

I decide against leaving immediately and spend the rest of the night patrolling Marquette. I pay a particular attention to auras and smells. Unfortunately, if there are any vampires around, they are being cautious. I do meet with some success while inspecting my personnel one by one and finding one under the thrall of an enemy. The influence appears as a light hue in the man's aura. A summary inspection of his neck reveals two discrete bite marks.

I manage to control myself before I kill him on the spot. He is a victim of circumstances, not a traitor. Once the influence is removed he confesses with great fear that he was ordered to send all manners of financial and trade information to an address in Chicago. Truly, if Melusine has not betrayed me, those people have some gall. I let him go and complete my purge the next afternoon just as Phineas arrives.

The Lancaster warrior dives into charts and legal documents with a Rosenthal-like delectation, peeling the truth wherever it may be. With him on our side, it will not be long before hostile fundings are tracked to their sources. Already, a few 'persons of interest' in Marquette are set to receive some pointed questions in the near future. I leave Phineas to his intellectual hunt and grab my armor.

Oh yes, I see no point in holding back now. Besides, the werewolves appreciate true strength. I wait for nightfall and slip out of the compound to an empty warehouse at the very edge of the city, near the road to Moonside. I call Metis and the old girl gallops excitedly by my side. She, too, can smell a good bloodshed coming.

*"Now the real question is, can you carry me while I wear that."*

This is a valid point. Metis is a powerful, fast warhorse, not a Percheron. I wonder if she can accomodate me.

No sooner have I asked that she neighs and flips her head with great agitation. As I stand there like an idiot, she turns on herself and lightly kicks me. I block and complain.

*"Metis, what is the meaning of... Ow!"*

She is gone.

I stand there dejected for five minutes, until I hear hooves and she returns wearing her barding.

I will never understand how she puts it on.

This is the barding Loth made years ago from light metal and alligator hide, She looks absolutely regal in it. I smile at her confidence and place a hand on her flank. She bolts away.

*"Come on, Metis, it was a genuine concern!"*

A proud neigh. She snorts and turns her head away.

*"I mean, I never doubted that you could carry me!" I lie, "I was just concerned that you might find the armor cold and uncomfortable."*

Considering that it would freeze a mortal solid on contact, my worries are genuine. Well, they would be if I were being truthful.

Metis casts a dubious, red glance at me and shows some teeth. I apologize respectfully, call her the queen of destriers and the best pony on earth and elsewhere until she finally deigns to let me climb on her back, then we are off at breakneck speed.

I think she wants to make a point so I go with the flow and let her race through the plains of Illinois. It occurs to me that if we hit someone right now, they might as well be standing on a train track with a meat grinder hanging in front of their face. No such accidents happen. We arrive at Moonside shortly after. I ask Metis to slow down, reign in my aura, and remove my helmet. No need to appear too hostile in those trying times.

It makes little difference to the two sentries hiding in the bush by the village's entrance. I hear soft curses when I arrive like a nightmare (haha) and stop next to their hiding spot. Branches wilt overhead while a puddle whitens with spiderweb lines of frost. I breathe in the scent of wolves, of their fear, of harvested fields. A tension hangs in the air, not just because of my presence, but because of a general feeling of unease. Werewolves are meant to be predators, just like us but less competently. It grates me to see them so vigilant because it implies weakness. I cannot abide that in one of my faithful minions.

"You lot. Tell Jeffrey that Ariane has returned," I tell the bush and the men behind. Nothing stops except their breath. A bit late for that, gentlemen. Besides, you two reek of sweat.

"Metis can always use more ears. Do not make me repeat myself."

That does it. Whether the familiar name or the familiar threat jostles them into action, it matters not. They race to the center of the village to fetch their leader. I dismount and walk to the wood board on which the village proudly announces itself. I always found 'Moonside' to be quite tacky, yet I believe I understand it now. Jeffrey always wanted a haven where his folk could be wholly and publically themselves. And since the place is out there in the boonies, they normally can. Something must have changed recently because as I look at the many thatched roofs and fields, I find something missing.

Namely, a lot of naked people. Werewolves will not clothe themselves unless compelled.

I only have to wait a minute before a group comes running. Jeffrey jogs down the road, followed by two columns of fighters. I raise a brow when I notice that they wear leather dusters but no shirts. The women in their midst wear horizontal bands to cover their breasts, but leave their stomachs and cleavage shamelessly exposed. Ah, werewolves and dressing codes. I should not complain. At least they covered their genitals.

