

The base extends below us for miles, an haphazard assembly of tents that lacks the usual discipline. Not even the fact it was designed for me suffices now. That damn armor has a mind of her own.

“We have our work cut out for us, gentlemen,” I tell my newest minions.

“Do you mean to tell us the lemures have already infiltrated their ranks?” an Erenwald courtier says.

Daft lad. A blond. Feels compelled to repeat everything I say like the world’s blandest parrot.

“Yes, as I warned you. If there are wounded or squad members have lost sight of each others, then lemures are likely. The Summer Court has tools to detect them but we will have to proceed the old-fashioned way.”

The Brotherhood vampires gather around me in a court of ducklings. For some reason, I expected the ‘Nacht Ritter’ to gather their strongest warriors in a show of force, but instead they sent me disposable courtiers and young masters. What, do they expect me to kill them? Contrary to... other things, I have an excellent record with trainees. Ugh.

I tap my nose.

“You’ll have to smell them out.”

“You have to be joking.”

“I’m afraid not. I can tell at a glance that their aura is wrong, but since your superiors have seen fit to send me people without magical capabilities...”

“I can cast spells.”

“...or skill, you will use your nose. But first to introduce ourselves.”

We walk down the slope, passing by an ambulance that stinks of old blood. A woman rests her head against the wheel, exhausted. A couple of soldiers hide behind it in an effort to smoke in peace. One of them finds me. In his gaze, there is no more soul than in that of a cattle. This man has been chewed and spat out by whatever he faced farther west. He does not even react to the *Aurora*.

“Where is the command tent?”

The man waves a hand towards the center of the improvised encampment. I follow his direction through milling soldiers and screaming officers. We are not stopped. Those who have the authority to do so recognize my follower’s uniforms. As for me, a look is enough to classify me in the ‘above your paygrade’ category. We find the commanders unimpeded. Even the sentries do not block our path.

Sloppy, but I can hardly blame them.

Inside, the command tent is the very image of wanton disarray. Oh, the maps are in the right position and the officers suitably grim, but they converse in small groups while two high-ranking men argue rather loudly about the next steps somewhere in the center. Pure chaos for Germans. If it were France, a fisticuff would have already erupted. Someone could be peeing on the maps.

“Congratulations!” I yell, silencing everyone at once.

“Your camp has been selected as the meeting point for the combined fleets of Europe, which will start arriving within the next few hours. You will get the camp in order and establish defensive positions. Fortifications must be built to the west, by order of the emperor himself.”

I wave my decree like a little flag. Oh, glorious moment where I wield the ultimate power but have to use it to dig ditches. Alas, alas for maturity. At least I can watch that fat bearded dude get an apoplexy.

“You dare?” he erupts. “Do you know who I am?”

“Hush.”

A deadly silence spreads through the tent, quieting even the clamor of the voices outside. The man speaks but no sounds come out.

“That is better. Now, I have never killed a general before...”

I stop and reconsider my words.

“Well, not one so high-ranked at least, but I will do so without hesitation if you oppose me. The decree gives me full authority to turn this sorry cesspit into a functioning forward base. If you oppose my work, I will retire you. Permanently.”

The general turns an interesting shade of tulip, but one of his aides picks up the paper and pales when he recognizes the seal. I lift the sound interdiction.

“Sir... this is genuine.”

Sadly, this turns the man purple. He needs a moment and a glass of schnapps. I am left dealing with underlings.

“You will clear the field in the direction of... what is the nearest town?”

“Baden-Baden.”

“Yes. That one. And set a perimeter around it to prepare for landing crafts.”

“Madam... there are no fields large enough. This is the Black Forest.”

I sigh.

I have used my Magna Arqa to clear land before. It just feels like such a vulgar use of an amazing forest. Removing forest runs against its very principle. Pah, whatever.

“You will lead me to a suitably flat spot then. In the meanwhile... there is the matter of the lemures.”

I grab one of the sentries who had been watching with empty eyes. The man struggles while his comrades watch in shock, unsure how to proceed.

