

The Amaretta stronghold lies at the heart of the Atlas mountain outside of the grasp of colonial France. There, seers have built a secluded temple in shades of ochre, sober and hidden like an ancient ruin. Patches of green could be taken as errant copses of thorny growths from the sky. Only by getting close would the casual observer see the care and attention given to desert roses and cedars. I can tell it irks them to no end that I would find the place so easily when summoned.

In order to avoid attention, I have left the Fury on standby over the Mediterranean. It has been the matter of an hour to run there. Normally, vampires would avoid such wasteful expenditure but I am far beyond such concerns. I still asked Metis to carry me over the last few kilometers. She does enjoy treading new ground.

I am let through ranks of veiled sentinels wielding a variety of polearms. They do not seem surprised to see me, which is expected of a bloodline that can see the future. A silent attendant leads me deeper into the complex. A few mortals glance at me from arched doorways, fearful about my arrival. My dress clearly marks me as an outsider. I see they have no men here. A terrible loss. Some of them are quite fun to be around but I suppose a little fun might distract them from all that navel gazing. In short order, we arrive at the heart of the complex. A circular gate leads into a room built as an amphitheater, and in the recession rests one of the last living Progenitors I have not supped on yet.

Resting on a bed of white, translucent flower as the only spot of ethereal glory in this drab fortress, Amaretta is one of the few female vampires turned as a mature woman. Strands of gray and crow eyes give an appearance of wisdom and dignity to her severe face, an image reinforced by the pristine dress clinging to her thin body. She could be from anywhere around the Mediterranean. Masters and a couple of ladies in similar, pale garb sit around in the stone rafters according to their seniority. The more powerful members have the privilege to meditate closer to that unwithered corpse. How can she even exist like this? As I watch, the strongest lady stands and approaches, face veiled and eyes shut.

“Greetings, and welcome to our sanctum, Daughter of Thorns and Hunger.”

Ah yes, showing off Nashoba’s little name for me. Cute.

“It is my pleasure,” I reply with a smile.

Ah, the game of the old ones. All fanged smiles and hidden hatred. But I must play. It would not do to antagonize one of my most pivotal supporters.

“My mistress has summoned you to impart wisdom. She must not abandon her concentration so I will be her voice in her stead. Please grant me a moment.”

The lady grabs Amaretta’s wrist with the reverence reserved for relics. She opens her eyes suddenly and they have taken a milky white appearance. I assume it works to impress the weak-willed. I, however, felt the spell used to grant her orbs their strange hue. Parlor tricks. This visit is starting to get on my nerves.

“The heir to the Devourer. You have come here.”

"Yes."

"You should not have. This place is sacred. You are placing us at risk by not waiting for my envoy like last time."

The guards and attendants freeze like statues. Few people ever provoke me anymore. I may have acquired a bit of a... reputation. Fortunately, I made the opening move so I feel no need to react.

"Do you honestly believe my sire does not know of this place?" I ask with overt disbelief.

In truth, we are merely playing our part. She has decided to acknowledge my power play by confronting it.

"It matters not. There was no need for you to come. Enough of this. There is much for us to discuss."

The puppet waves and the guards leave. Interestingly, I can feel the briefest hint of fear betrayed in the aura of the Progenitor. The puppeted lady picks up on it as well and I notice the barest twitch of her eye, her surprise contained quickly enough. It would fool most of us but I saw it and I must stop myself from flexing my claws. Showing weakness without subservience is such an invitation to be tested. Alas, I cannot afford more enemies right now.

"The final conflict will be upon us soon. A storm siphons all the threads of fate to it right now. To him."

"He blocks your view of the future?"

"No. Explaining the vortex of visions to a stranger would be beyond even the most talented visionary. Suffice to say, all the paths we can see lead to him because his success or demise will change everything. Not just for us. For the fate of the world itself. If he is allowed to succeed, tens of millions will die. Hundreds! If the Great War was enough to open a portal to the hell of blood itself, I have no doubt what follows is next. And you are partly to blame for that. After all..."

The puppet glares, then shivers.

"You are the one who gave them the tool to destroy themselves."

"I assure you that they would have found it without me. We need it for the liches."

"They were not an immediate threat!"

