

The crate containing my armor now lies on Trieste's deserted docks, hidden from view by rows of barrels and other supplies. It only takes me a moment to realize that the box is unnaturally cold and also that the metal exterior is, in fact, a containment field. I mention it to Loth who nods with pride.

"Oh aye, it is as ye say. Below the mountain, we found a place that used ta be a magma chamber. Once, it had been connected to the surface by a chimney, but that one had closed eons ago. When we first excavated the place the miners had to use special equipment against the cold. It got so bad that we considered giving up and containing it instead, but we persevered and found ice."

"Ice?"

"Black ice as cold as the void and as hard as diamond. Even explosives could nae put a dent in it. I had to use a special heated wire to cut through a single block. We also realized that it was too heavy and freezing to be used in anything we could think of except..."

And he smiles.

"The armor of a vampire lady. And here ye be, all fresh from the mold or whatever ye cold ones use. It took me six months ta cut all the pieces and engrave them. I have inlaid them with obsidian glyphs ground to shape over weeks of effort. The links and nails are enchanted electrum left to bask in the moonlight at the heart of the Skandes. It weighs over two hundred and fifty kilograms, would kill any human on touch, would stop a cannonball without cracking, and contains enough enchantments to make a battle golem. It is... the perfect armor."

"By the Watcher Loth, did you truly make such a thing?"

"Aye, lass, ah did. Maybe you will fall in battle one day, but it won't be because of the armor that's for sure. Enough preliminaries aye? Open it."

I plant myself in front of the box and pull on the chained ring I see. All four sides disengage with a clang. They unfold like a midnight rose to reveal the undeniable proof that Loth is a mad artist, and that he is also the greatest armorer the world has ever seen.

"By the Watcher..."

"In the name of the Eye..."

Both Phineas and I cannot help but widen our eyes before the wonder in front of us, just as the mortals take an instinctive step back at the sudden chill in the air. While the protection I lost was a dress of exquisite make, this one is a deadly plate of polar death as elegant as it is intimidating. This is an armor fit for an immortal on the warpath. If the devil crawled out of hell to lead his unending horde, he would be wearing its male counterpart.

My previous battle dress could pass as real cloth from afar. No one with a functional eye and a bit of sense could gaze upon this lethal perfection and think that it is anything else but a

tool of slaughter. Plates of black ice interlock gracefully in a narrow skirt over greaves. The chest is made from a single slab while delicate scale-like fragments cover the stomach and articulations. The right gauntlet is a sophisticated masterpiece barely larger than a glove while the left one shows an integrated spellcasting system and knuckles designed to knock down a castle wall. There are pauldrons as well, barbaric things covered in destructive enchantments so that blocking with them would destroy even a solid steel weapon.

The helmet is specifically designed to cover most of my head while still giving me full range of movement. A mask in the likeness of my face in silvery metal leaves the eyes and mouth free so that I may bite down mid-battle. The rest, up to my chin, is protected by a heavily enchanted mesh of interlocking small mail over a respectable gorget. It will take a colossal force to behead me. The gorget is even designed to stop blades neatly instead of pushing a potential blade up and into my face. It was designed with me in mind from the ground up. Every plate, every part of the armor shows intricate engravings of black on black where obsidian comes to enchant the eternal heart of winter and the chill I feel in my vein takes on a magical quality. I place my hand against the familiar sigil adorning its chest, now smaller to give room to a dense lattice of fire and shock-repelling enchantments. The cold caresses me and my essence. I remember that moment of breath-taking beauty when I got lost in Semiramis' maze years ago and ended up near a pole. They share the same lethal and untouchable beauty.

"Loth..."

"Lass, I present to you the Aurora. The crown jewel of my collection and the hardest armor ever to come out of Dvergur hands. I must also apologize. I wish you could give it a try here."

It pains me to admit it but he is correct. We do not have the time for me to change and find not just a suitable partner, but a proper battlefield as well. I shall have to 'christen' the armor at a later date, and what a shame it is. I know exactly what Loth was thinking when he created this masterpiece.

This is the armor to end all armors. If I wear this and face my sire, I will be able to deflect a few hits. In fact, the Aurora must be one of the only armors on the planet that could give him pause. Loth knows this. That is why he gifts it to me now. He is preparing for the end long before it can happen, just as I would expect from someone who was alive when the vikings started their first raids.

"Loth, thank you. There are no words."

"You can try a few superlatives and see how they feel, aye?"

