

“Convincing the mortal military of the seriousness of the situation is paramount, Ariane. Please do not take umbrage when I say this but... in this instance, your appearance might do you a disservice. The same harmless countenance that makes warriors lower their guard will prevent them from taking you seriously,” Sephare said, an expression of fake, polite concern plastered on her delicate traits.

A lie, of course. The cold, calculating Hastings does not plead. She moves chess pieces and when those prove to be unwilling, she merely adapts her strategy. She will have to do so now as I have absolutely no intention of agreeing.

“Power must be used, else it is lost,” I reply.

“I am not sure — “

“You want someone like Jarek or Wilhelm to take my spot and convince our mortal partners that a true soldier is at the helm. A tall man, muscular and bearded like the knights of old. It would work, of course, but I refuse to step down. First, if I am the Hand of the Accords, I must be so in any circumstances. A true leader will not use a shoe in. Second and most importantly, Sephare, I think you forgot an important detail. I have never, ever had a need to change my appearance to terrify people. You can send them my way. I promise I shall be convincing.”

It had been a long ride.

The carriage had taken twists and turns across the pavements until the men were thoroughly lost. Curtains covered the windows as agreed, hiding the streets except for the blurry orbs of gas lamps. The men themselves did not talk. They were all experienced soldiers, veterans of the Civil War who had stood in the midst of their men even as lead harvested limbs and lives around. A tacit agreement prevented them from speaking, from revealing anything to the night folks, including their own nervousness. Eyes stayed on the roof, or the ceiling, or the occasional glint of light reflected on the metal of their bared crosses.

Soon, the noise from the wheel changed and they came to a stop. A polite knock heralded the arrival of their host. The door opened, revealing the smiling — if pale — face of a large man with an impressive, braided long beard.

“Welcome, to the Fortress, gentlemen. I am Wilhelm, the steward. Please, come in.”

They climbed down one after the other. Their ride waited in a grotto of sorts, or a basement. A tall metal gate waited behind them, shut. A corridor led in and up. The walls were stone, unadorned except for racks of equipment. There was no one else.

As the last officer stepped down, they realized the blond man was tall and imposing. Although he wore a perfectly cut suit, the finely tailored tissue only served to underscore the

lean forester constitution hidden within. With his beard and long hair, he belonged more in the primeval forests than here in this man-made catacomb in the heart of Boston — or so they thought it was.

“This way please,” the man said. “The Hand will be receiving you.”

“Are you.., a vampire as well?” the lead man said. He was the smoothest of them all, clean-shaven except for a well-oiled mustache.

“Yes, Mr. Zahn. I am.”

“I hope you have brought sufficient proof of your claims. We will be reporting our findings with honesty.”

“Oh, yes, solid proof since I suppose you would not trust testimonies from our partner.”

“Yes, the werewolves and mages. We live in strange times.”

“That we do,” the vampire agreed, his voice still even and polite.

The group walked through the corridor, finding witch lights guiding their ways. Many doors and side alleys branched out, locked or deserted, revealing nothing except for how expansive the complex was. That such a deep structure could exist under the republic’s very feet filled the officers with concern, but only one did not miss the unfortunate metaphor it drew with the power of the vampires themselves. Their base had snaked its way deep, so deep he was not sure they could ever be rooted out.

“Your partners are the werewolves and mages?” Zahn asked after a pause.

“Yes. We have an understanding with them, especially when it comes to external threats.”

The underlying threat was clear.

“We have the Hand to thank for this alliance. I am confident you will fit at her table just fine.”

“I thought your ‘Hand’ was in charge of military affairs?”

“A hand stretched in welcome, or closed as a fist, is still a hand. Ah, we are here.”

The narrow stone alley widened ever so slightly. At the end, an armored door as thick as a hand silently rotated on its hinges. A wave of cold emerged from the threshold.

“Go on in, I will return when it is time to go,” the blond man said with a last smile, and it revealed a hint of fangs.

Zahn did not hesitate. Following him, the rest of the officers filed into what appeared to be a large command room. Maps lined the wall overlooking desks and tables filled with pieces of armor and antiquated weapons. A massive central table covered in dark gray sand occupied

its center. Inside, there was a man in a strange crimson uniform, fiery hair escaping over a white mask that would fit an old world masquerade. Another leaned against the table in an unseasonal light outfit, one that should make him shiver, yet the cold did not seem to hold any sway. He wore a crooked, cocky grin on his handsome face.