"They very much are a threat. Did you not admit that you could not see past our final confrontation? You would know how dangerous they truly are, or will truly be when united if you got off your bed and walked the world again."

“Do not think to dictate my behavior, child. I am a seer. Seers see and predict. That is my role. It will always be my role, for no one else can do it for me!”

“And what are you seeing beyond my sire’s face, hmm? Looking forward to an eternity of captivity should he win?”

“It will not come to that,” she replies testily. *“If he enters this sanctum, I will end my own life.”*

It is my turn to be silent, not because of what she said but what it implies.

Not when, if. Not capture, but ingress.

Someone who sees the future should know of a myriad way to escape his grip forever. The world is so large, and now, there are several of them. Surely she could stay one step ahead or at least believe she could. Unless... Isaac of the Rosenthal always surmised that the Amaretta had limits on their abilities, a blind spot, so to speak. I believe Amaretta just betrayed her own blind spot.

Herself.

Interesting. That is why she felt fear. She could not be sure I would not jump on her once her guard had left.

I find it amusing she could believe that her guard might stop me to begin with. I remember learning the rudiments of future sight, back with the American knight squad. My teacher at the time was named Aisha and she repeated many times that intuition and prophecies should never be relied on. Yet, her own progenitor has shut herself completely to the normal world. Does she know better? I doubt it. She is lost in the strands of her own power, thinking more of it will solve all her problems when she should get out and obtain more tools rather than straining the ones she has beyond what they can reasonably achieve. Ah, no matter.

“I assume you did not bring me here to scold me on the development of new weapons. Enough delay. What do you want?”

“Young ones. You are so much in a rush, so eager to leave. Someone ought to have taught you respect. Do you not recognize the opportunity I present? Do you not wish to know what the future holds, you who spends so much time and effort understanding the world around you?”

“Please. You will only tell me what you wish for me to know.”

The puppet scowls under the influence of its master, but the free hand forms a fist, the host losing composure. Perhaps fearing for her life. A curious development. She should know I have not come here to fight.

“Very well. You could have made a friend today.”

“I do not communicate with friends through seances.”

“Enough! I have two gifts for you. The first is information. Of all the strands that lead to victory, there are none that do not involve England.”

I blink.

What?

“The Entente must be involved in the assault on the Last City, or all will be lost.”

“It will be hard to convince the Kaiser to allow foreign troops on his land.”

“You must succeed in bringing them at all costs. Only a mixed intervention will lead to success. I am sure someone as eloquent as you can come up with convincing arguments. After all, have you not saved Europe once?”

“I will think of something.”

And it will involve an ungodly amount of strong arming. I see at least two ministers that will have to be disposed of or the deal will never be made. What a headache.

I will definitely delegate this to Sephare.

“And the second I already regret, yet it is my duty and burden to see it through.”

Aha!

“You will partake of my blood. It will give you an edge against your sire. It is necessary to even the battlefield.”

“Because he already consumed yours,” I finish.

The puppet flinches yet again. Poor control. I can see the shock in her tense shoulders.

“A long time ago, yes. He found me. I leave my fate in your hand. I trust that you will be a person of honor.”

“Yes. You have my word that I will not abuse your trust in this matter,” I easily promise.

With a last shiver, the lady steps out. Her glare follows me while I lean and grab the wrist she just recently released. The skin possesses a dry and cold texture that I have never felt before. I wonder if Amaretta is in deep slumber yet still active at the same time. Will I ever slumber? I wonder how it would feel. I also wonder if I will get the same sense of wonder as before with Progenitor blood. After all, they all pale compared to a dragon's. Can I still enjoy such a rare treat? I would certainly hope so.

With a sense of trepidation, I bite down.

The woman is named Ismat. She is the only wife of a noble from Medina. Under her care, her children and their lands have prospered. Caravans loaded with her goods travel from Anatolia to the lands of the Berbers. Her endeavors often meet success because Ismat can see the future. It comes to her in dreams, in flashes, on the fall of the bones over her prayer mat. They whisper of what could be and what should not be. It is a gift she has kept secret. Not even her children can know of it.

“You must not go to Tiberias,” she tells her husband. “The crusader will go there. You will be killed.”

“Your visions are never that clear, woman.”

