

"I have decided on a course of action!" Alexander clamors back in my office in Marquette. "Your trials have shown me the truth. The west is wild and untamed, filled with dangers and savages. Outlaws terrorize the widows and orphans!"

"Errr, it might not be all that bad," I observe with diminishing patience. Time is short.

"But where good men do what must be done, evil cannot triumph. The law and justice have no frontiers, and I shall be its sword. Starting today, I will endeavor to become... a bounty hunter!"

He unholsters his new revolver to my mounting horror, feverish with enthusiasm. The gun slips from his tired hands to clatter on the ground by my feet. I almost expected to have a new hole in my favorite pair of walking boots. Thankfully, fate is generous tonight.

"You will complete the Red Cabal agent training in its entirety to the full satisfaction of your mentors, or I swear to the *Watcher* that I will bind you in chains and ship your sorry posterior back to Sussex on the first ship I can find."

"That would probably be best. I understand that no amount of enthusiasm can make up for training and preparation. Justice shall not suffer a dull blade! I will not forgive myself if I fail because of carelessness. You will find me a devoted student."

"You will find Oliver a devoted mentor, not me. I have urgent matters to attend to, and besides, I cannot oversee your day training with my delicate skin."

"Oh yes, the curse. Not to worry! You can depart with your mind at ease."

As if I could ever do so within walking distance of a Bingle. I leave him to the training chapter of his life since I have much to do on my end. A ringed bell summons John and Urchin.

"I need you to prepare for a long trip. We are going west. You must expect a fight against vampires, so take the battle armor and all the weapons you think you might need."

They nod and leave without comment. The next task is both easy and painfully annoying. I must report this development to Sephare and request our faction's support in this endeavor. I may be trying to swallow more than I can chew. It would not do to pursue Benoit only to find him surrounded by a retinue of battle-hardened Mask lords. I highly suspect that the little weasel is operating on his own so he can claim full credit for the capture or conversion of the newest Progenitor. I simply cannot take the risk, and so I call Sephare on my mirror and relay the encounter to her. Her reaction is unusually strong.

"Oh goodness me this is... momentous! A Progenitor, here! I am at a loss for words."

"I was surprised as well."

"You know, sometimes I wish that you called me for other reasons than just war and other impending catastrophes."

I raise a dubious brow.

"You wish to socialize?"

"Why yes, we Hastings tend to do that. You should try it sometimes."

"We should perhaps focus on the matter at hand."

"Indeed. Could Benoit already have captured this man... Ako, was it?"

"Correct and no. I absorbed the rogue's essence. His bloodline's ability is to establish a sympathetic link with his kin. They are one 'family', so to speak. I do not know exactly how much they can share and I suspect that it might expand in time, but for now I can tell you that they can locate each other and share their experience... whether they want it or not. Ako sired a lot of fledgelings in a short amount of time."

"Foolish."

"I concur. Some proved incapable of enduring the overload. Nevertheless, I got enough memories and impressions to point west, a week's ride away from here. I will depart immediately but I will need your support, diplomatic and otherwise."

"We will send reinforcements but our logistics do not extend to the frontier. It will take time."

"I will go first and stall as much as I can."

"Excellent. You surprise me, Ariane. I almost expected you to keep this discovery to yourself."

Ah, as if.

"This is far more trouble than it is worth."

"Of course, I did not expect you to betray the faction. I merely thought that you would wait until you knew more."

"Your calculations do not fill me with confidence," I reproach.

I naturally expect her to consider her own interest first, but being so vocal about her own duplicity bothers me. It feels out of character.

"Goodness me, Ariane, I would not want you to feel ill at ease. I promise that I would take great considerations before betraying you out of fear that you might survive the attempt. Which leads me to my next point. When you find Benoit, you might feel a deep resentment towards him after what he has done to you and your own."

"To put it mildly."

“No matter what you choose to do, remember that Benoit is already set to be executed, and that we will support you should you choose to carry out the sentence yourself.”

