold embroidery as mine, caressing his arms and flowing down his chest towards his thighs. He put one of his hands through his tussled, gold hair as he took a bite out of whatever it was he was eating. “Scarlett! You’re

up! Welcome to Sandalwood Forest! Are you hungry? Here, have a bite out of this salted yum-yum fish," Foster said as he handed me a sizeable, smoked fish, with its head still on.

I stared at the fish that was hanging from Foster's hand. All three of its eyes staring back at me. It was repulsive; yet I licked my lips as I admired its deep golden brown meaty body and thought of the life this mutant fish might have lived. I grabbed the fish by its tail and bit into it, ignoring his eyes.

I felt Foster's hand run down my arm, "I have never seen a more beautiful queen in my day. You have been away for too long" he said.

I looked up at him trying to ignore the fact that there was a large fish between my hands, and in my mouth. Maybe he could try to be sweet and confusing at a better time. I still did not know what was going on. "Why do you keep calling me your queen?" I asked.

"Oh right!" he said, "I have not yet informed you of your history." He took a pause and then started to walk towards the river. "Follow me; let us go for a walk."

I nodded and threw the bones of the fish behind my shoulder.

We walked through this beautiful land as he explained the rich history of Sandalwood Forest. It were as if I was admiring the beauty of this art piece and Foster was the enlightening tour guide, enabling it all to make sense. The people of my village were all brave warriors, which I wanted to meet. We stepped over large stones in order to get across the river. I tried not to fall, but it was hard not to stumble. Luckily Foster was there to hold my arm and keep me from falling flat on my face. His heavy stare and delightful smile made it harder for me to walk. Rainbow-coloured frogs with abnormal speckles jumped in front of us throughout the river. It was quite remarkable actually; it were as if they glided across the river in unity. I looked down at the water and saw the three-eyed yum-yum fish occasionally swim by the buzzing school of smaller, multi-coloured fish. I have never seen water so crystalline clear before. The way the sun reflected on the tiny ripples was almost blinding. As we neared the other side of the river, the vegetation began to grow dense again. The beautiful orchids, hidden between the tall bunches of cattails, seemed to open and sway side to side as we walked by. I saw a yellow-footed tortoise stick its head out of its shell. The tortoise seemed to be looking at

us. The hike became more tiring as we went on; the ground increased steeply. I heard someone faintly say "Scarlett." I looked back and saw no one but the tortoise. Maybe I was losing my mind, or maybe some of the animals here can talk. It's not like that would make this place much weirder than it already was.

Large bamboo trees hovered over us as we walked up-hill. They swayed in the wind above our heads like an inflatable man promoting the grand-opening of a new car dealership. I heard something jump within the trees, allowing the trees to dance even more so. I heard something that sounded like a combination of giggling and hissing. I looked up and was only able to catch glimpses of a furry, yellow tail jump along the branches. I thought I heard someone say "The queen!" That could not be right! I stopped and looked up at the swaying branches. I saw the yellow-tailed woolly monkeys jump from tree to tree at an invisible speed; giggling and shouting "The queen! The queen is here!"

Foster looked back at me and asked "is anything wrong? Why have you stopped? Are you tired?"

"Do you hear them?" I asked

"Hear who?" Foster replied.

I guess I must have been imagining things. It is quite strange for animals to be laughing and speaking to me; even strange for this place. I shrugged and bent down to take off my sandals. "Oh never mind, I just stopped to take off my sandals. It is getting quite hard to walk uphill with these things on."

Foster chuckled. "Ah yes, you must be getting tired as well. Don't worry we are almost at the top."

He jumped up to the peak of the climb and held out his hand to pull me up. I climbed up as far as I could, trying not to be completely useless. I was just about to reach the top of the climb when I lost hold of my grip and slipped. Foster grabbed my hand almost as quick as those jumping monkeys, in efforts to save me from an embarrassing fall. As his fingers pressed onto my skin, I felt a bolt of electricity race through my veins and energy surge through my limbs. Foster lost balance as his hand gripped mine, and we both fell flat on the leveled surface, my chest on his. I let go of his hand and stared into his

shimmering green eyes. We both panted and gasped for air. Sweat beaded down our faces as they moved closer together. Lost in his eyes, I was unaware of how close our faces had become. I looked down at his lips, and bit mine in angst. As my hands clenched his arms, I suddenly came to realize what I, so badly, wanted to do. Every inch of his body was irresistible; but I mustn't! I do not know what will happen to me or him if our delicate lips meet. I may hurt him, which I could never let myself do. Or I may lose control from the enormous surge of power, which could be worse. I backed my head away from his and tried to think of something to say to break the tension. "There goes my sandals," I said. I tried not to punch myself in the face for what I had just said. What a stupid thing to say!