The woman sees resignation and anger in the glare of him. He places a saber at his side. The setting sun shines on the metal helm he has placed over his head. He looks so strong now. She could almost ignore the screams she heard, the smell of blood and offal in her nose as she woke up at midnight, shivering and drenched in sweat.

“You will not return to me.”

“Then I will have died a man! I will have died doing my duty and with god willing, you will do yours as well.”

The husband never returns from Tiberias. The city falls to the cross bearers. So does Jaffa and Haifa and Acre and Beirut. Soon her sons perish as well. Her caravans wither, pillaged by crusaders and bandits a like. It is a dark time. She has lost much. No matter how many glimpses she is offered, it is never enough. Knowing a blow will fall is not enough to ward it off.

She is desperate.

One night, a stranger stops at her door. Ismat felt her come and so she welcomes her into her abode. She gifts the stranger perfume and dresses, the last of her wealth. They eat sherbet in dainty crystal cups. The stranger offers her a deal. They have no need for words. They both know she will take it.

With her power now reaching a new level, the woman turns her daughters and leaves her remaining son in charge of her crumbling trade kingdom. For centuries, she shapes the fortune of her family then her own from the shadows. The crusader kingdoms wither and die. The Turks come. She leaves her mortal past behind.

Why lead a consortium when one can tilt the world on its axis with a single sentence?

Wind buffets me when I leave the temple behind. Metis is more than eager to gallop away over the rocky expanse of the Atlas as I leave the seers behind, locked as they are in the

past. The experience reminds me that no matter how old and powerful one can grow, flaws do not get polished out unless a conscious effort is made. It has been centuries and Amaretta, since she has chosen this name, cannot let go of control, Nirari is still a domineering maniac, and Cadiz is still a battle-obsessed blade head.

I must be sure not to fall into the same rut. I suppose I have no choice. No matter how uncomfortable it shall be, I must constrain myself to accepting the unpleasant or I risk becoming a creature of habit ensconced in layers of obsessions, quirks, and predictable defects.

It must be done.

“And here on your right is an interpretation of the blood moon forest before the Seekers of Lost Memories left them.”

I proudly wave at a large painting at the corner of the main exhibition room. If I focus, I can almost smell that strange scent of pine and the immensity of a sky locked in an eternal night above me. The bloody hue of the moon speaks of the expectancy of the hunt. Most of the pieces here have their own identity, so to speak, and this is one of the most peculiar. A study upstairs holds the painting of the dragon mid-flight and the Watcher’s eye opening over the Winter sphere. Those tend to affect my visitors a little too much so I have refrained from showing them. Unfortunately, rendering guests insane goes against the laws of hospitality.

I expected a positive reaction from my werewolf allies. Allies, since I would not go so far as calling a man who never wears pants a friend. A lady must have standards. I admit to some disappointment when they inspect my work warily. Something bothers them on a fundamental level.

Perhaps it is the curse.

I turn once again to check the painting. It really is just as I remember it, so why?

As soon as my back is to them, it begins again.

Blake, leader of the werewolves in Canada and Jeffrey, leader of the local ones do their best not to sniff the air when I am in their direction, but their instincts push them to inhale as soon as my back is turned. I could hear their sniffs over a locomotive, I swear.

“Look, for once, I shall be understanding. Get that sniffing out of your system before I lose my sanity!”

They have the decency to look ashamed. Werewolves leaders can be a delight to the eyes, especially those two with their powerful builds and confidence. Sadly they usually smell. And they maintain a natural aversion for underwear. I am really trying my best to accommodate them!

“Sorry bosswoman. It’s changed again. There is something, I dunno, reptilian? And hot,” Jeffrey says.

“Yes, most peculiar,” Blake adds. “Not unpleasant. Quite unique.”

“I am not a glass of wine.”

“I did not mean it like that. A memorable mark like your own will give you influence around our kind. It helps with being accepted.”

“How delightful,” I deadpan.

“No need for arrogance, Ariane. You understand what I mean. Which leads me to the question that has hounded me since we have arrived. I do appreciate the visit and all those paintings clearly mean the world to you. I really enjoyed the fancy landscapes from that French man.”

“Monet,” I grumble.