I glance with suspicion at the petite vampire’s wavering silhouette, vaporous in the silver mirror I use as a focus.

“You always value prisoners.”

“Benoit is a snake. An incompetent and overconfident one, that is. He has been dealing with Marthe and her Mask enclave down in Mexico for quite some time according to some interesting correspondence we found. We can discuss this more later. Right now, flaunting your existence is much more valuable. So please, by all means...”

She smiles.

“Go wild.”

“Oh, I will.”

Our convoy rides west under heavy escort. We are walking into unknown territory, and I have hired a Rosenthal escort at great expense in order to proceed smoothly. The reasoning is simple. I do not know how deep Benoit’s influence has spread, but I have no doubt that he has recruited agents to monitor Accords movement since he has been away for quite some time. I must make sure not to be noticed until the very last moment or he could trap and even kill me. Unfortunately, not everyone is capable of stealth.

Red cabal members form hunting squads and my own security forces have neglected acting and impersonation classes in favor of shooting and shoving sharp implements into other people’s fleshier bits. As a result, I lack the qualified personnel capable of passing as settlers and had to hire external help. I do not mind it since my new guards rode tirelessly to reach us and found a mature woman in conservative clothes waiting for them. As far as they know, they are escorting a widow searching for a niece captured by the Comanches. It is, incidentally, the first time that I use my Vanheim transformation power to alter my appearance. Except those times with Torran but they do not count. I find the exercise interesting and vaguely upsetting, especially when I have to maintain my disguise for a very long time.

At least I can go out freely, unlike my unfortunate subordinates.

Obviously my travel arrangements have told those in the know of my nature, and their suspicion must be confirmed when, on the fourth night, we are intercepted by a cavalry detachment.

I have never been to the Great Plains before despite their proximity and I admit that the place has its charms. A seemingly endless expanse of colored grass extends to the horizon under a layer of blue clouds laden with rain. I am struck by an impression of immensity. A gust of wind scours the sea of grass. The air is heavy with the promise of thunder. I inhale and enjoy the heavy scent of horses and woodsmoke.

“Milady?” the mercenary sergeant asks. He is a serious lad wearing a long beard and a perpetual scowl.

“Yes?”

“We have been joined by a detachment of the Seventh Cavalry. They claim that the Comanches and Kiowa have been on the warpath recently, and object to our passing. They wish to escort us back to a nearby fort.”

I inspect the camp and notice military tents in proper order. Discipline is maintained, and yet I notice that much of the gear is threadbare.

“I do not know why they would impose upon us like that, milady. This is highly unusual.”

“They wish to requisition our supplies, Sergeant. The Seventh belongs to the Army’s Department of the Missouri and they are notoriously low on everything. Allow me to talk to their commander. I am sure that I can convince him to see the light.”

The sergeant inspects me. His gaze lingers on my lips, perhaps trying to discern the fangs underneath. This one knows what he is dealing with.

“If it is you, then yes.”

I walk to the command tent where a young officer with a drooping moustache and long dark hair stands, smoking a pipe. He readjusts his crumpled hat when he sees me. I perceive no anomaly in his aura, which means that he is not under the thrall of any of my kin.

As usual, I do not use Charm. Instead, I invade his personal space and force him to take a step back when he realizes that he is a head shorter than me.

“Well well well young sir, what do I hear? You want to divert our expedition? Well, that will not do, that will not do at all.”

“Ma’am, for matter of national sec — “

“You do not have the authority to stop us. You do not have that right unless you suspect criminal activity. Do you suspect me of being a criminal, my boy?”

“Well, no...”

“So here is what will happen. We will leave you three crates of fresh vegetables and seasoned jerky, not as a gift you understand, against a formal letter from you that you acknowledge the reception of said supplies. I will even throw...”

I lean forward conspiratorially.