Jeffrey slows down at a respectful distance and gives me a devious smile that does not reach his eyes. He is quite dashing with his rugged good look and corded muscles. It helps that he approaches Jarek in height, if not in size. Although his roguish facade has not

changed, I can see calculation running behind his keen brown eyes. Recent events must have tried his patience.

“Good evening to you, Jeffrey,” I greet pleasantly, “I heard that you have a pest problem.”

“Aaaah bosswoman! You have returned to us in our hour of upset, just as I said you might. Didn’t I June?”

He elbows the lithe blonde woman by his side. She rolls her eyes dramatically.

“I said to her, I said, that’s a bosswoman problem for sure. No way the usual bounty hunters would bother with smart stuff when they think silver is enough, no! Not like that Hendricks fellow who just rode into town asking about large beasts in spring, remember? That guy was dafter than a headless goose, he was.”

“Jeffrey…”

“Right! We do have a pest problem, and those pests are quite pesky if you catch my meaning. because they’re a pain in my backside. See, they know exactly who we are. All of us.”

I think I know what he means. Very few people are aware of a werewolf community thanks to my efforts. Of course, there are rumors of large creatures in the woods of the region but so far all those who visited Moonside wrongly assumed that werewolves were hiding within the populace. By the time they realized that their quarry was neither hiding nor ‘in’ the populace, it was too late.

“Do they use specific methods?”

“Yes. It all started two months ago.”

As Jeffrey speaks, his demeanor changes. The affable persona he usually dons like a cloak fades away to reveal the cunning leader underneath. It pains me to admit that I was one of the first to be fooled, when I unwittingly allowed him to bring a whole pack to my lands.

“First we lost a patrol, but said patrol was composed of two very aggressive young men and they are the most likely to leave. Unfortunately, we found a body in a far field a few days later. He had been killed by silver bullets at a long range. Tracking them to their source was made impossible because the culprits used vast amounts of mint oil to saturate the place. Everyone got a headache, including yours truly. It happened two more times.”

“Culprits? Plural?”

“Yes. The bodies we found showed signs of multiple bullet wounds. We suspect that the attackers shoot a volley to prevent their victim from escaping and potentially recovering once the bullets are removed. I personally led a tracking party to all the surrounding camps and valleys around the place but we never found more than traces of their passage. And that damn stench.”

He sniffs.

“God I can smell it in my nightmares. Do you know that I used to enjoy mint tea? Jesus. In any case, we have had troubles tracking them because the entire west part of the village stinks to high heaven.”

“I see.”

I consider the situation for a while. I have several tools that do not rely too much on smell and a powerful scent is not as debilitating to me as it is to the wolves.

“When was the latest attack?” I ask.

“Two days ago, by the edge of Zeller’s field. They tried to shoot at a patrol but failed, then legged it with horses after dispersing a full vial of their horrible oil.”

“Can you lead me there?”

“Of course, right this way.”

I leave Metis behind to follow Jeffrey on foot. The squad closes in behind us, showing a surprising amount of discipline for their kind. They match my walking speed. I do not jog in full plate. I either stomp or I sprint, none of that infantry routine thank you very much.

“I put rules and protocols in place to avoid further deaths,” he tells me. “There are large patrols moving around the surroundings in irregular patterns, a curfew, and we have set traps in some places. We even killed two of their horses that way. But it can’t last.”

I feel Jeffrey’s gaze on me and turn to meet it. He flinches.

“Damn it’s cold tonight. Anyway, we cannot stay cloistered for long. We are already pushing ourselves to live a normal life.”

“I understand, Jeffrey. Do not worry. You are one of mine.”

“I appreciate the help. I...”

He snarls. Ghastly, giant fangs grow in his mouth, eerily disturbing on his still-human face.

“I only wishhhh to find a throat to rip mysshelf.”

I deploy my essence around in a way that only he can feel. The polar wave forces his jaw to go slack. I have no time for this.

“The night is young,” I tell him, not unkindly.

“Yes. And full of surprises.”

Zeller's field sits at the edge of the village, nestled between two stretches of forest. Only a few tracks of blood and the lingering scent of peppermint reveal that the locale is more than just a boring field. I place my helmet back on my head and take down the mask. It has a function that blocks noxious gas and I use it now. Even without breathing, the aggressive aroma would still be distracting.

"Stay there."

