

May 16, 1867

I was more than ready to go out for an evening to accomplish that bit of larceny Sinead mentioned, only to find out that the insufferable cad had taken one month just to prank me, and that the event would take place later that year in Philadelphia. I should honestly not be surprised, because I have always known Sinead is a dilettante and that his perception of time is somewhat skewed.

And so I find myself at the top floor of a comfortable inn overlooking the Delaware river, entrenched in a salon with my coffee and my resentment. The cozy salon and excellent blend do little to distract me from my current circumstances.

“Why, poppet, I thought you might be excited! This is the birthplace of your nation, after all. I promise that we can break into Carpenter’s Hall later tonight,” Sinead offers, regal in a beige suit and waistcoat.

I wonder where he gets money for all his fancy attire seeing as I have never seen him work a day in his life. Swindler. Charlatan!

“First, you have presented yourself as my husband for the very last time or I swear I will consummate our union and by that I mean that I will eat you.”

“But poppet, it is the perfect cover!”

“Second, if you ever allude that we are indeed in some sort of relationship, I will thank you not to flirt with every member of the fair sex in a two miles radius!”

“Ah, but my dear, consider this, I have not done anything but talk. Now, all those pretty birds swoon for the unattainable, the forbidden fruit that is yours truly while they assume that I ravish you every night. How they must see you with envy!”

“Has this excuse ever worked on anyone?”

“Yes.”

“And that is why mankind should not be allowed to govern themselves. Enough of this. The plan?”

“To business then!”

Sinead struts to an overly decorated desk to retrieve a map, then unrolls it over the gaudy coffee table. The inexplicably rich cad probably picked one of the only inns in the city that chose late baroque as a decorative style. I think that rococo is what happens when someone has too much time and gold paint on their hands.

I glance at the map and sigh heavily.

I remember that the Likaeon and I paired up before when planning to rescue his fiancée, and that he was fully capable of pointing a destination on a map. Wait, I am remembering this wrong. He pointed at a general area.

“This is not a plan. You have made a drawing. A very convincing drawing of... is that me in that blue dress?”

Despite my annoyance, I cannot help but stare fixedly at my representation. It is me, as I remember it from so many years ago but... different. The same nose, the same chin. He even managed to catch the shade of blue eyes I saw staring at me so many times in my small mirror, or blurred in the garden's pond. The Ariane dancing with an unknown man is different. She is supremely confident, with an enchanting smile and a bit of calculation, but that is not all. Her neat clothes and poise evoke a certain purity and innocence I believe I lost on the night I died, yet here I find them, expressed with a tenderness and attention to detail that would have stolen my breath if I still had one.

And it is not the only one.

Instead of a blueprint of a house, Sinead's plan is a sequence of events drawn across a childish rendition of what a manor looks like to one who has no sense of perspective. Each bubble of planned reality pops on top of another. I receive a ring from an old man with whom I share a smile of deep trust. I walk elegantly to a parked car. Each take shows always the same face but I look so... alive, as alive as Hastings essence and perfect acting could make me.

“Do you like it?” Sinead says, suddenly very close. Too close. He smells like fields under a summer sun.

“Back off. Would it be too difficult to give a proper map of the place?”

“This is a map, poppet. Your reality might be boring and inflexible but I will not allow it to dictate my planning. I am a prince, not an engineer.”

“Well... Fine! Then please do explain the, hmm, steps.”

“Steps! Steps? I am not building stairs, I am telling you a story. Act one! The old professor and his protege visit the Stow household, invited to the party as exotic visitors come from faraway Savannah.”

“There is absolutely nothing exotic in Savannah besides the contents of its river.”

“Psh! Quiet, you blathering mooncalf! How dare you interrupt me after demanding an explanation?”

“Alright! Ugh. Go on then oh storyteller.”

“And you shall be the choir and you shall be quiet until called upon. As I was saying, behold, two strangers bringing gifts and carrying many secrets, but the darkest secrets our hosts

shall never learn, for we will away into the night before they can unveil even the first layer. See, this woman, Mary Stow. She carries with her a prize most unwise, a gold ring carrying the armories of the Myrddin clan. It can unlock many more doors than she believes, and so does not belong on her dainty finger. But look! Our charming pair mixes with the guests, turning a great many heads. The professor greets Mary and the ring is gone. He passes it along to his accomplice so that, should he be searched, the treasure might not be found.”