“A small bag of arabica beans, prime quality. Then, tomorrow morning, my men and I will ride out into the unknown with your blessing. If you attempt to stop us we will not comply and you will have to arrest all of us and imprison us in your fort.”

“I am certain that — “

“If this happens I assure you that you will be dishonorably discharged within a fortnight and that you will never again hold a commission in any of the armed forces of the continent. I hope I am making myself clear, dearie.”

“Well, this is most irregular! Madam, with all due respect to you as a member of the fairer sex...”

“Shhhhhh,” I interrupt, placing my finger over his lips to his flustered, blushing confusion.

“Sh sh sh. Hush,” I tell him with a genial smile, “nothing good ever came after those words. Hush now, there’s a good lad. Think of the coffee, sit your pretty bottom on the nearest chair and just... let go. Hush now. There, there.”

I pat him on the shoulder and leave.

“Remember what I said dearie, and have a pleasant night. Ta ta!”

The convoy departs the next morning without incident. On a related note, I need more coffee.

The grim sergeant’s retelling of our encounter amuses the soldiers for another two days as we cross the empty plains. Unfortunately, their mood plummets when we reach the destination I saw in the rogue’s memory. The mercenary sergeant enters my safe carriage a little past midday carrying dire news.

“Milady, we have reconnoitered the area and found the remains of a village. It was treated... cruelly.”

I ask him a few more questions but decide to wait until night to see the battlefield with my own eyes.

“Stay put, sergeant. We will inspect the camp ourselves.”

“By yourselves you mean you and your... hidden associates?” the man asks.

I smile and let him see a hint of fang.

“That is correct. You have fulfilled your part of the mission.”

“Will you require blood, perhaps?” he asks. I feel no fear in his heart.

“No, thank you. We found a raiding party yesterday.”

“I see. Well then, take care.”

Any doubt about our nature is dispersed when we exit the carriage in heavy armor. The sergeant frowns at my hair, suddenly more blonde than before, but my face is thankfully hidden behind a mask and so my ability should remain hidden this time. A Rosenthal mercenary will not betray the trust of their employer anyway, therefore I have no need to eliminate the potential witnesses.

We leave at a fast pace. The plain is so vast and empty today that one only has to open their eyes to see the remains of a sprawling village on the edge of a small lake. All of the remaining tents have been destroyed but the most striking feature of the carnage is the field of pony corpses littering an entire side of the abandoned locale. As we approach, more elements become clear.

The village was attacked by a group wielding firearms as the rotting bodies of warriors we come upon attest. This close, the stench of decay is so thick and cloying that it eclipses everything else. Swarms of flies and the caws of buzzards hide the music of the night and I find myself shocked not at the dead Comanches we are seeing, but at the methodical fashion in which everything was mowed down. Even the potteries and sacks were not spared the brutal punishment. Despite the dreadful attack, it appears that a significant portion of the population managed to escape as we find plenty of horse and human tracks leading north. The most recent ones show several thick carriage wheels, which means that the assailants were probably white people. The three of us circle the camp again.

“This band was successful until someone fell on them like a brick wall, Mistress, beg your pardon. Look at those bags. Military supplies bags, those are. They probably raided a fort.”

“Or took down a patrol, we would have heard about a fort. I agree with your assessment.”

I point at a pile of goods. I see a makeup kit, needles, and velvety fabric next to a mirror that now lies broken. Other civilized goods pop out here and there. Some of the discarded clothes and furniture are quite valuable which tells me that the pursuers did not come for plunder. It could be revenge, or it could be that Benoit finally found his quarry.

“Do you think the new vampires raided settlements?”

“Possible. If this is what happened, it might explain how Benoit found Ako. He merely had to follow reports of devastating night raids.”

“How did he even figure out that there was a Progenitor?” Urchin asks.

I shrug. We can figure it out later.

“Before we leave, I want to check one last thing.”