The third was a woman.

The cold emanated from her, or rather, her armor. It was a hypnotic work of strange lights on a midnight sky, ephemeral and always changing, yet eternal all the same. The polar winter had somehow left the sky and twisted itself in the shape of a full plate armor engraved with strange, hypnotic letters of no alphabets they had ever seen, shimmering like dancing lights. The woman's fair face, pale as death, emerged from it. Her blonde hair half cascaded, half held above it. A pair of blue eyes left the table to land on them. It was the only trace of movement they could perceive.

As they woke up from their stupor, the officers realized their crosses were shining a light blue, a strange aura trailing back like snow pushed by a strong wind. It did not feel hostile yet. More of a light wind that never stopped.

"Welcome. I am Lady Ariane of the Nirari, the Hand of the Accords. Take a spot around the table, please."

The men shuffled because there was nothing much else to do than to comply. A rift was forming, one that had not been obvious until now. Those who wanted to protect the peace turned their eyes to the tables and their strange contents. Those who wanted to cleanse the land looked at the woman and considered, more than ever, the necessity to rid the world of such a powerful evil. They also realized the difficulty of such a task. The woman met their glare and smirked. She extended a nightmarish gauntlet ending in dark claws over the table and the sand shifted, merged, split to finally form a comprehensive map of the North American continent. Lines drew over the easily recognizable landmasses to form borders.

The officers stared at this breathtaking rendition. Three spots radiated out like beacons, the map almost... alive with the shifting grains.

"In the past two weeks, we have detected no less than three incursions by forces foreign to our world and intercepted one. In two cases, entire villages have disappeared from the map while the fabric of the world has been damaged. We have also discovered evidence of portals in all three locations. Those are the marks of the same strange skeleton creatures that attacked Warsaw twenty years ago."

"Hold on," an officer asked, "How can you be so sure? I'm not calling you a liar, I just want to know."

The woman spared a glance at him.

"I was there when we fought them off."

"You were in Europe?"

“Yes. If you are here, you must know about the dead world and the possibility of portals leading there. The skeletons and their lackeys crossed such a portal. Their foot soldiers mostly fought with swords and strange metal, but they also had a unique weapon of dire effect, an orb that captured the attention of any humans who came close to it. The skeletons fought with an extremely powerful brand of magic fueled by life itself, which they were able to retrieve from the environment. The third incursion and its participants perfectly matched those characteristics.”

“Do you have solid evidence we could present to our superiors?”

The woman pointed at the tables lining the wall.

“Those are pieces of armor and gear the invaders had with them. The alloy that forms their armor is light and made using a process we do not understand. You will be given several such pieces of gear so your researchers may examine them in detail. You will also receive the frozen remains of a few foot soldiers as well as this. We will not, however, give you an orb as they are too unpredictable and might kill everyone around them if activated.”

The woman silently stepped to a side wall, the officers following her after a delay. A skeleton waited on it, displaying clear signs of damage. It was incredibly tall. It was also engraved, metal-encrusted, and covered in armor that was not designed to protect flesh. The empty eye sockets seemed to follow the men as they moved around it. One of the officers touched a tibia and lifted it with some difficulty.

“Heavy. Must be all that metal. What is it?”

“Electrum and platinum. Not all skeletons are built the same and there are major differences of power between one specimen and another. That one was on the weaker end of the scale.”

“Why do you think that may be?”

“We believe the skeletons are made from willing humans and a significant amount of the planet’s... life force. We surmise that the process varies from one person to another to match them, and that the most powerful individuals were already mages while they were still alive. We also believe they are trying to make more of themselves.”

“What are they here for? What do they want from us?”

“They are locusts, eating then moving on.”

The woman hissed softly. The room grew more oppressive, shadows creeping around the corners. The crosses burned more brightly for a while. Eventually, the light returned. It took its time to do so.

“The skeletons are fully sapient. They speak. That one could communicate in English, and we believe they already harvested captive to teach them. Given enough time, they will increase their numbers and eat our world alive. We will not let them of course.”

“This dead world, can we visit it?” Zahn asked.