The werewolves do not protest. Some of them even pinch their noses in distress. I walk to the epicenter of the herbal explosion to search for traces of an intruder. I find it easily: someone smashed a bottle of oil against a tree.

With their bare hands.

The darkened piece of glass showing a dark set of fingerprints speaks for itself. Whoever used it was careless and in a hurry. They are making it almost too easy. I use the glyphs embedded in the armor's powerful gauntlet to cast a tracking spell. Unfortunately, it returns no result. The enemies are too far, and the construct is too amateurish. I am not giving up yet.

There are only two possibilities. Either the attackers ride from a distant base every time, or they have a base nearby that the wolves have been unable to find. Both options have their own risks but I would lean towards a local base since one of the attacks occurred a few days after the other. As for the base escaping detection, well, Illinois is vast and recently quite minty.

My inspection done, I grab the shard and leave the forest, finding the group alert and away. They collectively take a step back when I arrive, until I force the shard into a piece of tissue and down my glove.

"They are too far for my spell to pick up but I suggest that we ride a mile out and try to catch their trail."

"It has been two days, it would be faded by now."

"Not necessarily. One of them hurt his hand on the bottle he threw. Which means that some of the scent may linger."

"Maybe. Let's try it."

I call Metis who arrives from the forest to our left, this time. Her space shenanigans send the werewolves in a tizzy, or so I think until I catch a whispered sentence.

“It’s her! The ear-snatcher.”

Metis is now Moonside’s boogeyman. Or boogeyhorse? Bah, it matters not so long as she gets her well-deserved infamy. We ride out through a thick ring of trees and out onto more empty fields. Once we are far enough, I have them fan out and we ride in a curve that follows the edge of the village. Eventually, I pick a powerful perfume on the wind.

“That way,” June says. Jeffrey’s blonde beta points to a lone tree standing proudly on the side of a dirt road. We find our first hint discarded on the floor: a leather glove of average quality with two fingers torn and dark specks of blood. A good half of the fabric is saturated with blood. Discarded bandages litter the sparse grass.

“They must have made a halt there to stop the bleeding,” Jeffrey comments with his sleeve held over his nose.

I do not comment.

It would have been easy to find the tracks left by our foes. A simple organized search would have revealed those clues within an hour, yet Jeffrey could not manage that because... in the end, he is limited by his nature. The werewolf curse was of human making while ours is divine. They failed to sniff down their quarry and thus... gave up. Whoever sent those men must be familiar with the nature of my allies, their flaws and their struggles. They accounted for those, but they did not account for me.

I do not need the werewolves to be perfect. I merely ask for their loyalty. They have proven it before when I brought them to bear against the Scourge Hive. I have not forgotten, and I have the skills they lack.

The glove proves a much more powerful focus than the shard was. I believe that some items, especially those charged with meaning, possess more inherent trace than other more mundane ones, another quirk of magic. A damaged garment soiled with the blood of an escaping criminal gives off much power, and the spell caught on it.

“That way.”

We ride out, this time much faster. The pack behind me growls and snarls as they run, still wearing their human forms. We make good time and I once again marvel at my companions’ seemingly unending stamina. Their auras merge into a large cohesive whole that smells of hunt, but also of heat and flesh, which I cannot quite grasp. I still enjoy the presence of this great roiling mass that the pack has become. Each individual helps the other calm the curse, direct it, become part of a greater whole. Even their smell and nudity fade in my mind while I enjoy the experience.

It certainly helps that I am upwind and do not have to see them.

The plains of Illinois move past us, flat expanses of grass decorated with small copses of trees. The hills roll up and down under an immense sky. There are no trails here, and no farmsteads.

For a while, we just move with determination. All hunts must come to an end, however, and I slow down on the edge of an empty field. A heavy log marks its boundaries. Someone carved the initials 'JP' on its surface with a sharp knife.

"This is the Patterson estate. We have an understanding with Joseph, the patriarch," Jeffrey says. "We stay off his land and he doesn't bother us."

"Not tonight. The trail leads on."

He looks uncomfortable.

"The owner of this glove is close," I continue, "very close."

Jeffrey frowns. Just like me, he cannot easily go back on agreements.

"We are demanding explanations, not trespassing to steal his milk and bark at his cow, Jeffrey."

"Lead on."

Whoever lives here believed in being self-sufficient, though it must have changed recently. I dismount and we walk through the field and over a small incline to a compound surrounded by a relatively sturdy palissade, with a fresh coat of paint. Jeffrey's bubbling aura betrays his suspicion. This must be a recent addition to the farmstead.