We circle the camp, seeing that some of the dead horses also carry saddles and horseshoes of American make. I soon find what I was expecting. A trail of warrior's bodies ends at a line of heavy tracks still flattening parts of the tall grasses. I find rectangular, discarded casings on the ground.

“They have gatling guns.”

“Does it matter to us?”

“No, but our escort must be warned.”

“I shall do so, Mistress. You and John can go ahead.”

Our pursuit takes the better part of the night. We start finding graves at the edge of abandoned camps as well as more dead Comanches and their horses. Those are warriors, not civilians like before and I suspect a running battle took place. Shallow graves with crosses on top confirms that the pursuers are from my side of the frontier. I know with certitude that the pursuer is a vampire and most likely Benoit. A party of this size could not have repulsed a Progenitor at night, even one weakened by youth and fledgelings. Our only saving grace is that the battle was long and time-consuming. It is slightly past midnight when I see the first fires on the horizon. They dot the plains, forming two light islets on that everlasting green sea of undulating grass. The first is small and disciplined. The second is wider, larger, but also dimmer. It does not take a strategist to guess that the pursuers are winning. The Comanches left their first encampments in a hurry. They must be starving by now.

I hide my aura while Urchin and John suppress theirs with some effort. I use the darkness spell to cover our entrance even more. Fortunately, our approach remains undetected until we are quite close and I see why.

Those are Benoit's men. The Roland lord himself stands at the front of an encampment, inside a ring of torches with three masters by his side. Four courtiers stand guard at regular intervals, including one who faces us but whose empty gaze reveals a deep mental fatigue. For now, Benoit seems focused on the scene ahead and has not detected us.

"What should we do, Miss Ari?" John whispers.

I could try to negotiate with Ako, though the loot in his camp shows how much he values my race. Young vampires tend to keep attachments to their blood and groups. It takes some time before the attachment fades. He would have no reason to believe that Benoit and I are not on the same side.

Yes, it would be tricky.

That is why I shall not do so. Benoit has kept the Progenitor and his remaining fledgelings, if there are any, at bay, and I can taste his essence. I can taste all of their essences. The path to follow is as obvious as it is seductive.

"You will wait here and engage the courtiers when battle is joined."

"Understood."

I keep moving, alone this time, and stop at the edge of the circle. The sentry finally senses that something is wrong and frowns lightly. The poor prey gives me a delectable expression of unmitigated horror when I drop the spell and appear only four paces in front of him, in full regalia. I believe I shall cherish this memory for years to come and, to express my gratitude, I salute him with a nod as I pass him by. Cries of dismay greet me on my slow walk throughout the camp, not the least because of the absolutely glacial aura that sends the mortals reeling. I see the gatling guns protected and arrayed to my right. A group of mages in a protective circle stand to my left, whispering with confusion. Benoit feels me and turns immediately. His surprise is replaced by fear and then by arrogance when he recognizes me.

I stop in front of the lord at the end of my casual stroll. He does look respectable in full plate, his handsome face hidden behind a helm. A bloodied greatsword hangs behind his back, a sign that battle has already been joined tonight. His aura covers and protects the three masters by his side. I see a woman in a wizard's embroidered robe covered in runes, a warrior with a massive flail, and a last man in darker armor wielding a rapier and dagger. They take a step back. The courtiers group around the gatling guns. Meanwhile, the armed mortals all take their distance, an amusing yet ultimately vain exercise. If they had a bit of common sense they would be running as fast as their legs can carry them, but the herd instinct has prevailed.

"Oh, I did see the report on your return, Ariane of the Nirari. And you came alone? A little risky, I think."

I smile and do not answer.

"I fear that I am unwilling to share this prize. First come, first served," he continues.

“I will admit that I admire your courage, Benoit. You are ready to wager all of your standing, all of your possessions in a single hunt for one of the handfuls of entities that we should still fear. Bravo.”

“There is much power in a lord, as you will discover. And after that I will have some questions for you, such as how you found me, and after that, why, I believe that some of my acquaintances in Mask might be delighted to see you again. They were frustrated to see you go, last time. I shall be the pivot of this meeting and many more after. Do you know what I can obtain in exchange for a Progenitor?”