Then my captive twists into a thin, ghastly creature, all taut skin over countless bony extensions, a mix between a man and a gecko. Teeth snap at me.

The vampires stand there.

“Well, this is the perfect opportunity to get used to their essence.”

“Errr.”

“COME CLOSER.”

I shake the beast as it snaps at me. Annoying. And slightly malodorous, though the essence is rich. Ugh. I know exactly what to do. I open the tent flap and cause a small panic among the soldiers.

“Milady?” repeats the man with some doubt.

“I have a task for you. Go catch it!”

I toss the lemure bodily into the nearest post. It falls, dazed, then attempts to flee.

This is all that is needed for the vampires’ instincts to kick in.

“And bring me back the corpse of the others! There are at least seven!” I scream after the hissing pack.

The head elements have fallen on the shapeshifter to eat it, leaving the slower folks to spread out to earn their meal. At least this will get them out of my hair.

“Where were we? Oh yes, deforestation.”

“And to think this is the military that kept ours in check for over two years,” the man who just entered says.

The man who so casually forgot the contribution of the French and the might of the Germans can only be Sky Marshal Jacobi, the head of the Triple Entente fleet. He is an older gentleman with impressive sideburns and a perfectly groomed moustache. His aide rushes by his side, embarrassed for some reason.

They spot me.

“And you must be the vampire.”

“Sir?”

“What gave it away?” I ask, showing a hint of fang.

“No respect for your elders, which sometimes means that I am not, in fact, your elder.”

“Indeed not.”

“What a troublesome era. At least, you should have been a man.”

“I fear I cannot take responsibility for my condition.”

The admiral huffs. Another man, this one in a blue uniform, moves in.

“Ah. Mademoiselle, you must be the Hand of the Accords zen?”

“In person.”

“Is it true they call you the Red Maiden as well?”

“You sank my uncle’s ship near Gibraltar,” Admiral Jacobi says reproachfully.

“Oh yes, that was quite fun,” I observe.

I remember well. Sinead was with me.

“He said you had naked men dancing on your bridge!”

“Quite a lot of fun.”

“Scandalous.”

“Any person who sank a British ship and is not German has my immediate respect, madam. My name is Admiral Gireaud. I represent the French fleet. You are American, yes? We have brought your minotaurs. Please keep them in good shape as we have yet to pay them fully.”

“I am sure you have a good contract,” I reply genially.

“A capitalist misconception.”

“If you would focus on the issue at hand...” Jacobi chides.

We gather around the table where updated maps await. I have received constant updates from the Rosenthal over the past hours. Their intelligence network is working overtime to follow the invasion from up close.

“Here is what I have,” I begin. “The German fleet was unfortunately mauled over Colmar. Only the Scharnhorst is still fully operational, but they have brought their entire complement

of biplanes from every front and we can count on them to protect our approach. The Italians sent fast frigates, twelve of them, and they are already here. What about you?”

“The Entente sends twenty-one cruisers and five frigates. The admiralty refuses to commit more to the defense of an enemy power, even one that has capitulated. We must defend our land.”

He gives me a pointed look.

“We also refuse to give you command over our contingent. We formally request that you give me overall command since we bring the most numerous and powerful detachment.”

“That is fine,” I reply with a shrug.

Jacobi blinks, quite likely expecting protests.

“I have no experience commanding a fleet,” I explain, “Not to mention that my presence will be required on the ground at the end of the run. I am more than willing to let a competent leader direct the fleet, so long as all our objectives are complete.”

“Is that so. And you will commit your personal ship?”

“Of course. It will be carrying me into battle, after all. Please make sure it stays covered since, you know, there isn’t anyone else capable of taking down the prince.”

“Then you have no objection to us sending an observer to the ship?”

I could refuse, of course, but that would not be fun.

“You can send someone, so long as they respect our rules, starting with the most important one.”

“Yes?”

“They must wear the hat.”

