

The autumn wind blows with the promise of rain over the deserted road. Adrien stands over trampled dirt of the flat road in his impeccable beige suit, an exquisite transplant in an otherwise drab garden. His essence and mine meet in the middle where they touch but do not mix, setting a frontier that we both respect, for now. I am still not used to this new sensation of existing outside of my body.

Urchin and John take a few steps back. In a contest of lords, all other combatants are merely different magnitudes of flies.

"You will have to offer an extremely convincing argument Adrien, because my current options are to kill you, or report you to the Accords and watch Ignace torture then kill you."

The Roland lord sighs minutely. I have him.

"May we talk somewhere? I would not want to be interrupted."

"Are you surrendering yourself to me?"

"I cannot."

He means it. His words carry a weight of conviction that I can taste on his essence, but only because he allows it. For a moment, I entertain the thought of going back to a clearing we passed by on the way, but I quickly crush those parasitic remains of a time when I was much weaker. He will not get a single concession from me. The balance of power is firmly in my favor.

"Then this place will serve."

Adrien leans slightly forward in a predatory gesture that speaks of a deluge of claws. I let him. Metis turns her head to consider him in that peculiar judgemental manner she has. I am stronger than him even without the armor. His shadows mean nothing because the thorns will find him no matter where, in whatever form he has chosen, and they will rip him to shreds.

"Try your luck, or do not, but stop wasting my time," I tell him.

Adrien hisses softly. It speaks of defeat.

"We never intended to face you. Our arrangement throughout the civil war has been very fruitful and we know you to honor your bargains. We were trapped by Benoit, Warden of Virginia."

I remember him. He commands the opposition to Sephare's faction. An ambitious man with the demeanor of a brilliant scholar.

"Benoit summoned Adam to his estate for the sake of coordinating the reconstruction effort, or so he claimed. He called him a traitor to the cause instead and had him imprisoned. I am

to obey Benoit's directives or my brother dies. I do not need to tell you what happens if they find out that we are cooperating."

This makes little sense, and yet Adrien is open and his truthfulness is beyond doubt.

"A territory will never be worth alienating two powerful lords when its custody depends on a larger system. There is more than what you are telling me."

"Perhaps, but I was only able to discover little. Adam was tortured by someone talented. His clothes were returned by Lord Loic, the new Warden of Tennessee, who immediately took over our spy network. Loic is Benoit's creature and a man of the shadows. My eyes and ears were stolen from me before I could even deploy them. I only managed to gather snippets from illegal outings. Loic... has taken over my place of residence."

He grits his teeth and his gaze focuses on me. The beast is close to the surface. It must take a colossal effort for him to retain his will.

"They have moved a significant amount of monetary resources to the attack but the amount of schemers involved remains small because Loic has to make excuses to his own side for lack of commitment to ongoing projects. Those are the actions of a secret cabal. The problem is that without prior knowledge of my brother's current location, any attempt on my part to take revenge could end his life. I will not accept that. Never."

Metis moves slightly, sensing my agitation. I rein in my imagination. It will be of no use right now.

"Benoit's motives matter less than discovering the means of stopping him and his group. Unfortunately, a direct approach will not serve us here. Even if we capture Loic, which would be complex, his absence will be remarked long before we can extract the truth from him. Roland lords are notoriously difficult to break."

Adrien's expression darkens further at the reminder of what his brother has gone through, but I can sense the determination under that. I have lit the flames of hope in his heart, which means that he is ripe for the taking.

"We need to involve Sephare. I do not have the spy network to find out what Benoit is up to."

I lift a hand to stop his protests.

"I will use a mirror spell and require her to be cautious. I know that you have little reason to trust her but I assure you that she will take every precaution to safeguard Adam's life if I am the one to request it. In the meanwhile, the masquerade must be kept. I will return your agents and we will coordinate to pretend that you are still attacking me."

It is too much, and Adrien realizes the trap too late. The beginning of a smile freezes on his lips.

"Of course, I have conditions."

"Name them," he hisses.

"You will be part of my faction now and for the next century. Whatever I vote for, you vote for. Whatever I fund, you fund, within reason. My battles are your battles. You will be, for all intents and purposes, my subordinates."

"For a hundred years? Are you mad?"

I do not reply. Instead, I step down from Metis and come to face him. Rose materializes in my hand.

"There were choices to be made, Adrien. The ones you picked hurt my friends and my interests. You did it because I was away and you thought us weak. You were wrong. I have absolutely no reason to spare you."

"I spared your second and your Courtiers."