Oh, he does love the sound of his own voice, but I can wait no longer. The frustration of the past months is finally catching up to me at a most auspicious moment.

“I no longer care about your motives, Benoit. Politics, power plays, they only exist here as abstract background to the matter at hand. I did not want to speak to negotiate or question. I just wanted to say thank you.”

Benoit is taken aback, I think? Not that it matters. I let go of my aura. I unleash it and let it flow around and through the others. I allow it to seep through the cracks of reality and at the edge of all that vitality and power. Benoit’s eyes widen behind the medieval helmet because he knows and understands the implication, but it is too late. Too late! I am already in the middle of the camp where he thought he had me cornered. No one corners a Devourer. We thrive in the thick of carnage. This is where we belong and this is where we are at our most unstoppable.

*“Thank you for invading my land and killing my people. Thank you for stealing and destroying what I held dear. Thank you for striking me so ruthlessly and, from the bottom of my black heart, thank you for coming here. This lost place is so far from any information network that anything that happens here, if reported, will be taken as nothing but fables. Here we stand like at the dawn of time when the elder city emerged from the sands and our kind came into being. We do not need to hide here, Benoit, we are entirely free. We can let go. We can be ourselves, fully ourselves, in all our furious, blood-soaked glory. You called me and I am here, Benoit. Now show me your fangs and your claws and your rage. Let us break the world together. You are a rock and upon this rock I shall build my legacy as the first and only **Devourer War Lady**.*

Magna.

ARQA.”

My world is a sphere.

Thorns rip the earth asunder. They rise to the sky, sending men and weapons flying, shredding, mangling. What was a plain is now a deep and treacherous forest writhing under an alien sky and the purple, curious gaze of the *Watcher*. They experience this apotheosis just as they die to feed it, my captive little things, my prey. Essence flows and vitality drips

from so many obsidian nails and there cannot be enough, there can never be enough. I need more. **MORE.**

“SHATTER AND FALL.”

Every drop of power feeds the Magna Arqa. Its area of effect is still much smaller than it was when I faced Octave, and yet I can feel it growing yet again. I am not done growing. I just need more **PREY.**

Benoit attacks the roots. Futile. The Master with a flail rolls under a lashing root so I can pin him like an insect and grab his head. Reveal the throat. Consume until all is **ASH.** A blue flash and I spot the Master in her robe running. So soon?

“Heartseeker.”

The Devourer signature spell sends dark arrows hissing through the air. They catch her in the back, in the leg. They turn her flesh dry and desiccated. She falls.

“Nooooo.”

“YES.”

My allies come. John and Urchin have engaged the Courtiers guarding the Gatling guns. I let them. **USEFUL WARRIORS.** Something could emerge if I willed it, to help them, and I do so. I dive deep into the maze of twisting roots and spot a hint of white marble statue, of an insectile humanoid hybrid wielding long claws. It swipes a shrieking mortal. Oh, the Herald, one of the prizes of my collection. More essence. More life. I feel the mages huddling under their protective circle and spitting fire as if their pathetic flame could ignite the primeval nightmare. I sprint to them, roots parting to let me through, embracing me. They are mine.

“Shield breaker.”

I punch the protection with my gauntlet and let the spell and the Watcher’s deleterious energies spread through the construct. It falls to pieces almost immediately and leaves the mages defenseless. They are caught by the tide and by me. I drink an old man dry. I walk to the next. Loth’s armor makes every step a statement.

Benoit finally understands that attacking the roots is pointless. Whatever he destroys will just regrow in time and it is barely worth the effort. He jumps and squeezes between the appendages, seeking me. Perfect timing. I give him the illusion that I do not know where everything is in my domain. He cleaves down with his sword. I let the edge slide against Rose with amused ease. Our eyes meet.