A locked double gate bars our way. I place my hand against it and push. Wood groans and cracks. A chain snaps.

We walk in.

This is it. Three buildings now stand in our path. A slightly sagging one that shows signs of age, a well-built barn, and a larger, newer house with an attic.

A man peeks from an upper floor shutter and ducks back with a soft swear. I can hear eight heartbeats from the newer house and seven from the older one. I can smell horses in the barn. A light smell of gun oil mixes with that of grain, beast, dust, and peppermint. More than that, the Dvor instincts in me scream their outrage. Someone harbored the enemy. Someone who had no cause to go after me.

The aura of the werewolves shifts too. Someone whispers about Joseph Patterson never having horses before. More mutter about the horrendous smell. Furious outrage flares among the pack.

"Not yet, Jeffrey. I need answers first. Then you can have them."

"Please... Hurry."

The pack tenses. They instinctively spread out behind. This is the ambush part of the attack.

Now for the theatrics.

“Mistral.”

A frigid wind carries the armor’s glacial aura forward. A lantern flickers. Frost crawls on the glass of a single window while, behind, the horses whinny softly. They caught my scent.

“Come out.”

A scramble in the house. Someone moves the nearest shutter with a laughable attempt at stealth. I turn my gaze upon the mortal, and my helmet swivels ominously.

“Do not make me repeat myself.”

“We don’t want anything to do with you! Go away, this is private property!” the person bleats.

A man, rather old. Joseph Patterson, I’d wager. The attackers in the second house slip weapon barrels through the windows. Cute. Ultimately useless.

“I will not leave without answers, and you will not like me asking questions. Neither will your family.”

A sigh. Footsteps, interrupted by frantic whispers. They stop when a revolver clicks and a grown man utters a threat. Interesting. It appears that one of the hunters does not trust his host.

A part of me decides that the objective here is to retrieve the leader and any documents they may have. Another enjoys the prelude of threats and banter that comes before the inevitable violence. The last part revels at my newfound power. I know where everyone is. I know what they can do, which is very little. I smell the acrid perfume of their fear. I stand there while the patriarch glances fearfully outside with the full knowledge that I am exactly where I am meant to be and there is no force inside of my territory that can challenge that. I let my arrogance radiate.

The door opens. A fearful man peers at me from behind the futile barrier of nailed planks. He hesitates before standing on the threshold. The cross on full display on his chest shines a nice blue. I recognize the old promise of ash and retribution, much more potent than it used to be. It feels so nice to be recognized for one’s own achievements.

“I know what you are, vampire.”

“I keep hearing this as if it made any difference. I shall cut to the chase. *Quiet.*”

I raise a finger and block the sound of our conversation from those still inside. Another spell and I see the interior clearly through the wall. I count a scared woman with a ruddy face, four



children, and a nervous man with a beard holding the muzzle of his colt against the youngest kid.

“You will invite me in and I will spare your family, or I will tear you apart and let the one you pray to sort them out.”

“You cannot go in.”

“They can,” I add with a smile. The old man looks behind me and blanches.

“It is finished, Patterson. Make your choice. You have until your guest loses his nerves to make your decision.”

“I can’t... They have us...”

“Oh, I can hear him breathe harder. Will he shoot your eldest first, or will it be your wife?”

“Damn you. Damn you! Come in...”

“Bolt.”

A ray of pure blood magic pierces the wall and lands squarely between the eyes of the hostage-taker, killing him on the spot. It drills through the back, until I hear a horse panic. A bit heavy-handed on this one. Ah, well.

“Much obliged,”

I turn and take a step towards the new house.

“Fire!” someone yells.

Bullets clang uselessly against the armor. I let them, because this is fun. Some miss and hit the ground instead despite my proximity. Those idiots waste much silver! Do they not know the price of an ounce? Bloody wastrels.

“Shred.”

The front of the house explodes in a hail of shards. Eight men scream. One, who was hit in the eye, is quite vocal. I take a small jump towards the attic and smash through the few planks still attached. The floor groans under my weight. This is what I had been looking for. I calmly make my way through a writing desk where some correspondence awaits.

My slow pace surprises the three men present so much that they forget to shoot. The oldest finally recovers his spirits just as I place those documents in a ratty leather bag.

“Monster! Die!”

He empties a revolver on my back. The bullets ping pointlessly against Loth's impenetrable aegis.