“Yes. With that said... what are you playing at?”

“Excuse me?”

Blake fixes his gaze on mine, a daring move but one that also speaks of honesty among his kind, and only between equals. I tolerate it.

“We usually meet on the fields of Moonside. Why the change of venue?”

“It has occurred to me that I have been... hoarding art since my return. I considered that it would do everyone good if I shared what I have with others. Temporarily. Opened myself a little bit and stopped being so protective of my collection.”

“Is that why this place is more defended than Fort Knox?”

“Merely a side effect of being at the heart of my power.”

“The standing army?”

“Private security personnel,” I correct.

“Warships?”

“Demonstration products meant to be sold to the military.”

“The enchantments designed to turn intruders inside out? I recognized the blood magic runes.”

“If people do not wish to see their own pancreas, they merely must refrain from trespassing.”

“And why, I must ask, do your doors possess teeth.”

“It is Pookie.”

The two men exchanged glances. I do not like those glances. They feel quite rude.

“What the hell is a Pookie?”

“Pookie is the house.”

As summoned, the walls shiver and a massive eye opens on the ceiling. Yellow and slanted, it centers on the two guests before a myriad of smaller eyes open around it.

“Ah,” Jeffrey says.

He’s usually more eloquent than this.

“What fresh horror. I mean, whatever bosswoman. A stowaway from the fae land?”

“She was the ship, actually.”

“It’s a she?”

“Yes. I mean, I assume so. She can give birth.”

“The tool shed?”

“Aye.”

The two men ponder this new development in silence.

“I thought it was moving as well but I assumed it was an illusion. We are safe, I suppose?”
Blake asks.

“You are my guests. You are the safest people on earth right now.”

“Excellent. It soothes my heart,” Blake lies. His heartbeat has not changed at all.

“Nevertheless, I would like to know why you called us here first. It worries me.”

“Sorry Bosswoman. This doesn’t look like just a social call so we’re both waiting for the other shoe to drop. What’s going on?”

“You must be joking. I come to see you even when everything is going well.”

“Yeah but it’s always on schedule. Not out of the blue. And you’ve never invited me indoors before.”

Arg. This is exactly what I was afraid of. Getting predictable!

“She looks like she swallowed a lemon.”

“I am still here. Alright, yes, very well, I admit, I have called you here because I need your help. We are going after the liches.”

They exchange another glance, charged with meaning. It annoys me.

“You are always at each other’s throat whenever you meet. Why are you two suddenly so buddy-buddy?”

“Even rivals band together when facing a bear, bosswoman. Not that you are a bear. Or afraid of a bear. It’s just a figure of speech.”

“I am familiar with the concept.”

“What we mean to say,” Blake adds diplomatically, “is that we have been going after the liches for decades. Is there a new base in America?”

“No.”

Both sigh, understanding the implication.

“No,” Blake says.

“Bosswoman, you’ve told me many times that the liches would be unbeatable on their home ground.”

“I did say that.”

“You said that attacking the Last City was not just suicide. You also said that it would cause the liches to unite for a retaliatory strike.”

“And I pray to the Watcher that I was wrong.”

Again, a moment of silence interrupts our conversation. The two shift on their feet at the exact same time which causes a spark of rivalry. Their body language changes before relaxing once again. They cannot help being rivals.

“You are serious about this, are you not? What makes you believe that you stand a chance against beings that can rip the very life force from a subject?” Blake asks after a delay.

“That is on a need to know basis.”

“If I —”

“And besides, you are not to come with us.”

The pair tilt their heads with remarkable synchronism.

“I need a detachment to protect my ships on the earth side of things. My mortal soldiers will be here as well as the White and Red Cabals if I can convince them.”

“Do you expect trouble?”

I tap an index on my chin in pretend consideration.

“What would I do if I were a mortal concerned with vampire interference, and most of the powerful ones were to gather in one place, possibly returning wounded from an expedition?”

“Are there even weapons powerful enough to take you all out in one fell swoop?”

“There is now,” I inform them, and the cold in my voice lets them know that I am serious.

“So that’s why you’re attacking, bosswoman. Just one thing though, if they have stuff that can take you out, then me and my folks won’t make much of a difference, you know?”