“Can you not just glamour it?”

“Foolish child, do you know how difficult it would be to glamour a stolen magical object in the house of its owner?!”

“Sorry.”

“I could do it, naturally, but trust me when I say that we must take few risks so early in the operation. We will have enough unknowns by the time this is all over. In any case, we shall depart the event in a reasonable time frame so as not to arouse suspicion then retire here for the evening. The Stows serve decent champagne and it would be a shame for me not to partake.”

“And I? Is there anything I should partake of?”

“I sincerely pray that it does not come to this. By the way, I know that vampires do not enjoy make-up or wigs but I was hoping we could come to some... oh.”

I now have wavy dark hair, large chestnut eyes and a soft face.

“A perfect glamour! Physical as well... Impressive for someone your age. It must be innate.”

“Yes, I acquired it in unusual circumstances.”

“A woman of many talents! Why, only a gifted niece could match the genius of one such as I.”

A change of tone warns me and I turn to find myself looking in the bespectacled, wrinkled face of a wide-haired old man, his fantastic beard expanding in silvery bristles.

“Oh. And whose skin might you be wearing?”

“Nothing so crass, Madchen. You have the honor of addressing Herr Professor Friedrich von Pappen. At your service!”

“Kannst du wirklich Deutsch sprechen?”

“Natürlich! I can speak any language that strikes your fancy, ma mignonne. Or did you think that your primitive grunts were beyond me?”

“Ugh. Fine. By the way, could you do this before?”

“Not without a focus. It appears that the alignment of the spheres has led your rigid reality to become a bit more limber, like a widow hiring a young, rustic gardener. Where was I? Oh, yes. Crime! We depart tomorrow.”

The Stow residence lies on the outskirts of Philly, to the west. I am told that they used to keep another south but the area was overwhelmed by German and Irish immigrants, especially after their famine. It would not do to share space with poor people, I suppose, and so they share it with cows. And goats. I can smell them from the muddy road.

“Are you sure you wish to present yourself as a musician?”

“It would certainly be more believable that as a student of... what is it you study?”

“Phrenology.”

I glare at the scandalous man, currently ensconced in glamour and a dark coat.

“You study skulls? Can I really go fetch one and you shall analyze it?”

“Of course! I can already deduce that the person is dead.”

“Brilliant. Utterly mind-boggling”

“But my question remains. What if they ask you to sing?”

“I can eat you here and now, Sinead, and save us all this cruel fate. I am too young to be a governess and an actress would be too scandalous, hence, a musician.”

“Is it not socially acceptable for women to be painters?”

“Not successful ones. And besides, I do not paint for mortals if anyone asks for a demonstration.”

“You could draw.”

“I will draw a blade before I draw a pen for my prey.”

“You should paint me.”

“I have.”

“Can I see?”

“No.”

The Stows knew they could not match the wealthiest families of the land and so they did not make the attempt, for which I must credit them. It takes much to impress me after Constantine's fortress and its mirrored ballroom. Most attempts at majesty fall short in comparison. The Stow estate has no such pretension, and they receive their guests in a series of rooms separated by open double doors. Candles and gas provide enough light to see the varnished floor and sturdy furniture covered in brown quilts. Both the guests and the house itself favor earthy colors in shades of brown, black, and green. The women here prefer high-necked gowns and I now see the reason why Sinead insisted on a dark blue conservative outfit instead of the lilac ones I have been favoring lately. I would have stood out like a rose on a bed of begonias. And besides, my hair is black for now.

I allow 'Herr Professor' to lead me in, bypassing the flock of young ones by the entrance and garnering quite a bit of hostility, which happens sometimes. Some communities have an inflated image of themselves, and all newcomers must submit to the ruling pair before being allowed to socialize. The blond man and short, severe dark-haired ones are especially hostile so I assume they fear a newcomer in their den.

A part of me smiles and greets people whose names I will have forgotten in three days. I remain demure and shy to fit the obviously Puritan gathering. Another part is amused by the circumstances. I obtained permission to stay here for 'personal business' from Warden Patrick of the Lancaster, a member of Sephare's faction. As a lady and someone with weight, I could simply demand the ring and obtain it within a week, wrapped in tulle with a polite note. I could also ask Urchin to acquire it and he would oblige without difficulty. I would not even attract that much attention with how busy everyone is these days. I am, technically, slumming it. No self-respecting vampire of my rank would lower themselves to this charade, and yet I believe they should. A little masquerade is always a good practice and, besides, it can be fun.