"That is good or we would not be having this conversation. You must understand this. We Devourers are jealous masters. My mortals are mine to the last wagon driver. My mages belong to me to the youngest apprentice. My wolves run for me when I call them. Their lives were not yours to reap, and now you will bend and commit to my banner for a century or you will die. Choose."

I care not. He already revealed enough. I can place a name and a face on my mysterious foe and Adrien's help is no longer needed.

"Be careful, Ariane. Your ascension was swift and those in your position often make enemies they might regret later."

"While you are regretting yours now. Enough talks"

"I accept. I will have to take solace in Benoit's fall and, hopefully, his ignominious end. Do not push your luck too far, Ariane."

"For the offender in this affair, you certainly show me hatred. Save it for your true tormentor."

"Oh, young one. My heart has room for all the hatred in the world."

I scoff. This man is not Malakim. He does not know true hatred.

"We need to return to Chicago for now. There is much to plan."

One of Melusine's Courtiers leads me into her mirror room. His name might be Donald or Duncan or something similar. To be perfectly honest, I had forgotten that Melusine had followers. She recruited them young and they are still undergoing training, therefore they were useless and hidden during the conflict. Typical of the redhead. I close the door behind me and sit in front of the communication spell's focus. It does not show my reflection, of course.

Without touching it, I fill it with power and reach for the blonde vampire's location. A pulse crosses the space between us and the mirror's surface shimmers and undulates like wind blowing on the surface of a pond. It takes some time for the pulse to find an echo, which does not surprise me. Few individuals can claim to have Sephare's ear at their convenience.

The ripples merge and gain color, resolving into the petite and seemingly demure Hastings lady. She wears an intricate teal dress that leaves her shoulders bare.

"Ariane?"

"We may have a problem."

I quickly expose the recent developments and my findings, summarizing the liberation of Illinois in three sentences while expanding on Adrien's revelations and my own conclusions.

"Goodness me, yes, this is preoccupying."

"It just feels so short-sighted to me. With this action, Benoit endangers his reputation and the very existence of his faction, and for what? There is more territory to snatch than there are powerful vampires right now."

"Yes, although, not every territory is currently worth the effort it would take to grab it. Imagine trying to establish a coven of cultural and sophisticated immortals in Arkansas? In any case, please get Adrien here so that we may learn where to start."

I call upon the Roland and maintain the spell while Sephare questions him with meticulous attention. She asks him how many mercenaries and agents he has employed, how much they are being paid and how much the supplies would cost. Adrien was recently cut off from his possessions, but he was the one to handle the shadier aspect of the twins' business and his knowledge of his own logistics does him credit.

"Ariane was correct. This operation is completely unsustainable. Loic must be receiving funding from outside and I suspect that the entire operation might be used to distract us from some central scheme."

"Could it be related to Mask?" I ask.

I did not follow up on internal Accords politics while I was with the Knights. I did, however, get acquainted with European power dynamics. The expansion faction has successfully

united their wayward covens across Europe's colonies. Only we remain, and only because we have both a unified government and the military power to back it up.

"I have kept an eye on Martha. There has been no buildup of forces recently. In any case, I do not wish to waste time on conjectures. I will see how our Virginian friend employs his money. It should give us a hint. In the meanwhile, please prepare a plan to neutralize Loic in a way that we have enough time to turn him, or Adam will be in danger. We need him pliable so that we can move more freely. Ariane? Any idea?"

"I have one that could work. I will require some assistance and it also depends on a specific condition."

I turn to my neighbor.

"Adrien, how much would Loic want to capture me alive?"

There are times where immediate and overwhelming violence is not an answer, or so I have been told. I argue that there are two types of diplomacy. The first exists between people searching for common ground. In this case, diplomacy allows both sides to benefit as part of a positive sum game where each participant has a chance to increase their own well-being. The second exists when one side's purpose is completely unacceptable to the other. For example, the newly formed Integrity party considers the existence of supernatural creatures as unacceptable while we would very much prefer to stay alive. In those instances, diplomacy is merely the continuation of overwhelming force by other means.

The White Cabal advocates moral superiority and taking the high road. I wish them good luck in their endeavor as I pull the trigger.

The rifle roars between my hands, propelling a little cone of lead at amazing speed through representative-hopeful Holst as he exits a house of ill repute. The projectile bores through his chest and splatters his lung on the wall of this fine establishment. An employee screams. Her dress is ruined.

Tragic.

I pick up the rifle and drop out of sight. For all their talks of faith, most integrists look down on those who lend the other cheek. They are filled with the burning passion of righteous outrage. If they win, it is not that the other side respected the law. It simply means that God is on their side. Thus, my intervention shall act as a reminder that they are not invincible and that their champion was not as pure as he claimed, depriving them of a martyr. Every little bit helps.