I do not roll my eyes this time. Instead, I give him a proper bow.

"It is cold perfection given form."

"Not bad. Now, ya know who I had in mind when I made it, besides ya."

"Yes."

“But disnae forget to give it a whirl beforehand aye?”

“Oh, Loth. With the way my life is going, I will be wearing it three weeks into getting home.”

We board soon after and leave before dawn. Loth’s ship sails smoothly across the Adriatic and I busy myself getting up to speed with the fallout from our little rebellion, as Loth affectionately calls it. It appears that the image of the Knights has taken a serious blow and several agreements are being renegotiated, but there are no significant changes in terms of allowing Knights access. Vampires are pragmatic and Knights are too useful to be simply discarded. Indeed, their continued existence proves that they fill a necessary role.

Nevertheless, the Knights organize a massive conclave, the results of which I do not know. Perhaps they will implement new rules to make sure that corruption and self-interest no longer taints their organization? I wish them the best of luck, but it will not erase this offense and it will certainly not bring Manfred back. I wash my hands of their entire organization. If they come after me in America, I will kill them with pleasure.

Crossing the Atlantic with Loth proves more interesting than my usual fare. The Skoragg sovereign naturally brought enough tools to pass the time, and we work on design improvements for an interesting innovation called the Gatling gun. In particular, we consider ways to make it portable and practical but fail to achieve a definitive result in the time it takes to reach Boston. Phineas grows melancholic despite my best efforts, until Loth finds an unexpected source of amusement for the Lancaster: financial records. It appears that my newest ally hunts mistakes and anomalies with more fervor than rogues and undead mages, not that I blame him. Jimena worries until she is assured that her lover is secured and on her way to the New World as well. Interestingly, she is less affected than I feared. Her absolute confidence that she made the right choice to leave means that she is not harassed by regrets, not that our kind much suffers from this unfortunate tendency. I also expect some sort of attack, but apparently even the most foolish of privateers would think twice before attacking a warship.

We moor in Boston’s harbor three weeks later, having made good time. We are welcomed with a ceremony by Constantine and Sephara since Loth is technically a foreign head of state. The fortress’ security has been improved once more and the dense woods surrounding the lone castle now host a few new hamlets, all inhabited by retainers loyal to the cause. Sephara takes me aside while Phineas goes through the induction process. The delicate blonde lady sits me down in her opulent room for some tea.

I now realize how much I changed in those past two years through the telling mirror of her reaction. Viktoriya and Torran took my side the moment we came across each other, because the bounds that tie us go beyond that of mere allies. As such, my ascension to the

rank of lady received their unconditional approval. Sephare and I have always been allies of circumstances, however. Now that my essence rivals her own in power and my control has reached new heights, I can see that she is a bit at a loss. It will take an aura master to read mine now, thanks to Svyatolsav's tireless teachings. Perhaps one day I will manage to mask my presence as completely as Malakim does.

"Allow me to congratulate you on your progress. With you by our side, our influence can only grow," she starts with a fake smile.

An empty remark designed to probe my intentions. I could play subtle games with her if I could spare the patience. I know that some newly ascended lords and ladies tend to settle grudges and remove yokes. What she fails to understand is that I joined her faction fully knowing that she was a snake whose interests aligned with my own by sheer luck. Nobody compelled me. I realize that she is judging me according to her own standards. No matter how much time we spend together, she cannot fully believe that I could work towards common good out of my own volition, even after I demonstrated it, because she is a mercenary at heart.

"Indeed. Despite its disastrous end, I achieved the desired effect. Now I am ready to work again with the Accords to guarantee our common future."

Nothing has changed, I am still on your side. Now empty your bag, you duplicitous flaxen-haired knot of vipers.

"Excellent. While I would normally let you recover from your ordeals, there are three major issues we must address immediately. For the rest, I will have my second prepare a full report on the situation."

"First, we have reached a point where the knowledge of our existence will soon be spread to the masses. We object, of course, and have prepared counter-measures."

"I imagine that you do not intend to slaughter every pamphlet printer in the new world?"

"Of course not. The key to long-term public success is not to remove your opponents but to discredit them. We have received an intriguing proposal to publish a book of monsters by an unknown genius. One of the entries concerns us, and shows a list of weaknesses, some real, some less."

"Such as?"

"The author included garlic and flowing water as repellants."

I scoff.

"Preposterous! Who would swallow such nonsense?"