“Liebchen, I appreciate you taking care of your old uncle but you will never find a good party if I do not let you mingle. Go now and make some friends!”

“Oh, uncle!” I reproach him with a fake blush. Nevertheless, I leave his side with pretend excitement, eager to throw myself in the maw of hazing. I make my way to the nearby ruling couple who watch me approach like a pack of wolves finding an errant sheep.

“Good evening, everyone, my name is — “

“Is it true that you are from Germany? Where in Germany?” The blond man says.

Ah, the old interruption game.

“My name is Adele von Pappen. My uncle is from Germany, I was born and raised in Savannah.”

“Pfff, why would someone move to Savannah from Germany?”

“It is a coastal city,” I explain with patience.

“I know that!”

“Then I fear that I do not understand your question.”

I smile disarmingly, in a way that just hints that I am provoking them instead of stating it clearly. I could play it more smoothly but I will not because I am arrogant and prideful, and also unapologetic.

“So you are a musician then?” the short, severe girl asks in turn.

“A student of music. I would not claim this title just yet.”

“Father Williams says that it counts as a frivolous pursuit for a woman.”

“Really? You never sing when you worship?”

“It is not the same! Those are hymns for the glory of God!”

“Ah, yes. Music conveys emotions with such incredible passion. It speaks to the soul and lifts us in a way that words seldom do, would you not agree?”

“Well...”

“All voices joined in unison until they form a whole greater than themselves, until the harmony exists more vividly than the individual notes. Deep male voices and dancing female ones singing praises with joy, carrying more emotion than an hour-long sermon. You must have felt it, no? The touch of grace.”

The woman blinks as I focus on her. It would not do to try and affect the man while I present myself as an outsider. The woman would see it as a challenge.

“Ah, women can be so frivolous,” the man declares with a pompous air of moral superiority.

“Cease, Andrew, or do you find me leading the choir and singing God’s praises to be a frivolous endeavor as well?”

“Laura, I did not mean it that way,” he retorts with more anger than would seem warranted.

In truth, he is probably disappointed at being publicly scolded in front of an unknown. Well, he should not have started then.

“Adele, you are probably one of those artsy types, are you not? Do not listen to Elias, he is all happy to hear our voices every Sunday but rehearsal and practice are ‘frivolous’! Typical.”

Aha! I got them to bicker.

“Oh, that is quite alright. There are so many who appreciate art yet look down on those who toil to provide it. So, you are a singer then?”

We discuss for a while, with the stern Laura proving deeply knowledgeable about sacred music while her companion Andrew fumes at being sidelined. Ah, yes, vampires. Sowing discord since the dawn of history. Our short conversation is soon interrupted by the return of Sinead, who slips the ring in my sleeve with the grace of the expert pickpocket.

“Ah, Liebchen, I see that you have made friends! And who might those people be?”

“Those are Laura and Andrew. They kindly welcomed me and it turns out that Laura is quite the expert on hymns and requiems.”

“Wunderbar. You enjoy yourself with people your age while I go examine the skull of Frau Peters. It is a remarkable example of deep sensibility.”

I stop myself from glaring at the shapely woman standing awkwardly behind him. She is flushed and smells of arousal. I find myself deeply annoyed by a little bout of jealousy, though it would be hypocritical of me to comment since we vampires are hardly monogamous. Sinead really got under my skin, somehow, and it appears that age is not helping me grow wise.

“Oh, uncle, when will you stop your pursuit of science! Off you go then.”

No sooner have the pair disappeared to beds unknown that a dire scream shatters the mood of the evening. Sinead avoided the attention just in time.

“My ring! My ring! I have lost it!”

The circus begins with the guests making a token attempt at finding the lost jewelry, in vain. I help with the research, staying close to Laura and her flock now that we have become acquainted. I cannot help but feel a wave of excitement when the victim of the theft walks by me and I feel the aura of several enchantments. She may not be a caster herself but she keeps one in her employ. Perhaps she has even warded her private quarters.