The late afternoon sun shines over the newly made field between Baden-Baden and the natural barrier of the Rhine. Thousands of troops in various levels of preparation board their designated ships for the first, and likely not last union of mankind against a foreign invader. Reinforced balloons shine with glyphs and protective plates while sailors load the last of the available ammunition. Baden-Baden was never meant to be a major supply hub.

From the safety of my sarcophagus, I observe the wear and tear on many of the ships’ hulls and sails. Those all bear the wounds of an extended conflict. Even the newest ship shows signs of extensive repair. The war has raged mercilessly and the flying vessels have born the brunt of every large battle due to their ability to fly where they are needed, both a blessing and a curse.

By comparison, the Fury looks brand new and quite different. A mundane observer could think the airship is designed for racing, and they would not be wrong. It is designed for speed and maneuverability. The massive gun lodged in the airframe and the spell spears may be hidden. The hull is thinner and offers less resistance to air than that of a more cumbersome cruiser at the cost of armor. It is custom made to my specifications. And now, it flies in formation with ships that, a few days earlier, would have shot at each other without mercy.

I wonder where this is all going.

The world is changing so fast, now with the invasion of our second group of pests. Thankfully, this one comes from far away, and they should not have the ability to stay once we sever the portal.

I spare a thought for the fae spheres on the other side of thousands of kilometers of hell. I will never reach them but sometimes, I wish I could. I wish I could summon some help to deal with Nirari instead of having to stop him myself. I wish it did not just depend on me.

There is so much to explore and so many things to do, but now much rests on my shoulders and... I do not like it. A part of me wants to cross that boundary and fight the blood court for a century, until they break me or I break their world. Just for the adventure it represents. My sire's presence looms like a sword of Damocles, as it has since I stood a chance to stop him.

This is but one more diversion, but this time I see an opportunity to further even the odds: the blood of a prince.

I cannot let him escape.

Outside, a horn sounds. One by one, the ships take off into the sky. The *Dalton's Fury* is no exception.

"Why do I have to wear the tricorn?" the 'spy' officer asks, a bit aghast.

"It's the rule," the skipper replies without emotion, though I can taste his amusement.

"Is it true your boss is called the boom girl?"

"You can always ask her."

"What's that big tube over there?"

"The main gun."

"Your main gun is larger than a coastal battery!"

"What else would you expect from the boom girl?"

"I thought this was a jest!"

"I assure you sir, here, we do not joke about explosions. It ties into rule nineteen."

"Is it the same list of rules that covers the tricorns?"

“Yes, and rule nineteen states that nothing is a laughing matter until after the enemy has blown up.”

“I want to get back to the Zephyr.”

“Wait! You have not seen our anti-personnel spell arrays yet.”

I close the communication, letting my skipper amuse himself. He is one of Loth’s men. He will die before he betrays my trust. In the meanwhile, I watch the combined fleet lift toward the skies.

It is quite a sight.

I have lived for some time now, and I am glad for the spectacle. It does not beat the Court of Blue but... it will do. Each ship ponderously gets in formation, the cruisers in the centers and the escort ship around. We are considered to be an escort ship. The Fury is only thirty meters long with a crew of seventy in wartime, such as now. Contrary to others, it is not powered by a mix of modified engines and mana. The might of the Fury comes from the Aurora itself. So long as I am in the ship, its power surpasses that of even a flagship.

I am eager to see what the Court of Blood intends to throw at us.

As the fleet gains altitude, we pass through a cloud and the rest of them disappear from view for a while. I adjust the mirrors around me and enjoy just resting in fluffy clouds, imagining that stepping outside will not turn me into a screaming Ariane-sized torch. We pierce the cover and the gray turns to pinks and reds.

For two hours, nothing of import happens. We are too high to be intercepted, a superiority of human technology. I relax and check on the other night denizens aboard my ship. The poor dears do not have access to the external recorders and appear to be bored. It will change soon enough.

Towards dusk, we dive. The cloud cover thins to reveal what is left of the battlefield around Verdun.