“I do not expect you to stop a general attack. I have other contingency plans in place should this event come to pass. What I need is for you to make sure the mortal militaries do not have full control over the gates on the earth side. Your mere presence should deter large-scale plans.”

“And if we are attacked? We would only be a hundred at most because only powerful leaders and outsiders could stay in control so far and for so long. Modern militaries have hundreds of thousands of troops. We would be swarmed in moments.”

“This will be a delicate time for everyone involved. The armies will be more concerned with each other than with you. If the worst comes to pass, you will be evacuated.”

“How will you know if anything goes wrong?”

“We will open several gates, including secret ones. Indirect communication will be guaranteed between our agents on either side. You will be here as observers and... an insurance. During daylight only.”

The werewolves ponder my words for a moment.

“I must discuss this with my aides. However... I am not opposed in principle. The liches are a blight upon our planet. My kind will not stand idle while they threaten us and all we stand for.”

“Same, bosswoman. Our alliance is for defense, yeah? But we’re already at war. Will be nice to go tickle them where it hurts, for a change. I’ll talk with June and pick a team, yeah? Just make sure we’re as safe as can be.”

"I am more concerned about keeping the others safe from you," I inform him.

"Oh I mean from the cold folk. If any of those mortals want to act up. Well..."

His eyes turn yellow and suddenly, he seems to occupy more space in the room. Much more space. The taste of the hunt titillates my tongue in a ghostly caress.

"That is all I ask. And now, would you care to see my weapons collection?"

"Now we're talking."

It pains me to have to lie to them but it is for the best.

Marquette is a hive of activity. Two men watch a warship load men and ammunition before departing into the night sky, its tails shining with signal lights.

"Modern design that one. Better against them fighter planes," the first says.

"Like you know anything about planes, Rogers. You're a janitor."

"We got fighter planes as well. I didn't know we had trained pilots."

"They're not your planes, big boy. And how do you even know that?"

"Don't want to stay a janitor my whole life."

The second man huffs into the night air. His cup of tea steams in his gloved hands.

"Huh."

"I want to be head janitor. Work in the main hangar where the magic happens."

"Damn you Rogers. You ambitious prick. What's even the pay?"

"Not that there's a lot to clean. It's like an entire army just left. They're heading east to the sea. Makes you think."

"Yeah," the other added. "Hope they come back."

They stayed silent for a while until the first man broke their contemplation.

"Seven dollars a week plus benefits."

"Goddamn."

"I hope you know what you are doing," Constantine states.

"If Mask breaks the truce, they will do so on Polish territory, not here," I reply. "The Rosenthal are formal. They are all gearing up forward. Not just Mask but Eneru and the Brotherhood as well."

"And the German knights?"

"Of course. They will stay with the empire's military."

"Ariane, if this fails... Vampirekind could lose almost all of its remaining Progenitors."

"It will not fail. And remember who is on our side."

"He is just one man."

"You know that is a lie."

The Speaker crosses his long fingers over his desk. It is studiously clean as always.

"Speaking of that, I shall require your assistance. I need to move my own gear."

"You will have it."

I watch the man lean forward in his seat with a condescending smile. The men by his side stand with their arms crossed over muscular torsos, an unobvious display of power. We are currently sitting in his warehouse at night under the glare of electric lights. It means a lot that he would not welcome me in his office.

The gates open to the outside, letting much needed cold air get in after the stifling heat of this Louisianan summer.

"Listen, little lady. I'm sure you mean well. Hell, it must have taken a lot of courage to come here alone to make this request of me. I respect you for it. Really, I do. It's just that I got a family to feed as well, see? God in his greatness has seen it fit to make our world a harsh one. The Reynaud have been blessed for a long time, right? Well, all good things must come to an end. It's the invisible hand of business and all that there is supply and demand, and you can't meet the demand and we got the supply. It's just the way things are."

He gives me an indulgent smile, then goes to pat my knee but reconsiders when I pull back a little. His smile does not fade.

"I can't just stop doing business simply because you asked nicely, you see? That's common sense. Now if you had something to offer..."

His eyes roam over my body, despite the rather conservative outfit I picked for this little outing. My, I have not been ogled so shamelessly in years! It certainly brings me back to the days before my reputation or bodyguards preceded me. I feel thirty and full of spite again. Hmm. Let us keep the act up for a little longer.