I jump across roofs back to the office Sephare lent me while I reside in her city. We have much to arrange and Marquette is quite safe right now. I let myself in through the window and remove the black cloak I wore for the occasion. Under, I wear one of the normal blue dresses I use for business. The design is simple and includes a heart protector. The fabric shows enough care to indicate wealth while keeping a conservative appearance to lure others into a false sense of normalcy. It will suffice. I sit down in front of an empty table in my office to clean and disassemble the rifle I used. The mundane task soothes me.

The world has moved on while I was away, it is a fact of life that I had not anticipated and that I now apprehend. I had previously lived through many changes in government, of course, but this is different. The mundane humans know of magic. Some countries already outlawed it completely. My eyes travel to the newspaper placed on my desk.

“Louisa Pasteur executed this morning by firing squad.”

She is the first person to be officially slain for the crime of sorcery in a long time. Louisa was an untrained witch with a small quirk. Her power went out of control during an argument with her husband, causing his accidental death. It could have been manslaughter were it not for the means used to push the poor man against that fateful chimney frame at the worst possible angle. Unfortunately, using magic to harm people is now punishable by death, no matter the circumstances, and no matter the result. The accidental nature of the death only gave the integrist the ammunition they needed to show how dangerous magic could be. Never had a man's broken neck caused such a pain in my own backside.

I know where this is going.

I am not surprised when a knock on my door comes an hour later. One of Sephare's men announces the coming of a visitor. He wears a tuxedo with white gloves and a cane like the rest of them, a uniform that Sephare picked for them. Some of the goons look like circus bears in this outfit, which I find amusing.

“Come in.”

A man in a navy suit enters the room. He grasps a bowler hat between nervous hands. I smell fresh sweat and terror in the air, fear in his shifting blue eyes. Those who know of me without knowing me always react in the same manner.

“Is it wise?” he finally asks.

I maintain eye contact while I keep cleaning the gun, which is an old model I know well. It only unnerves him more.

“Mr. Holst was killed on the doors of a famous brothel. Sadly, a note will be found in his breast pocket concerning a debt he contracted three years ago and remains upstanding. A regrettable affair, but one should not give lessons when they are sinners themselves. Let him cast the stone, and so on.”

“Was he that dissolute?”

“He did receive some money from a relative three years ago to purchase a property here. It is such a shame that this relative died and the source of this gift shall remain dubious.”

“That is quite a low blow.”

“No, sir, I shot him in the heart.”

“That is not... I meant...”

“I know what you meant. Newspapers will smear his name by dawn and now the integrist have lost quite a charismatic leader. You think that I am being too harsh?”

“We are not murderers!”

I glare and he has enough backbone to take a deep breath and to stand his ground.

“You are not, and this is to your credit, I suppose. Now I assume that you have your license?”

“Hmm, yes?”

“May I see it?”

He hesitates then removes a mundane piece of paper from his breast pocket. It shows his name and description in clinical details. The term ‘wizard’ appears in bright red letters below the stamp of the ministry of supernatural affairs, its seal showing a reverse blade hanging over the name like a sword of Damocles. A fitting image.

“If a sovereign puts your name on a list, you are either a nuisance or about to be taxed. You cling to notions of respectability and I commend you for it, but you are also a rich little man living in a mansion in Washington. You are a useful activist whose role during the civil war clads him in an aura of respectability living in a lawful and policed city. Others will not share your good fortune. So wash your hands and your conscience of my deeds, if you must. Veil your eyes with the belief that your exemplary behavior will move the masses to new heights of morality, since you believe in mankind’s goodness. I know the truth and I will resort to the same tools as our foes, because this is the only thing they will understand and respect.”

“An eye for an eye will leave all of us all blind, vampire.”

“Only those removed from disaster can allow themselves this sort of sophistry, but since you served me an expression, sir, allow me to reciprocate. Vae Victis.”

“We are not at war.”

I stand up and pick the newspapers, which I throw at his feet.

“And yet blood has been shed by both sides.”

We remain silent for a minute or so, during which I finish cleaning and placing the gun back in its case.

“The Lady Sephare warned me that you had a more... hands-on approach to problem-solving. I just hope that it does not cost us too much good will. I will condemn this action and express my condolences at daybreak. I hope that your logic does not throw us in the precipice of war we are trying so hard to avoid.”

“Best of luck to you.”