Foster chuckled and pushed me away to his side. "We must find you another pair then my queen."

I laid flat on my back for a few moments, trying to catch my breath and calm my nerves down from the incident. I then got up and followed Foster as he walked through what seemed like an un-enterable bush of cocoa trees tightly packed together. Foster managed to find a way through the bush and guided me through to the other side.

Ignorant to the pain my feet felt, I stood there in wonder peering onto a glorious sight. A brilliant, powerful waterfall flowing white from on top a cliff, into the crystalline blue shallow waters it pierced into. The dark grey cliffs surrounding the waterfall sparkled in the sun which shone through the trees, hovering over the fall. Glistening in the mist of the waterfall, the rocks attracted the growth of moss; out which appeared pink-purple orchids and red-orange bromeliads. Then there were the butterflies; oh so many butterflies floating around the fall. Covered in every colour I could imagine. The birds sang and danced over top of us. I looked over to Foster and saw him pick peculiar-shaped berries from the tree. He brought some over to me and, like everything else here, it looked mouth-watering.

As I put a few berries in my mouth, Foster began to speak again. He began to speak more seriously of my role here in Sandalwood Forest, and my importance; not only to Sandalwood Forest but to the entire Kingdom of Iquitos. I was – am a queen. I simply could not wrap my head around that notion. Protector of the sacred fire... I did not even

know what that meant. What is the sacred fire? What is the sacred fire used for? I was afraid to ask for more information because I thought my head would explode. I sat down and looked down at my red, silk dress that was covered in dirt. I followed the gold embroidery with my eyes and thought about the new-found responsibilities I had. I was not cut out for this. I could not even get through a simple hike up this mountain! How was I supposed to save the Kingdom of Iquitos from some evil King's wrath of destruction? I cannot be trusted with this task – people should not count on me!

“Scarlet,” Foster said quietly as he laid his hand lightly on my shoulder. “Is everything okay? You seem down.”

I looked up at Foster and saw his face ridden with sadness. Such a beautiful face should not frown the way a poor soul does. His beauty should not be degraded because of my ineptness to take on responsibility. I could not let Foster down, but I did not have the ability to save the Kingdom. I sighed and said “oh nothing, I was just thinking about what you said. I am not sure if I can handle this all.”

“Scarlett, you are the queen of Sandalwood Forest. You may not know it now, but within you lies great power; an enormous and beautiful power that will be no match for anyone who dares to stand in your way. And not to mention, I will stand by your side throughout this whole thing. I would never let anything happen to you, my queen.”

I smiled at Foster and forgot for a moment where I was or what I had to do; all I thought about was him, and that made me feel – okay.

“I think it's time to call the griffins out. You're going to love them!”

I continued to smile and then my face stood still. Did he say griffins?

Foster whistled into the sky and his projection of sound roared through the valley. He then glared up into the sky with one hand over his glistened forehead

I raised my head and glared into the sky alongside him. The valley became dark. Two flying creatures circled around the trees which hung over the waterfall and dove down fast towards us. They moved at soaring speeds and appeared larger as they came closer. I became nervous and scared. What was coming for us? Without knowing, I clenched Foster's velvet tunic and laid my head on his chest, burying myself in his

intoxicating and comforting scent. I felt his warm hands rub my back and then wrap around my arms. As my heartbeat dropped with his warmth and calm presence, I felt his heartbeat rise and pound against his chest.

I looked up at him. Everything seemed to slow down at that moment. I felt a huge gust of air push my hair towards him. My dress flew around my body like a swarm of bees angry and confused after someone had just destroyed their hive. Foster looked at me and blinked once, just once. His mouth moved slowly and eventually formed the words, "Say hi to Tornado and Inti."

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