The woman turned her attention to him, then moved back to the table.

“We will arrange it. But not tonight and most definitely not around here. A portal is never safe. One should never be opened around a large population center.”

She pointed at the three spots on the map.

“Those separate marks are distant, and we believe they might be far away from each other in the dead world as well although we have been unable to confirm it yet. We suspect the skeletons are... mapping the place.”

“Like one finds the best mushroom spots...” one of the officers whispered.

“When they are ready, they might bring more forces to bear to commence harvesting the local populations, depending on the availability of resources. Skeletons are jealous of the energy they use and it takes quite a bit to open a portal, so they will favor spots with much to get, lightly defended cities.”

“Humans are the richest source of life energy?”

“I personally believe that it is not the case, but that they have the most experience draining intelligent creatures.”

“Do they have a base of some sort, one we could siege and destroy?” another asked.

“Good question. I do believe they have a secondary base somewhere around, however destroying it would be a temporary measure. It is likely the common base is the Last City, or so the prisoner we had called it. The city itself harbors a hundred of those beings including some of remarkable power. The amount of servants also seems to be in the hundreds of thousands.”

The men mulled the news in silence for a little while.

“More importantly, the skeletons use their power sparingly while on the offensive, and we have proof that they do not trust each other much. If we were to attack, however...”

“They would unite against a foreign invader. I’ve seen it out west with the Comanche. You think you’re against a tribe, then three thousand warriors attack your vanguard,” another said.

“Precisely. The Last City has stood alone for a very long time. Who knows what defensive tools it has accumulated over the eons? We need to learn more or any expeditionary corps faces annihilation. In order to proceed, I propose the following measures. First, we need to protect our people and deny the skeletons resources as much as we can. Two, we must capture a slave of theirs and interrogate them.”

“Can we capture a skeleton?” Zahn asked.

“We have no idea how one would go about disabling one. We consider the task too dangerous for now.”

“Are those slave humans?”

“They appear to be human, but shorter, slightly stooped and bald, with strange traits. Dissections have shown different organ sizes and a missing gallbladder. A great portion of them have small tails and they have nictitating membranes. We are not sure if they are human at this stage, though the resemblance is... remarkable.”

“Incredible. Could they have been kidnapped after the fall from Eden? Or are they demons?”

“I shall leave the theological questions to you,” the vampire interrupted drily, “I believe we were discussing measures. Now, one thing we have tried so far was to patrol the dead world to intercept or find them, but we have run into an issue. Ground forces will be constantly attacked and eventually overwhelmed by Merghols, a local species that feeds off magical energy. An airship cannot function for very long because the current models rely on our planet’s ambient energy, something the dead world is devoid of. For now we have no recourse.”

“How about a true expedition? A cavalry detachment would wipe those creatures from the field!”

“Of this I have no doubt, but then there would be another field, and another after that. The Merghols are without number.”

“Nasty things they are,” the smirking man said.

The officers turned to him, suspicious. There was something off about the man, about the way the blue, unnatural lights reflected in his eyes. His posture spoke of aloof confidence.

“I intended to introduce my partners later, but I suppose now is fine too,” the woman said. “This is Jeffrey. He represents this nation’s werewolves while Oliver here stands for the mages.”

“Kind of you to throw me a bone,” Jeffrey said.

One of the officers frowned, clearly unamused.

“If you think that —”

He made to take a step forward. Before his foot even touched the ground, a deep growl escaped from Jeffrey, freezing the man in his tracks. It was not the animalistic noise that stopped the man but its depth and power, one that could only come from a chest several

times the size of the person facing them. It was a growl that spoke of volume before it even spoke of violence, and it inspired with both aplenty.

“Please do not do that,” the werewolf said in a clipped voice.

The temperature lowered and cross radiance started to overtake the light of magical lamps.

“Please show my other guests the same respect I extended to you,” the vampire said.

“Let us return to the main question, that of countermeasures. You were mentioning patrols,” Zahn interrupted.

Once more, the light returned to normal levels.

“I have mentioned the limits of such attempts, although we are looking into solutions.”

“How do the skeleton mages cross the planet then?”