It starts with red light, like a field of fireflies seen from above. Soon, however, the little dots resolve themselves into so many fires, burning without much fuel on a seemingly endless plain of blood-soaked, scorched earth. Red and brown to the horizon where Verdun still holds, the land has perished. I find the culprit without much difficulty. The portal to the Court of Blood hovers in the middle of a crater, its surface like a bullet gash in reality complete with frayed edge that bleed mana into this reality. The earth beyond is more crimson than our own, but not by much. The process has already started.

“Ma’am, the Zephyr has ordered us on an intercept course to the plain in front of the portal. They want to land the marines there,” my skipper tells me.

“Follow for now,” I reply.

The prince should have taken the bait, but he might be further afield. I suspect my human allies might be able to unload some of their troops before they are swarmed.

And then, we are inevitably spotted. A cloud of fly-sized combatants lifts off from the many recesses of this strange earth. The rays of the waning sun shine on dragonfly wings, leather wings, strange, segmented body parts stuck to much, much larger specimens.

“By jove, is that a dragon?” the spy asks.

It most certainly is not. It has a good size, however.

“The Zephyr is signaling to prepare for an engagement. We will not change course,” the skipper observes.

He turns to his communicator and his voice appears more clearly in my sarcophagus.

“Ma’am, any instructions?”

“Do as you will, Skipper. Just get us through this in one piece.”

“Aye ma’am, and even afloat if I can manage it.”

“DEFENDERS OF MANKIND,” a voice bellows with a terrible intensity.

I listen with rapt attention, considering two things. One, those defenders of mankind are here because I, a vampire, brought them here. Second, only a fraction of those defenders of mankind actually speak English. Admiral Jacobi does not mind.

“I know you are confused. I know you look left and right and see the foes of yesterday, against whom you fought and to whom you lost friends. I know this and I ask you to look beyond that to the hellish landscape in front of you. This is our world’s future.”

Ah, the sweet taste of terror spreads across the fleet, though I know Jacobi is only preparing for a delivery.

“We are facing invaders from another world. Those invaders will turn our planet into this unless we stop them here and now. So look left and right. All those you see are our world’s only chance. And I am not afraid.

“I have seen your mettle, gentlemen, over the past two years. Friends or foe, you are all proud sailors of the fleets of mankind. Tonight, you will give me your best for tomorrow the skies will be blue and they will be ours. Everyone, battlestation. The time has come to reclaim our earth. Kill every last one of those ugly bastards, and let their gods sort them out.”

In front of us, the swarm approaches.

The Zephyr is the first to open fire, then the rest of the cruisers join in. The largest creatures are immediately turned to paste, torn asunder by shells designed to kill a ship through its plating. As the large, dragon-like enemies fall, their smaller brethren still approach. They look like horrible winged humanoids with blades instead of arms. I watch the Zephyr signal for beehive shells designed to fill fighters with shrapnel. Soon, the swarm is close enough for machine guns to open on them.

I notice larger specimens now that the combatants are closer. They have officers of sorts, and one of them concerns me more than most. He looks like the duke my allies identified, only with wings.

If they have one of their two dukes, we might be in trouble.

A minute later, the swarm is upon us.

A veritable hail of bullets meets them, downing many. Blood and body parts fall like rain on the desolate earth below. The vacuum of constant gunfire is deafening and, outside, I see the barrels of machine-guns overheating from the constant fire. The sky turns into a confusing painting of black shapes and the white rays of tracer rounds. The Blood Court warriors die in droves but there are many of them, more than I thought possible. Perhaps they crossed the border in priority. Soon, the first manage to land on escort frigates' hull and jump on the bridges where they are welcomed by marines with short guns. Just as the heart of the formation approaches, a buzz covers even the din of the cannons.