He leaves and I return to the desk to check my correspondence for that night. The main point of interest is a letter in a cream envelope addressed to me in person. I am cordially invited to join the extraordinary conclave of the White Cabal in response to the creation of the first supernatural task force.

This is not the sort of event that I can afford to miss. I write a formal reply and ring a small bell. A moment later, the doorman answers my summons.

“Please have this letter sent, then bring me the memo on the supernatural task force, thank you.”

“Understood ma’am.”

I have my document a minute later, brought by a mousy intelligence expert. Let us see. The government is hiring mages to deal with mages under the supervision of selected officials. Hmm, I wonder if they can be at all infiltrated. The book of disinformation Sinead wrote has already become a bestseller, but the higher level of the government must have access to more precise briefings, including on how to protect themselves against us. We shall see how Constantine and Sephare want to play it out. My focus must remain on the supernatural alliance. This is more my area of expertise. One cannot be good at everything. Like singing. Curse singing.

I sigh and prepare to pack.

Two days later, near Avalon.

When the White Cabal first made their lair in the wilderness west of New York, they may not have anticipated their drastic growth. As one of the only two organizations to enjoy an alliance with me and a relative truce with the rest of us, the Cabal has found itself a durable species lacking natural predators, with the expected result. They have been fruitful and multiplied to cover all of the earth, or at least all of it between New Brunswick and Princeton.

What started as a refuge has now grown into a tentacular network of connected towns kept safe by a comprehensive system of wards, patrols, and good old-fashioned distrust of strangers. My carriage would have been interrupted a dozen times were it not for uniformed guards riding along.

I cannot blame them for their caution.

Hamlets succeed to forests, small subsistence farms, and active factories. The Cabal is almost entirely self-sufficient and they export high-quality consumer goods to afford what they cannot create themselves. Shoemakers and textile mills stand next to small foundries. The strategy is a bit backwards, although affluence has never been their primary purpose. Safety is. They do not enjoy the sort of anonymity our small numbers afford us. I am still musing when we drive into a ravine dotted with tall sycamores and the head horses neigh in distress. The convoy stops. The head soldier draws a pistol and scrutates whatever his lantern reveals.

“Who goes there?” he demands with the courage of those who defend their home. I sigh and open the door. Their attention turns to me.

By the time they follow my gaze, Adrien stands squarely in the middle of the path in a long beige duster. He wears a fox mask, which I will admit is quite a nice touch. The head guard is less impressed.

“By God. Is this...”

“You may want to back down, my good man. This is not an opponent you can face,” I tell him.

Leaves crunch under their footsteps as they dismount and fall back. The scent of fresh sap and rotting vegetation caresses my nose with a small burst of wind. A hint of vampire spice comes with it. The scent reminds me of Torran.

Adrien’s aura spreads and touches my own. Although he does not move, a sort of pull attracts my attention to a massive boulder on my left. I appreciate the delicate attention but there was no need.

All my instincts scream and I use a lazy mirage spell to create a decoy and take a step back. A spear shrieks through the air where my heart used to be. It clangs noisily against a nearby rock in a deluge of shards.

“If this is what passes as aura control around here, I cannot blame the Europeans for looking down on us,” I casually say.

My attacker stands from behind his hiding place like an opera highwayman. He wears proper mail armor, which I can respect. The enchantments show that he cares for it, while a few scars on its black surface show use. A black mask hides his features, though I recognize Loic from the aura alone.

"You are quite chatty for a trapped little minx. I bet that you are regretting your early return, right now. Do not be alarmed. We will not kill you. We merely need your presence for a project of ours. You can be our guest!"

"If this is a masquerade, you merely had to send an invitation to the Boston fortress, Lord Loic."

My remark stops him in his tracks, but only for a moment.

"Ah, you must recognize our auras from the council. It appears that your reputation as an airhead was slightly exaggerated."

"Only imbeciles base their strategies on hearsay, Loic. I could recognize every member of the council and their seconds. And for a kidnapping attempt, you should have taken a better spot."

"I think you may be overestimating the White Cabal, my dear. But I am not one to monologue for too long and we do have to kill your escort as well, so you will forgive me if we cut this conversation short."

I block a quickly manifested black spear and dodge under Adrien's blade. I quickly cast mirage, and I dodge against a roaring sweeping attack. I fight my way out of the ravine by using trees as obstacles and rocks as platforms. Loic fights with casual grace while Adrien supports him with limited commitment. Loic is annoyed. I see it in the impatience of his follow-up strikes, though he will never admit to it. Our contest of strength continues and leaves behind shorn trunks and upturned stumps. I manage to rake his flank but Adrien deflects the blade with an attack of his own. I stop at the edge of a small pond.