“Their orbs and powers allow them to control the beasts. It has been confirmed on multiple occasions. We suspect they might have means of transportation as well. In order to prevent them from having free reign, we will have to intercept raiding parties on our side. For that, we must rely on mundane reports of attacks or villages that last contact with the wider world. A fast response team should be formed to investigate the reports as fast as possible or we risk losing too many people. We are also working on a sort of... sensor. A detector to find breaches as they occur.”

“Those are temporary measures. You mentioned capturing a slave?”

“Yes. This is a task made complicated by the existence of a killing curse they carry in battle. It binds them to their skeletal overlords. We have witnessed one malfunction back in the Austrian empire, however we are also looking into an interdiction field that would prevent the hex from triggering.”

“And if you do capture a soldier, will we have access to him as well?”

“Yes,” the vampire assured, “just like we will leave the equipment here with you, we will share what we learned for the future of us all.”

“We know you can wipe information from their minds,” an officer said.

“Then I suggest that you take a captive by yourself,” the vampire suggested in a sweet voice.

“Right, capture and combat. How do we fight those things?” another asked.

“Haven’t met a thing that an elephant gun couldn’t stop,” one of the oldest officers said, his sideburns bristling at the thought.

The vampire smirked.

“Standard armament deals with their soldiers well enough, provided one does not get too close to their orbs. The skeletons are more of a problem. Excessive damage will overwhelm their shield, but it needs to be concentrated. They have spells that can destroy fixed positions with extreme accuracy, making the use of artillery and machine guns hazardous. Even airships will be at risk because the skeletons use fire.”

“Then what?”

“My men can use a ritual to cut the skeletons from the world’s life force for a while,” Oliver said from behind his mask.

“The area of effect is large. The spell lasts for half a day, more than enough to triumph or perish.”

“My kind has few tools to kill them but we can certainly keep one or two occupied,” Jeffrey added. “Though you might want to get some specialized gear, for good hunting. Like the IGL stuff.”

A wide grin spread over the strange man’s face. The vampire rolled her eyes behind the mortals’ back.

“Illinois Guns of Liberty? I hear that name all the time, do vampires have a stake in them?” an officer grumbled.

The woman merely smiled.

“I have another question,” the oldest officer said with a scowl. “Why do you monsters care?”

The men held their breath, waiting to see if the woman would reply to the insult. She mulled her answer for some time.

“Remember that we were first in line to face the Scourge Hive. We see ourselves as the custodians of this world. There has always been much hiding in the shadows, and we have always protected mankind from it. If you are too cynical to believe this explanation then the other is that...”

The lights disappeared from her armor until there was nothing left than glacial darkness. A purple light flashed through her eyes. The men took an instinctive step back when their crosses shone so bright they threatened to melt.

“We do not like to share.”

She walked to the table and dispersed the map with a wave of her hand. The gray sand returned to its shapeless form.

“Right, gentlemen. Regardless, I believe we have heard enough,” Zahn said. “The secretary will want to know of this. In the meanwhile, we agree... in principle. Such a threat cannot be left unchecked. We will be seeing each other more.”

“Happy hunting,” the vampire replied.

July 17th, 1884

My paintings line the wall of the Accords fortress ballroom, each one depicting a fantastic view either from the Watcher, the dead world, or faerie itself. A massive skeleton head half buried in a dreary plain sides with our dearest eldritch maker overlooking the battle of Black Harbor, then a dreary winter plain next to Sinead’s aunt, Carnaciel, rising above the world tree in her ethereal form. We have already had to install a round of guards to wake up human guests from their stupor. I had to refuse seven separate offers to buy my work at astronomical prices, although I take it as a compliment despite their persistence. A brilliant pianist invited for the occasion plays works of my beloved Camille Saint-Saens while waiters and waitresses walk among the crowd, offering refreshments and, sometimes, a taste of their own life force to the revelers. I throne at the end of the room with other hosts by my side, sometimes Constantine, sometimes Sephare, sometimes no vampires at all. I smile to my latest guest and clasp her wrinkled hand into my own.

“Thank you so much for coming. Are you sure you are feeling fine? Would you like a glass of water?”

“For the last time, stop fussing ‘Aunt Ariane’,” June retorts in a curt voice. Her tolerance for nonsense has decreased over the decade while her wit remains intact. I still worry about her. She is almost eighty.

“I told you I would be fine coming tonight so long as you return the favor.”