“Oh, mister Tibbs, this isn’t the laws of the market I’m worried about, It’s just that a few nights ago, my cousin got robbed. His wagons were looted and the thieves absconded into the night. Even killed a caravan hand!”

Now his smile fades. The harsh lines of his face turn grim and the thug peeks out from under the ironed suit. Mr Tibbs wears his reproachful persona with the grace of an inmate pretending to be a guard. Unconvincing acting. Two out of ten.

“Now now, little lady, that sounds very much like you’re implying old Tibbs, and we don’t much like implications over here. It’s a serious offense to insult a man like this in this here barn on my property. My god-given property, certificate and all! Why, I oughta ask for some compensation for this libel. Slander. This terrible slight on my honor.”

“Oh no sir, I am not accusing anyone. Well, anyone except him.”

I point at one of his guards who had made the mistake of wearing a small bandana when his forehead showed a very distinctive scar.

“Witnesses recognized the scar, see? He should have worn a hat, perhaps?”

My hosts tense. Tibbs glares daggers at the shamed henchman who wilts under the attention. The thug chief licks his lips in consideration and I can almost see the gears grinding under that lice-infested scalp. Ah, I do so enjoy those amusing distractions. Flaring my aura, I start the next arc.

There is a whack and a body falls behind me. John steps out from the shadows dressed in a leather duster. A few of the guards are armed but none of them have their guns out. John does. He also wields a latest generation trench gun, slightly oversized to accommodate his bear-like mitts. He does that thing I love where he moves slowly and it’s only when he’s close that our interlocutors realize that yes, he’s really that big. A few of them pale. They pale more when Urchin comes from the other side juggling his knives. Then a few of my scruffiest men join, forming a line at my back.

I allow my posture to change from meek to regal. I lower my pitch to sound more professional now that the cute act is over. I may have intimidated idiots for decades and yet I never seem to tire of it. Perhaps I have a thing for poetic justice. Or maybe I just like the hunt.

“Every generation or so, some idiot decides to go after my family using less than legal means. Oh, I do not mind the Reynaud’s influence waxing and waning as talents bloom and fade. I am not here to baby them to greatness. I did, however, promise them protection against more illicit attempts on their fortune. You see, I will be going away for a while and you provide the perfect opportunity for a... reminder. A reminder that there are layers of darkness beneath true society and you lots are merely the muck hiding the true dangers.”

“Woman, you—”

“Shhhhhh.”

For the first time tonight, I use Charm. Tibbs’ eyes narrow on the claw tipping my finger and a sense of recognition sends his heart into a delightful staccato. We are still considered legends and conspiracies among the citizens of the United States, yet it appears I have found a believer tonight. The enticing perfume of terror titillates my senses. I have not fed in so long. Perhaps I should indulge a little.

“Now,” I ask, “which one of you shot a member of our staff, hmmm?”

Silence. Several of the henchmen shift their attention to a dubious man with a messy blond beard, his teeth set in a rictus of fearful rage. They have not spoken however.

I point my finger at the scarred man.

“Doe.”

The thug’s head explodes in a geyser of blood and brain matter, away from me thankfully. The mortals’ ears still ring when the unmistakable click clack of another shell being chambered reminds them that their predicament is far from over. The bearded man does not wait. He runs for it.

“We’re taking him with us, Urchin.”

Our little escapee stumbles and falls with a yelp. Muffled screams ring through the otherwise quiet barn while Urchin drags our little prize away. Since we are finished, and I believe the message has been received, I stand to depart. One needs survivors to carry a tale. My sire would only leave one but I believe a group is both faster and more reliable.

“Just so we are clear, there will not be a repeat of this warning. Find your way somewhere else before the week is over. A good evening to you, gentlemen.”

We file out. Once we are a safe distance away, I turn to Tibbs’ compound. He bought a home and attendant buildings from a family fallen on hard times. The De la Fontaine clan. An old one.

I always thought their attempt at Victorian architecture was a terrible eyesore.

“Have you finished your inspection?” I ask.

“Yes, miss Ari. All clear. No pigs.”

“Burn it to the ground.”