"Well, young one, where is the proof that you are one of ours."

"I will not need it. Darkness."

The shadows spread over the land as Loic laughs and laughs, amazed at my stupidity. Adrien is in his element now.

"Magna Arqa," the twin whispers.

The Roland lord disappears in the spell just as Loic's hilarity redoubles. Then he chokes. And screams.

"How dare you, you traitor?! Magna Arqa!"

I do not let the spell drop. Loic's spear gains an ethereal quality and so does he. My first attack passes him by as he jerks away at the last moment. He tries to run out of the cloud.

"Traitor?" Adrien says, *"You call me traitor after what you have done? You have no shame!"*

I force another moment of ethereal shift with a lunge at his leg and cast immediately.

"Promethean."

The chain spell, Constantine's specialty, latches on the man's arm despite his shift. Loic strikes down and manages to pin one of the seven links I manifested to the ground, breaking it. Adrien's next attack digs a furrow along his flank through the armor. Loic drags me closer through the magical construct. He is stronger than me.

"This will not hold me," he spits.

"It was not meant to," I retort.

"Promethean," a deep voice roars.

More than thirty golden chains are vomited by a fantomatic silhouette at my back. They curve around my right and gather around an already immobilized Loic, pinning him down under an extraordinary weight. The surprise is too much for Loic, who gasps. I can also say from experience that the exercise can be painful when the caster wants it, and this one definitely does.

I let the darkness spell fade to reveal Constantine's dark eyes glaring from above his hooked nose, the Speaker majestic for once in a red battle robe brimming with enchantments.

Loic's surprise is complete. It immediately turns into outrage.

"You..."

Before he can throw a single slur, Constantine raises a hand, causing a few golden links to tighten around the captive lord and stealing his breath.

"Let me summarize the situation for you. Benoit unlawfully captured Lord Adam of the Roland without provocation and tortured the keys to his information network out of him, following which you were sent to their land to exhaust his means in another unlawful attack against a member of the Accords in good standing. Would you care to rephrase the term 'traitor'?"

The chains relax slightly and Loic vociferates as if he was not trussed like a deer.

"You are all playing this stupid game where you think you are a real faction. You only survived Mask's previous attempt as a fluke. We will not fall with you."

"Ah, the self-realizing prophecies of people torpedoing their own ship because they believe it will sink. No matter, I gather from your lack of denial that you find my accusations accurate. We will need the location of Lord Adam from you. Now."

Loic opens his mouth to curse but seems to reconsider. A slow smile spreads across his keen features. Constantine remains unfazed.

“So you know where he is. Sephare was right, it seems. Silence can be so incredibly loud. Let us see how long you can keep that smile on. Ignace?”

A man I wish I never saw again emerges from behind us. He is wan and gaunt with an angular face and pale eyes the color of watery hydrangea. He also tortured me until my mind broke. Even decades later, I have to resist the urge to pull on my fingers. The effect on Loic is much more dire.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Adrien takes a deep breath and we turn to him, surprised at the flare in his aura.

“Before we begin, if you will permit me?”

We remain silent. I highly suspect that Constantine has no idea what the offended Roland is talking about, that is, until the man jumps on Loic and pummels his face with great enthusiasm. I watch the spectacle, mesmerized, and wonder if we will have to wait for the head to regrow, but it appears that our ally removed his gloves before the cathartic event.

“Give. Me. Back. My. Brother.”

This goes on for half a minute, then Adrien stands up.

“He is all yours.”

“Thank you kindly,” Constantine replies, acerbic.

The blood archmage moves his gauntlet and the captured lord is dragged back to Ignace, who takes down his backpack to reveal its grisly content. A memory comes to my mind, unbidden.

‘Which fingers?’

‘One, four, eight.. No! Nine!’

I stop a shiver before it begins. Ignace’s eyes are on me.

“Many hold a grudge for what I have done to them, what I represent.”

I bare my teeth.

“You went above and beyond. I will not forget.”

“No,” he nods, *“you haven’t. That is why you called upon me to advance your plan.”*

The other two are studiously ignoring our exchange, busy as they are attaching Loic to a nearby horizontal stone. It appears that Ignace is confident that he will only need a few hours. Or is this merely the preliminary work?

I have not replied and so Ignace continues.

“We live very long lives, long enough for deadly rivals to become friends and vice-versa. Now that you are in power, I have merely turned into one more tool in your arsenal.”

“Be careful.”

“Of course, milady. Wardens may come and go but a good torturer is so hard to find. I shall serve your cause well. Now, if you allow me access to the patient...”