“I will endeavor to do so,” I assure her.

“See that you do. Pah! Why do you have to look like a freshly grown daisy? My head reminds me you are my aunt, but my heart wants to tell you to keep your fussing to yourself, young lady!”

“Oh very well, I shall not worry then. In any case, the time has come for the traditional speech.”

“Don’t make it too long or boring!”

“That is my goal as well.”

I stand up as the music ends, then wait for silence to spread across the room. There is no need for a sound enchantment here. The room’s acoustics are great.

Speeches.

No one really wants them yet a party would not be complete without one. Such a strange paradox.

With a sigh, I start speaking.

“Age is seldom a matter of perspective. Everyone is born on a certain day, at a certain time. However, we denizens of the night can be said to have been born twice, the second time by far the most illustrious occasion. I firmly disagree.

“I only survived my first month because of the support and loyalty of my father. My human father, Hercule Reynaud. He accepted me for who I had become and gifted me the rifle with which I slew the servants of Gabriel sent after me. It was his support that carried me through a difficult battle, and it is his memory I elect to honor tonight on the hundredth year of my existence. As of two this afternoon, I am a century old.

“I have much to boast about and we children of the Watcher are not exactly known to be humble, but rather than submit you to an unwelcome litany of my deeds, let me talk about those who led me here. Often, mortals are the ones who tie us up to this world. They give color and music to our darkness and bring a veneer to the Hunt. Without them, we would forget. This, you know. Let me speak of them, those who left us and those who remain. It seems fitting.

“My father was the first. After he saw me off, he would visit me on occasion while I was in hiding. He once asked to see my fangs which he promptly grabbed with his fingers in order to test their sharpness. His loss while I had exiled myself to Illinois was... difficult, but he did leave me with my first focus which he acquired after years of trading. A last gift.

“Loth of Skoragg helped me, but I would not count him as a human. The next would be my first Vassal, Dalton. Dalton loved to threaten people with his pistol then shoot, revealing a second, hidden one before they could recover. It was an intimidation strategy I always loved.”

Little by little, I reveal tidbits about those who help carry me this far. After Dalton I mention Nashoba and his habit to remind me he can see the future, members of Isaac’s human forces who died to the Herald, members of the Dream back in Marquette ages ago, the mayor who stood proud against the Lancaster assault despite his fear, Hopkins the mad bomber to whom I temporarily lost half of my hair, the courageous women of the Home Guard including Sybil who would only aim for the crotch. The list is long. For each, I only mention an amusing achievement rather than detail their qualities. I want them to be remembered here as well. John before he became a vampire joins the list, Crow the warrior,

King who sacrificed his life to save me in Alexandria as I burned from the assault of the sun, the space mage I saved in the library and whose studies paved the way for the fae portal. Sheridan, who is still alive and well with his unaging wife — Constantine does not appreciate the reminder. The ship captain whom I lost a bet to during my adventure with Melinda Bingle. The list continues, and I can eventually see in the eyes of my kin that they too wish to share a few words about their own mortals. I quickly end with the female guard who became a White Cabal squad leader then let the conversation spread, everyone eager to talk about the missing or the departed. I feel it is an important moment.

Gifts come next, as is tradition. Constantine offers me a lightweight casting glove with an exterior made of tissue, a remarkably thin affair I could wear with a dress. Wilhelm offers me a carnivorous potted plant to keep in my Illinois office. Jimena somehow found a rare Nippon-made 'Tanegashima' flintlock rifle, recently made with ancient techniques. Loth has an upgraded war mask sent to complete the Aurora. Many offer paintings from unusual or little known artists, many of whom I discover with pleasure. The Rolands gift me with an entire, artistically made piano. Jarek made me an enchanted flag. Eventually, the line dwindles and Melusine arrives with a massive, covered painting.

"It took me a while but I believe I found the perfect present. Here it is."

She removes the veil to display a rather convincing rendition of me, running away from a tide of swine set on fire, their porcine eyes mad with pain.

I can still hear those abominable squeals.

"You somehow forgot to mention those aspects of your memories, and since they play an important role in your life, I thought this little piece of art could jog your memory."

"I should have left you to drown in that river."

"You are welcome, Ariane. I will always be here for you when you take yourself too seriously. Have a great evening!"