Avalon has grown tremendously since the turn of the century. Now, it practically counts as a borough of New York. While the general public is aware that supernatural types tend to congregate there, few know that mages have formed a second government complete with armed forces, civil service, and education.

And taxes. The double tap remains a bone of discord to this day.

I wait by the entrance of the council room as usual. Those old codgers need to remind me and their constituents that mages do not serve others, so they always let me stew on a bench for five minutes before letting me in. Not one minute more, not one minute less, It has become something of a game. I perceive them classifying notes through the sphere of my Magna Arqa since they believe the wards on their room are enough to shield them. Ah, games of power. I will never grow to enjoy them. I am let in when the time comes.

Guests are granted a chair facing the half-circle of councilmen and their lesser peers behind that. The president uses his gavel to call for attention though it is not needed. We are dancing an old dance. I am a proven entity here, and while outside novices look at me with awe when my back is turned, here we are old allies who have fought on dozens of battlefields side by side.

They still make me wait though.

“The council welcomes Ariane of the Nirari, Hand of the Accords. Please check your protective amulets.”

The council complies with mechanical gestures. I have never attempted any sort of charm here so I would not know if the amulets would warn them or not. I am betting I could bypass their defenses thanks to Sinead’s exhaustive training. There is no reason for me to try, however. No rewards would be worth the risk of a broken trust.

“Ariane of the Nirari, you have the floor.”

“Thank you, president. I come here to ask your support in our next grand endeavor. Six months from now, the assembled might of the Entente, the Alliance, and the Soviets will enter the Dead World around Warsaw to besiege, and hopefully destroy the Last City.”

Half of the council erupts in concerned mutters. The other looks on impassively since they are my closest allies and I have, of course, already secured their support. Most decisions are taken behind closed doors long before they are even publicly debated.

Reginald leads the White Cabale, or at least its civil service branch which is de facto the most important one. He used to be the minister of ‘supernatural affairs’ ages ago when the position first opened, back before the government took a dimmer view of magic for electoral purposes. The opposition has the important portfolio that is defense and it is them I must convince of the importance of our mission. Kaltstein leads them. He is a large fellow with a powerful build and a no-nonsense attitude I have come to respect.

“Our alliance is purely a defensive one. You have no cause to ask us to intervene not only in an offensive operation, but also in one that will take place across the world. You may be able to escape unscathed from every operation but we cannot. Our people bleed and die to defend our land and they will continue to do so for such is our duty, but do not expect us to fight this on this adventure. Our duty is to protect our constituents.”

“We are already at war. Attacking the enemy’s base in a defensive war is a valid decision. No, it is a necessity to stop the conflict once and for all,” I retort. “And this is not an adventure. We are conducting the most ambitious military operation in the history of mankind. Mortal soldiers will form the majority of our power but the decisive blow will be delivered by us.”

“When you say us, do you mean your immediate entourage or the Accords themselves?” Reginald asks.

Perfectly timed for me to deliver the most important message.

“The first of us will lead our elites into battle. Every vampire alliance will send its best warriors to kill the liches to the last one. Every European mage group will participate as well. This shall be the defining battle of the century. If you wish to stand aside, then by all means do so, but I will consider you to be in violation of our agreement in spirit. If you do wish to attend, then I shall place your agents under my aegis. I will protect them as my own.”

“It is not for you to decide if we have broken our word!” Kaltstein says.

“You are mistaken sir, it very much is. I will go to battle to defend our planet against those who have taken the lives of your alliance. If you decline to help, you forfeit this alliance at it’s most vital moment. This is a common enemy that has repeatedly attacked us. You cannot possibly justify opting out of an attempt to end them once and for all. Not when you are stronger than you have ever been.”

“Mages do not perform well in the dead world,” a councilor reminds me.

“They will remain on the mortal side for security and to recharge key enchanted items we will need to protect the mundanes. They will only fight if something moves through.

“Humph. Perhaps, but it will be volunteers only,” Kaltstein says.

“I am sure there will be plenty of those.”

Of course we will be there,” Ollie says. “Do you know how many people we have lost to the liches?”

I do, in fact, know how many people we have lost to the liches.

“So who are you bringing?”

“Everyone.”