The loss of the ring sours the mood since the probability of theft is considered. I have been quite visible throughout the evening and I feel the weight of suspicion in the gaze of the

people around me. I could change that with charm, of course. It would be too easy, however, and defeat the purpose of the exercise.

“Do you perhaps have something you would like to confess?” Andrew says in a low voice by my side, and by low voice, I mean that he is perfectly audible for half of the room.

“I must admit that the mood has plummeted... Oh! You could not possibly suggest...”

I gasp in outrage and flush my cheeks to simulate anger.

“Sir, I certainly hope that you are not implying what I think you are!”

“A woman we have never seen joins the ball and, less than an hour later, a piece of jewelry goes missing? I find it curious.”

“What? You! I never! I have nothing to do with the loss of the ring. In fact, I have never seen the ring we are all searching for. Those accusations are baseless and cruel and I have never been treated so disrespectfully in any event I have ever attended.”

Technically, I was shot at and set on fire before but it happened after the event so, really, it does not count.

My outrage makes Edward flustered and the guests are split between supporting a local and risking to be seen as immoral. The key is not to get too angry because mortals somehow perceive this as a sign of guilt, while remaining suitably offended. Laura herself appears to be uncomfortable.

“Come on, Edward. She was not even in the other room.”

The man frowns while I huff and cross my arms. It would not do to leave now because the crowd might close around me. I need to cast doubt upon my accuser first.

“We do not know her. She could be lying.”

“You question my credentials as a musician?”

He frowns, slightly confused. For the first time tonight, I use Charm for the sake of a spectacle. As an operation, the robbery has gone wrong. I should never have attracted attention to myself, but just like any operation set up by Sinead, flair is half of the fun. Edward decides to throw the gauntlet.

“You know, that is a good point. If you truly are who you say then surely a demonstration would lift doubts? Unless, of course, you are a thief in disguise.”

“I will! There is a piano in the boudoir, and I shall play it.”

“Oh, I thought you would sing,” Laura says, “but this is even better.”

Indeed, it is.

I make my solemn way out, surrounded by a proper escort. Mrs. Stow even follows us to enjoy the show, all thoughts of her ring temporarily forgotten. I adjust the seat and place my hands on the ivory keys. They are solid and smooth under my fingers.

I feel a hint of nostalgia.

Despite its dreadful end, I have made some good memories during my stay with the Knights. Manfred's ashes rest in my secret collection in Marquette next to my favorite painting of the Watcher as a reminder of lost friendships. One of my regrets is that I could not spend more time with Nastasia, the advanced teacher for piano.

Vampires can pick up techniques fairly quickly. Our natural dexterity and coordination gives us an undeniable edge when it comes to playing. For all of our advantages, we find it impossible to convey the emotions we no longer feel clearly. Some rare kin still create art like I do, but to my great regret, my skill with the brush does not extend to the keys arrayed before me. I can play a piano, but I cannot play music.

I can, however, imitate it.

Nastasia was an intriguing woman, so severe and cold with her graying hair held up in an impeccable bun. She had a strong jaw that she jutted out in defiance to every new student who joined her classes, and I was no exception. For all her rigidity, she was different as soon as she sat down. Then, the diminutive Russian woman came... alive. It was a breathtaking metamorphosis that I could never grow tired of. Suddenly, the stern walls of the base rang with music as it was meant to be, fugacious and vibrant. She moved with grace and energy as easily as she breathed. She taught me the Marche Hongroise of Berlioz not as a solemn piece but a bouncing succession of phrases, almost naughty in their careless joy. The one piece I asked her to repeat a dozen times until I could ape her was L'idee Fixe by Liszt, the one I shall reproduce now.

I breathe deeply as I remember the curve of her back while she played the first arpeggio. The notes would flow in a waterfall of harmony, then before they could settle she would pull back and start another. Her hands never truly landed on the keyboard. They hovered there like dandelion seeds caught in the wi —

"You clearly know how to play, I suppose that you are not some lowlife who stole a dress."

I turn to Edward as he stands from a nearby chair and I gasp in outrage! What! To doubt me is part of the game, but to interrupt me! HE DARES.