"And our lack of reflection and inability to appear clearly in photographs makes sense to you?" she retorts. *"We have grown so used to our own nature that we tend to forget how*

peculiar our existence remains. In any case, the book has been advertised and will hit every shelf in a nation obsessed with the strange ones in their midst. There are tales of witches, werewolves and fae filled with inexact statements and exaggerations, and yet the flowing prose makes them so very believable. The mysterious author also includes absurd creatures such as chupacabras and drop bears which we are reasonably certain are jokes. He even mentions traveling courts of magical dancers and small winged creatures!"

Wait.

Wait.

Hold on.

This sounds awfully familiar.

"Ahem, imagine that. What does he say about the fae?"

"Oh, some nonsense about good fortune and sexual prowess. Here, I have a copy here if you want."

I check the name.

Simon Nead.

Sinead.

Of course.

"Are you quite alright, my dear?"

"I am. I merely find the author quite cheeky. Have you ever met him?"

"Oh goodness me no, he is a rather eccentric fellow and only communicates via proxy. I have been unable to track him down so far. Quite intriguing! But I digress. The reason why I mention this is that the book will be published one month from now and it would be best if you and your allies could momentarily lay low while the general public treads the street looking for us and the woods looking for drop bears?"

"Yes, of course. What was the second point?"

"When you are done at home, I would appreciate it if you could return to us because we could use your diplomatic touch for the sake of coordinating between the different supernatural communities."

"Of course. Now, what do you mean about 'being done at home'?"

“This is my third point and the one I must conclude with. Despite our best effort and financial backing, your interests and that of Melusine are under significant and relentless attacks. You could not have returned at a better time.”

Oh.

“I think someone is going to have a very unpleasant surprise.”

“I think so too. Do enjoy yourself.”

Jimena chooses to stay behind as she decides to wait for Aintza, which I encourage her to do despite her worries. She must decide what to do next. Phineas' induction into the Accords is done by the end of the night thanks to my benevolent influence. By vouching for him, and because Constantine is aware of his circumstances, he is cleared to join. It really helps to be friends with the boss on occasion.

It also helps that I fulminate so much that Constantine mentions the carpet catching fire. We are going to Illinois immediately. I will not tolerate little **ROACHES ON MY TERRITORY**. When the cat is away, the mice come, is it? I will find them and I will make an example out of them. Theirs will be a cautionary tale. Whoever they are, they made a big mistake.

Vadim, who possesses the unusual ability to transport us through the realm of the Nightmares, refuses to help me get to my territory faster citing that it is only for emergencies and some such nonsense. The gall! Would he not consider it urgent if he had ants in his sarcophagus? How is this any different! Ug! I am forced to take a mortal train that travels by day, thus being carried around like a vulgar piece of luggage. We stop before Chicago and I rush through the wilderness on Metis while leaving Phineas with the gear. I cross the boundary to my territory and feel more... alive. My perception extends and I feel my intuition grow keener, as does a deep sensation of wrongness. I am under attack. There are assailants on my territory. I must **DEFEND THE DEN**.

Alright, enough Ari. I must first understand what is happening.

Metis carries me through fields I know, some of which now host houses instead. Parts of the plains are now fields, and the forest has receded. Progress has not stopped while I was away, it would seem. I keep going at a slower pace now and hide my features under a cloak. I wear a spare armored dress I had left in Boston.

My compound looks intact, it seems. Nothing much has changed. Two guards salute me nervously when I enter the administrative building and make my way to Merritt's office. I stop at the door and took a deep breath.

There are two auras inside. One belongs to Merritt and the other is strangely familiar, although I do not recognize it. My second-in-command shows clear signs of fear and anxiety.

That will not do.

I must not judge her for failing her mission before I understand exactly what happened. They have held the fort while I was away, arguably on a personal quest. I must exert restraint.

I politely knock and one of my oldest allies invites me in.

Merritt is seventy-three.

It had not occurred to me until now because she is quite a powerful witch and age only has a limited grasp on her body, but her hair is mostly grey now and there are crow feet besides her keen eyes. She wears a conservative dress in green that compliments her sprite body. She currently sits with a straight spine as if preparing for an onslaught.

The second person lounges against a nearby cupboard with affected nonchalance. I would be more impressed if her aura did not flicker and if the room did not smell of nervous sweat. I recognize Lynn, Merritt's daughter. I am quite surprised since she was last married to some rich gentleman in the east.