"Warriors should face their own deaths with dignity, do you not agree?" I ask.

Click. Click. Click. His eyes meet mine. He does not wear a cross. I slap his meager defenses aside and seize his mind in an iron vice. Lots of guilt here, tempered by alcohol and rage. We will have time to be more intimately acquainted later.

"Sleep."

With a prisoner and his papers under an arm, I jump down just as the door to the attic bursts open. A man clamors after me while I leave.

"This isn't over."

"Indeed not."

The werewolves have waited far too long for this moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen, they are all yours. Do enjoy yourselves," I tell them.

Growls and snarls answer. Hybrid forms surge after defenders who apparently forgot to reload and the bloodshed begins. Jeffrey stayed back. His interest is still on Patterson.

"Why? We always left you alone."

"You... ain't natural."

I am surprised at the hurt in Jeffrey's eyes. Oh, his policy towards human neighbors might change in the near future.

"Ah, but it is not just faith that motivated you, is it?"

I grab for my prisoner and realize that he is frozen solid. Ah, oops? I may have forgotten about the armor's effect. I drop the corpse, which unfortunately breaks, and pick up a note instead.

"A receipt for payment of seven dollars per week of rent to a Mr. Joseph Patterson."

"You fucking sellout..."

"Quite a princely sum for such a hovel. Now, as promised, your family gets to live. You have fifteen minutes to pile on whatever you owe on the nearest cart. I will even consent to you keeping one of the horses."

The old man pales even more, something that I thought impossible.

“But... you can't”

I do not speak. Sharp claws dug into a support beam somewhere behind me. The man lets out a short yelp while I hear a snarl.

“Or you could keep wasting time...” I suggest.

They rush, a pathetic scramble to carry your entire life in a few minutes. Patterson turns to us when their cart is filled. Behind, the rest of his family waits in a terrified huddle.

“They can go now.”

He blinks.

“They? Agh!”

The claws of my right hand dig in his shoulders. I bring him to his knees.

“I said that your family may leave. You may not.”

“Nooo!” the tallest boy screams, but the others hold him back. Ah, yes, I can see the anger in his eyes. The fury. I could act on it, since he is almost old enough. Instead, I lean forward and smile.

“You can try to get me when you are old enough. Just remember not to miss your first shot, because I never do. On your way now, or I will consider that you declined my more than generous offer.”

They leave. I drink Patterson dry. By the time he dies, the werewolves have cleaned themselves.

“Someone please set the horses free,” I request.

While Jeffrey sends a minion, I grab the flickering lantern and smash it against the dry roof. I repeat the maneuver three times, one for each building until the entire farm is ablaze. I use the provided light to take another document from the list, this one a map. The hunters were truly careless. Perhaps they underestimated the werewolves' intellect, or perhaps they expected to have the time to destroy incriminating documents if they were spotted. It matters little. I give it to Jeffrey, who dutifully inspects it. His eyes still shine with a deep resentment and his usual demeanor is gone, at least for now.

“What is this?”

“A list of safe houses and supply caches. I must deal with the main threat. You handle the raiders. Find the bases. Kill everyone. Burn everything.”

Ah, it is good to be home.

Phineas finds me the next afternoon, back in Marquette, with the pride of a man who just resolved a particularly complex problem.

*“Our opponents have proven quite canny. All the return addresses have turned out to be drop points. I checked on the map of Chicago you currently have. They correspond to law offices and boxes. It would have been a dead end, except that several of the shipments requested and transferred by our mysterious foes are leather goods. Gloves, belts, soles to replace equipment damaged in operation and sourced here quickly.”*

*“They bought their own supplies?”*

*“Whoever designed this operation clearly has a good knowledge of tactics but their understanding of strategy and supply chain in particular remains quite lacking. There are several traces of such mishap in the documents I found. The important point, however, is that there is only one cheap and reliable source of leather goods in Illinois.”*

*“The local tannery. I funded the purchase of sewing machines myself.”*

*“Indeed, and the founder’s grandson holds you in high esteem. The goods were delivered to a warehouse block in Chicago. I have the address.”*

*“You think that our mysterious adversaries might be hiding there?”*

*“Payment was made there and a receipt was issued, with reference to an account at the Chicago Trade Bank. This implies the presence of a support staff. Where the support staff is, you will find answers. This is the best lead I can get without being on site.”*

*“How serendipitous because I am done here. Prepare your luggage. The time has come to nail the problem at the source.”*