"I suppose we can end —"

"YOU SIT YOUR POSTERIOR BACK DOWN MISTER OR SO HELP ME I WILL TAN YOUR HIDE UNTIL IT SHINES LIKE A FRESHLY PLUCKED HIBISCUS YOU BOORISH, VULGAR CHURL!"

Andrew freezes in terror. He collapses back down while the rest of the assembly gasps in surprise. Absolute degenerates. Interrupting Liszt. I should just Magna Arqa the entire place into the afterlife and be done with it. Where was I? Oh yes.

I ignore the mutters to concentrate again.

“She’s from Savannah, I heard, hence the southern accent.”

“Hot blooded folks, aren’t they?”

Arms like a swan aloft on an ocean gale. Yes. The tempo is an irregular one, especially at first. It languishes on some specific notes, only to fly off again. Ah, what I would not do to have a virtuoso play an entire piano concerto in front of me until I can replicate it. I let the memories carry me through the entire piece, loving every second of it. The false silence of beating heartbeats offers a perfect background, and when I stop, no one dares speak.

I stand up and gather all of my non-negligible pride as I strut away.

“I hope you enjoyed it because I shan’t return!” I proclaim at the front door.

Misdeed accomplished.

I disappear into the darkness, only to mysteriously reemerge a few steps away inside of our carriage. Soon, we are underway. I give him the ring and inspect his now natural appearance. Something is off. The smell.

“I had assumed that you would seduce ‘Frau Peters’. Were you interrupted?”

“We merely had a conversation during which I assured her that she was sound of mind and incredibly lucid. She believed me, and I predict that her lying donkey of a suitor will soon receive his due. Why do you ask?”

“It just feels strange not to see you gallivanting.”

“I used a pleasant way to escape the attention while you gathered it.”

“It was stupid of us to do so. They could have found the ring if I had let them.”

“But then, there would be no stakes at all. We always leave a chance to the mortals, poppet, unless the matter is too serious to leave to chance.”

“You are deflecting.”

Sinead leans towards me, amber eyes shining ever so slightly in the complete darkness.

“Is it not vampire etiquette? You may separate depending on circumstances but while you are together, you are together.”

“It is indeed proper etiquette for us.”

“Then I will flirt and charm the hapless mortals but none of them shall have me while we... work together, yes?”

I narrow my eyes with suspicion. I find it quite unlike him to exert tact. Sinead shows me an expression of perfect innocence and so I know with certainty that he is up to something.

“You are wondering about my motives, poppet. I assure you, it is nothing sinister. I merely wish to maintain a pleasant environment. And now, let us away. The path to the exchange place is far and I really want to get rid of this tasteless bauble.”

“Wait, you did not explain that part. Are we selling it?”

“Bartering, to be precise, in exchange for a specific tool we will need. Sivaya will join us. Only she can make sure that we have what we have come for.”

May 21st, 1867

The exchange spot was picked by our esteemed partners, somewhere in the wilderness south of Baltimore. I complained that the choice of a remote location screamed ‘ambush’, but was curtly informed that the reason for my presence was specifically to prevent this sort of mischief. My disappointment turned to elation when I found out that the deal would (hypothetically) take place in a forest, a deep and untamed one.

At nightfall, we ride out and turn away from a muddy road past a forlorn mill, stopping at a brook bubbling merrily under low branches. The setting is quite intimate in this dense forest. It makes me want to go for a run.

Sivaya appears from a beast path wearing a beautifully embroidered azure dress. Her dark auburn hair, sharp face and large blue eyes reinforce the faerie-like appearance the grasping branches and poking roots already evoke. She salutes me in a Likaeian gesture of respect, which I return with pleasure.

“Your... armor. In the cabin.”

“Get changed, poppet. We would not want you to be recognized.”

I find the place easily enough as well as a simply incredible set that I put on. I immediately come out once I am done and stop close to the pair, interrupting their discussion and causing a great deal of surprise.

“My... it certainly brings back memories.”

The armor resembles nothing that I have ever seen even in the Skoragg clan arsenal. Most of my body is covered by thin, silvery plates covered in a fine network of runes. They breathe power. The front molds my chest rather snugly, which I find a bit embarrassing. Tiny mail covers the articulations and are strangely silent, especially considering that they are so shiny I expect them to clink merrily like a wedding cake decoration every time I attempt to move a limb, and this is without considering the cloth. I wonder if Sivaya expects me to attend a royal coronation wearing this blinding apparel. I even have two flowing ribbons in teal popping from my shoulder blades like a pair of budding wings, and it is not even the most shameful part.