“You fucking Devourer monsters.”

“WE ARE ALL MONSTERS. I AM BETTER AT IT.”

Benoit screams and strikes in a deluge of attacks that I deflect and dodge, moving back and creating a thorn funnel around him. He realizes. Too late. He disengages, the pathetic weakling.

“Promethean.”

The chains Constantine invented surge from my gauntlets in starving snakes of reddish blood essence. Benoit finds himself trapped and strikes them down with a great overhead strike. It leaves him exposed for a lunge. Rose bites deeply into his chest, slightly below the heart. Benoit is forced to push the weapon down lest I finish him off here and now. The blade bites deep. The roots close around him.

“Enough of this. Magna Arqa!”

Benoit takes slow, careful steps forward but where the roots used to give him pause, they now slide helplessly against his pitted armor. I strike him and find Rose deflected by ever-more powerful strikes. Interesting! This is not an avatar type but an effect that will stop, I suppose, at the end of his stroll.

The gait accelerates and I abuse my reach to keep lashing at him. He manages to block most strikes and I feel his speed increasing, yet I am still faster and slightly out of reach. I entertain myself by testing him and keeping an eye on the last master who thinks himself hidden. Nothing is hidden from me in my forest.

The speed keeps increasing. All Roland lords have an absurd willpower, a perseverance that extends the duration of their Magna Arqas past what any other bloodline can achieve. Except, of course, for mine. I consumed so many of them. Nevertheless, I do not underestimate him and increase my focus. The roots at the edge of the thorn forest grow indolent and unresponsive, not that it matters since their prizes are drained and lifeless. Benoit accelerates further as he pushes me back and the forest moves with me out of the camp. I move around him, forcing him to perform abrupt turnarounds but it does not seem to negatively impact his speed. It does, however, impact his patience.

“Stop running!”

*“Stomp and moan your fill. Then I **DEVOUR YOU**,”* I retort.

I stand my ground more and more, pushing his devastating strikes away with a flurry of blows, deflecting and dodging while lashing out. Most of my attacks do little more than chip the armor, and yet he takes them as a personal affront.

“You dare!”

“I dare.”

We approach a climax. For a moment, I let him believe that I can be overwhelmed. A final lunge pushes me back, seemingly destabilized.

The enemy master emerges from behind a root and strikes.

I smirk and cast the combat's first mirage spell. The illusion catches the two fighters off guard while a root props me back up and on the offensive.

"Promethean."

The spell and a strike from Rose disable the master and I dive under a root as the forest rises to prevent Benoit's passage. The lord rages against the obstacles, in vain. They close around him like a prison. He smashes his weapon repeatedly. Every blow cuts a root and costs me energy but I can see his Magna Arqa unravel.

"Caught in a trap of your own making," I idly comment.

"Shut up! Show yourself you coward!"

Benoit strikes at what he thinks is me. His sword shatters the shield and arm of a new statue I extracted from my domain. Loth's face plate turns to him in all its marble-like glory and the lord stops in his tracks. This allows me to lop his right arm off in one blow.

I ignore his cries of pain and supplication while I peel off the helmet to reveal the tender skin underneath. He blabbers about threats and deals but we are past those, we are so far past those that I do not stop for a single second. After all, I have a prize to claim.

Benoit tastes of ambition and scheme. He was powerful and cunning but he was also arrogant. That is why I did not underestimate him and that is why I notified Sephare of my actions. One cannot stand alone in this world.

My Magna Arqa fades. We stand in the plain with the wrecked remains of the camp in the distance. I walk back to John and Urchin waiting patiently by the bound and insensate bodies of the fallen fledgelings. John stands like a hero with his titanic warhammer hanging over a shoulder while Urchin lazily spins knives between his fingers, switching and moving them with his power in a hypnotizing display. They are quite pleased with themselves and they deserve to be. They took four foes with no apparent wounds. An impressive performance.