I had not quite realized how powerful I have become since ascending, and not just in terms of pure physical abilities. I can sense others effortlessly. Even my control has improved since my essence is now more malleable. I have not yet tried to cast spells, but I suspect that they may be more potent now. More importantly, others can feel it too. I may no longer let go of my aura under any circumstances.

"Good evening, Merritt. It is good to see you again."

"My God, Ariane, is that really you? You are so cold. I felt you since you were outside of the building."

"I have resolved my aura problem."

"You have?"

"Yes, I am a lady now."

"Hmmm. Congratulations?"

She is afraid. Her reaction does not hurt me, however it reminds me that I must behave.

"Alexandria Merritt, it is me, Ariane."

She flushes and frowns, ready to scold me for using her first name, which she dislikes. I give her a small smirk to let her know that I got her and anger dissolves into tired amusement. My antics earn me a vague snort. She lowers her guard. I have accomplished my goal.

Terror was making her a bit tempting and I promised myself that I would not feed on my allies.

“Yes, sorry. Your appearance is the same, and so is your terrible sense of humor it would seem.”

“I assure you, I am fully myself and in control. Now, I have heard alarming reports and I would like a situation report, if that is fine with you.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. I have it here.”

She picks up a bundle of paper from her desk.

“But before we begin, I would like to inform you that I am... in the process of stepping down as the manager of your interests in Marquette.”

Her heartbeat increases and she stutters a bit.

“Not that I was mistreated or offered a better alternative. I am just... tired. I have been at this for thirty years, Ariane. Thirty years. I need a change of scenery.”

“I understand.”

She blinks and turns to Lynn briefly as if to verify that she had not dreamed my words.

“You... you do?”

For a moment, I consider dismissing the entire conversation to focus on the intruders. My instincts roar at me to go out and kill but I smother them, for now. Merritt is important. I accepted it years ago when she went out of her way to help me defeat the Herald. She is... the sort of character I want to see by my side. Honorable. hard-working. Effective. She is her own person with her own take on things and I need individuals like her to reach the top because the Watcher knows that I am not perfect. My sort of conquest requires generals by my side. She is, well, was, one of them. I owe her an explanation, I think.

“Believe it or not... you are the third mage I will lose.”

She seems stupefied. I imagine that she expected another type of reaction.

“The first was Nashoba. I lost him to a wasting disease. He was a shaman of a proud nation called the Choctaw and he could see the future. He taught me much about choosing one’s battles, about working on what one could change. He was also someone who knew when the cost of something was too high.

“The second was Frost. He died after using all his power to push back the Scourge Hive and save the lives of countless men. He was the first and so far only person I offered to change. He refused, of course. They died but some others, like Sheridan, left because they had turned a page and were ready to see what else life had to offer to them.

"I understand that I do not age. I understand that you do and that you will not always be by my side. I need mortals to remind me of what I have lost. Losing them in turn is a necessity I must accept, even if it pains me. So yes, Merritt. I understand. We have worked hard together to turn Marquette into the city it has become. You can pursue your next project with the knowledge that what we accomplished here will build the path to a prosperous future. And besides, you are not the kind of person who simply quits. I imagine that the presence of your daughter relates to your retirement."

"Yes, indeed. Thank you Ariane. Your words... they mean a lot coming from you. And yes, I will leave you in good hands. Lynn here has been managing more and more of my duties over the past few months. She is also better at manipulating those rich twats, I mean, the good society of our fair city."

"Mother tends to forget that much can be achieved by simply... asking politely."

Bands of aura unwind from her person like ribbons. Ah, I see. We call her kind enchantresses. They focus on mind magic. Most of them die within one year of starting their social career, either at the hand of a scorned lover or because they stole someone they should not have touched. Lynn is smarter than most. She knows that I perceived her power and pulls it back.

"And when did you return?" I ask.

She understands the unspoken questions.

"Three months ago with my son, after our enemies started harrying us. I give you my word that I have nothing to do with them. I swear on my power that I am firmly on your side. As to why I returned, it all comes down to the unfortunate death of my husband."

She leans to the side and shows her willowy figure. While Merritt dresses in a more conservative, provincial fashion, Lynn is more daring. She boldly exhibits her new position as an affluent widow whose east coast accent remains mild enough to impress without growing condescending. She also wears perfume. I would be interested in watching her work a room. Perhaps I can learn a few tricks from her later.

"My dear Edward always doted on me to the disapproval of his family. With his unexpected passing, he could no longer shield me from their retribution and I preferred to liquidate our assets and return to the frontier rather than fight a protracted battle in the courtroom."