An entire armada's worth of biplanes dives on the enemy. Their weapons are not the best to pick off small targets but there are so many of them and the warriors are packed so dense that it does not matter. Like sharks hunting a school of fishes, human fighter planes carve bloody paths through the formation, climbing back before they can get in range of their many foes. Chaos spreads through the enemy ranks while their nobles try their best to keep the warriors focused on the easier and more dangerous forms of the warships, but many fail. Long trails of flying warriors go after the biplanes in a futile attempt to catch up. Sadly, a few of the fighters are too slow to get altitude and fall under the tide of flesh. Their sacrifice gives us enough time to inflict devastating casualties on the swarm.

"The Zephyr orders us to tighten the formation," the Skipper tells me.

"I will take control of the frontal arrays," I reply. "Get all hands on the deck."

"Already done."

Inside the sarcophagus, a handle pops out of under the mirror, courtesy of Constantine's technology. I use it to aim at the nearest officer. A hiss, a roar, and the spell spear screams, sending a flashing blue ray of energy at the winged creature.

It explodes rather pleasantly.

Sadly, one of the Italian frigates in front of us falls down in flame, soon joined by a French cruiser. Heavy smoke follows the wounded titans as they fall to their death. With the ships tighter, the fire intensifies. A good half of the ships are boarded now, but they never stop firing. I watch the duke lead the solid core of his dying troops toward the Zephyr. Going after the largest ship makes sense, I suppose.

"Get us closer to the Zephyr," I order.

"That will get us within range of the swarm."

"Can you hold the bridge?"

“Yes.”

“Then go.”

The Fury accelerates and aims up and right, going in support of the beleaguered flagship. We are not the only ones to do so. Lighter cruisers and frigates close rank, risking boarding to fend off the attackers. More biplanes have turned around for another dive. The fire that pours into the duke's group is staggering.

“We're tearing them apart,” the spy exults.

I am not so sure.

The duke has landed on the Zephyr's bridge. I can spot its tail from here. It speaks in a low voice, calling the Court of Blood's primal magic. Royal marines fight his men off with their courage and their bayonets, but I can tell this will not be enough. A corona of fire expands from the winged form and the entire front of the massive warship is caught in a raging inferno. The leading sails fail and the ship immediately dips forward. Carnage resumes on the damaged bridge.

The Fury approaches and the warriors now flock over to us, a light target daring to close the distance. My soldiers cover the bridge and kill them as fast as they can approach with their excellent equipment, a disciplined wall against a raging tide. I can hear them banter as they kill. Good people. I fire in the crows as fast as I can while other gunners use the lateral arrays. Despite this, damage accumulates on the sails. Something is gnawing on the ropes.

A shadow falls over us and a thundering volley takes down all the incoming foe. I turn to see the Italian Sirio frigate rushing forward to buy us a precious few seconds.

We clear the Zephyr's bridge, giving me full view of the duke. I line up a series of shots and lay into him as he summons fire again. The shot pierces through him to his surprise. He roars.

Now I can see he was still unharmed until now. Molten iron rests at his feet in small puddles. An issue of bullets, as always with highly magical creatures.

It seems he has identified us as a major threat.

“We have incoming!” I warn the skipper.

“I see.”

The duke rises, torso ravaged by our strike. He flies straight at us under a deluge of bullets. Some of them manage to hurt his wings, but fire carries him to us.

“Turn to port, now. Accelerate on my mark,” the skipper says.

I watch the massive creature bear down on us with a cry of wounded fury. I hit it two more times, but it can no longer be stopped.

“Boosters, now!”

Magic and gasoline pour into the engine and the Fury swerves like no other ship, dodging the duke. I rake it as it misses us, front then side then back. It falls and... does not die.

A red biplane goes after it in a senseless dive. Well, I wish them good hunting. With the duke out, most of his swarm disperses or dives. As for us, we follow the flaming form of the Zephyr as it plunges towards the portal. It will crash-land right next to it.

The low clouds part before us and I realize that... we are not the first on the scene. Strange yet brilliant contraptions that look like armored cars with guns lead a formation of infantry towards the portal and, as I watch, vampires engage. It appears that Mask has joined the fight on the other side.