"Well done, you two. Take the two surviving Masters and bind them as well. I will negotiate with our new bloodline."

I keep walking calmly to the Comanche camp in the distance. I hear the heartbeats of human scouts in the distance, foolishly away from their camp. Many fall back when they spot me. I do not hide my approach. In fact, I should advertise it more.

"Let there be light."

Ghostly purple orbs appear above my pauldrons, bathing me, and only me, in their radiance. I take my time as I approach my destination and spot horses and mortals in various stages

of despair. Those people are thin, exhausted. They teeter at the edge of surrender. They merely need a little nudge.

Truly, Benoit paved the way for me.

And truly, I owe the Bingles yet another breakthrough. Is this a symbiotic relationship?

It does not take long for Ako to show himself. He is a tall, handsome man with high cheekbones and a dark glare. I feel a smidgen of sympathy for his overly long hair, which he will have to braid for as long as he lives. He is almost naked. Only scraps of fabric still cling to his muscular frame over long stains of congealed black blood. The fledgelings behind him are in marginally better physical shape but their faces show a deep suffering. They must have figured out that not all experiences were good to share, and that enough agony members can lead to a devastated community.

Ako grumbles a few words in his native language. I ignore him.

“Speak the true tongue, I know you can do it.”

More agitated words I’d wager are insults and threats. His voice is gravelly, tired.

“You are too close to your mortal kin. It will not last.”

He refuses to communicate. Ah, well.

“Suit yourself. Magna Arqa.”

The thorns catch all of the fledgelings while I advance to engage the weakened warrior. He grabs a throwing axe from behind his back and hurls it at me with great energy. Of course, the movement lacks the fluidity immortals are capable of and I easily catch it in my gauntleted hand. Feathers and charms adorn the shaft. Oh, a local production. How quaint.

“Shred.”

The full-powered disruptive spell cracks the axe which falls to pieces between my armored fingers. I keep moving forward and cut the shaft of a spear. A native warrior shoots a glowing arrow at me from afar. I let it plink uselessly against my chest and retaliate with a blood bolt that destroys his knee. Ako charges me. He jumps in the air and kicks me in the chest with both feet.

I let him.

We almost never jump, except to dodge. A vampire in the air cannot change trajectory, and a predictable fighter is a dead one. His naked feet impact my braced form with no discernible result except pushing him away. I slice both of his calves before he can land again and watch him crawl away from me. He was losing against Benoit. He does not stand a chance against me. Worse, he is fighting like a mortal. Weak. Clumsy. Bound by limitations that he should have shed, not that I can blame him since no one could show him the way.

"I have come to accept your surrender."

He is still defiant. I take control of all the thorns around his fledgelings and squeeze.

The pain wracks him so I squeeze them more. He rolls on the ground in agony. Ah, yes. I remember a time when pain terrified me, long before the sight of the Accords' fortress basement made me want to pull on my fingers and count them. I kneel by his side and grab him by the neck, twisting one of his arms behind him.

"I know you understand the tongue. You will surrender to me or I will kill all of your men one by one while you watch, and then, I will kill you last. My kin have slain Progenitors before. I have no qualms expanding the list."

"You black-clad devil. Leave us alone."

"I will start with the pretty girl with the stolen cavalry saber."

Ako stops struggling against my hold. I can feel the power in his limbs. They do not matter. He is trapped.

"What good would it do? Why would I choose an eternity of slavery to 'taibo' like you over a warrior's death?"

"We look after our own. If the land you tread officially belongs to a white man we control, it is truly yours. We can offer you a future for your people. Or you can choose your warrior's death and I will drain you dry here and now."

He does not hesitate and I can see the true despair crawling under the surface of his thoughts.

"If you speak the truth then I accept. I will join your community. You had better not be lying."

"I have no need to lie to you, Ako. Oh, and another thing. You will join my faction. In fact, I believe that I will take my tribute immediately."

It has been a few years since I last tasted a Progenitor. I bend down and bite.