"Merritt," I ask, "is this a reinterpretation of the Pyke family affair? Should I prowl abandoned farmstead for irate relatives to snack on?"

"Worse, Ariane. Instead of mercenaries, they will send lawyers."

"That is fine. They share a delicious flavor of greed and moral flexibility."

Lynn interrupts us and thus ends my hypocrisy. Isaac and Salim are lawyers and they would not be amused by our banter.

“Ahem. While dear brother busies himself with the Red Cabal, I have put my skills to use against our foes. I have always had a way with business dealings and my husband made full use of them. As a result, I have already managed to stabilize our more vulnerable ventures within the state. It helps that no one asks if I have my husband’s permission when I drop your name.”

“Yes, very good, but we are now talking about recent events. Sephare only mentioned an attack in passing and my intuition speaks of enemies on my land. Please start from the beginning.”

Merritt nods. She checks her notes and breathes in. Her back curves under the weight of the recollection and she places both of her hands on the table, palm open against the grainy wood.

“Right. Half a year ago, we started getting hit in a way that I immediately recognized as deliberate. Some key shipments of steel or textile went missing at crucial moments, messing with our supply chains and forcing us to fail deliveries. Mysterious agents underbid us in key contracts proposing prices that could in no way turn a profit. Our image took a hit. We lost quite a few guards to those ambushes as well, which meant that we had to pay a premium on the next. We were facing a domino effect. You know how it is. I managed to track down suspicious movement by newcomers in the city and sent spies after them. They were all slain in one night.”

I force myself into immobility and grab my aura tightly. I know where this is going.

“We did not retreat. I called the militia upon the suspected locations for a raid at dawn and we did find suspicious men. Mercenaries. They all fought to the death.”

“Disposable agents?”

She nods.

“We believe it is so. The bodies we recovered showed marks of fangs and we found a secret passage to an underground secured room. Unfortunately, it was empty when we breached it. Its occupant had already left. We managed to plug a few leaks by checking for signs of thralldom but we are fighting an uphill battle without a vampire on our side. Our people are scared of leaving the city at night.”

“We have vampires on our side. Where is Melusine?”

“Besieged with your followers in Chicago. Fighting a losing battle, or so the reports indicate,” Lynn states in a smooth voice.

She stands up and removes a map of Illinois from a nearby table. Pins cover its surface, many of them around the cities of Marquette and Chicago farther north. Most of the isolated dots remain close to the border to Kentucky and generally in the south where the terrain is more rugged and troops are more mobile.

“Our enemies are extremely well-funded. We are being overwhelmed and dismantled piece by piece. The Red Cabal is forced to neutrality since most of the threats do not appear to be supernatural in nature. Meanwhile, the werewolves are being hunted by people who know who they are. They have closed the gates and secluded themselves.”

“We are facing vampires and they are trying to depose me,” I calmly state.

Both mages look surprised.

“Depose? Like a queen?”

“We vampires are rather old-fashioned when it comes to territory. If one is unable to defend theirs, they are unworthy of holding it. The support of my allies in the Accords can only go so far. If I had not returned, they would have had ample time to destroy my reputation and that of Melusine until defending us became untenable.”

“Could those allies not help us?”

“Of course, but only if we bring undeniable proof of foreign involvement and you have been prevented from doing so. No matter. I am here now. Their little games will end.”

“I admire your confidence, however...”

“You do not have the tools to comprehend what it means to have a Devourer lady on your side.”

I release my grasp on my essence and allow it to spread across the room. Thorny roots crawl through the cracks of the world until tortured mortar and straining planks protest at the edge of our hearing. The shadows lengthen and the gas lights flicker and dim. The temperature drops.

“Please, no more.”

I stop the demonstration and notice that both women have grown noticeably paler.

“It so happens that someone thought me weak,” I tell them. “I will... correct that misconception. Out of all the vampires my sire spawned throughout the millennia, only three ever reached the rank of lord. The time has come to remind those intruders of why we survived. A new ally by the name of Phineas will arrive tomorrow. You will grant him access to all relevant documents, including anything you found in the mercenary’s homes. I want to know how they paid for everything and where the money came from. I want to know who owns the companies that underbid us. In the meanwhile, I shall visit my good friend Jeffrey and solve his trespasser problem, then while he roams the land looking for rats, I shall head north and pay a certain redhead a visit.”

“Do you expect our enemies to have a lord as well?”

“No, dear Lynn, I do not expect it. I am counting on it.”