“Why am I wearing a tutu?” I ask.

“It is a skirt,” Sinead replies, distracted. He is not done inspecting me.

“A skirt used in classical dance which can also be called a tutu.”

“A tutu would flare while this skirt falls down.”

“It is maintained in position by clasps,” Sivaya adds helpfully.

“A controlled tutu is still a tutu!”

I look down to the gossamer, spidery fabric covering my thighs and my virtue, or what is left of it in any case. It shares the same teal dye as the rest.

“I confess to being impressed,” I grudgingly admit, “I can feel the power emanating from the armor, and yet I could perceive nothing until I touched it.”

“We must protect your anonymity. Speaking of which, we had prepared a mask for you, but a change of appearance would work just as well. The armor on you... “

Sinead stops and confers with Sivaya in high Likaeen. I cannot follow the exquisitely complex and subtle language. Instead, I perform a few moves with Rose and find that the armor does not restrict me in the slightest. Even Loth’s old armor had not granted me such a degree of freedom.

“Could you turn your hair to silver and your eyes to pink?” Sinead asks.

I frown but I obey. The pair asks for adjustments, including a sharper face. When they step back, my hair falls straight to the small of my back and I have taken on a cold beauty.

“Uncanny. You resemble a Seeker of Stolen Memories, one of the many factions of the fae worlds.”

“Stolen Memories?” I ask, my voice having taken a slightly lower pitch.

To my surprise, Sivaya replies. She walks around me until I feel her light fingers braiding my hair.

“Not so long ago by our standards, the Courts had adopted various methods to mold partners and rivals into minds that were, shall we say, more suitable to their purposes. A gathering of errant warriors united to bring an end to the charade. They saw the theft of one’s self-determination as the vilest treatment one could inflict upon another sentient being and forged a pact with an ancient creature we refer to as the diamond mind.”

“Every freed slave joined the Seekers as payment,” Sinead says.

“Until entire duchies were consumed by the flames of vengeance. Then, the diamond mind went too far and tried to reclaim Winter’s prey.”

“The Coldest Court ever loves their games.”

“An agreement was reached by all to curtail the practice, but not before the plane of winter gave birth to another twisted landscape. Seekers are rare nowadays.”

“They are also unerringly polite. They always inform you of their intentions, preferably while you hunt afield with only a small retinue.”

“You bear a strange resemblance to one.”

“I assumed that it would be preferable to show discretion,” I object.

“You can be memorable so long as you can shed that notoriety like a mask. It will help us, I assure you,” Sinead answers.

“The mages will focus on your unique appearance, one that only exists when it serves our purpose.”

“If you say so.”

“I enjoy the company of seekers, back home,” Sivaya whispers. “They talk little.”

I nod in understanding. I had never considered the question but, naturally, the Likaeans miss their homeland. The familiar sight must soothe them. I will never get used to them behaving like people instead of actors in that great farce that is my life. I shall have to consent to the tutu then.

To be perfectly honest, I love that garment. I merely want to kill anyone who sees me wearing it.

“And the finishing touch. I thought of a weapon that could fit your style,” Sivaya tells me. She walks behind the tallest tree around, returning with an axe.

An enormous, two-handed axe with a crescent blade. It shines with enchantments as well.

“I use a whip blade. How is an axe close to that?”

“You fight aggressively.”

“Consider it like a cathartic experience, poppet. Try swinging it around a little bit.”

I had some basic lessons in axe-fighting from Jarek if only because I must know how to face one. This weapon is perfectly balanced. Not only that, but it is surprisingly heavy considering the lightweight nature of the armor. Between its weight and my strength, any strike will be devastating. We should not need it tonight but it will certainly help.

With nothing much to do, we wait until midnight, discussing other aspects of Likaeen culture. I lose myself in the myriad stories they have. Likaeen society has existed for an extremely long period of time. As for how long, the princely pair cannot give me a firm answer because time flows at different paces in different worlds, and the relative speeds between said worlds varies across, well, time. Sinead even alludes that the Court of Blue possesses a device capable of slowing down an entire plane, though Sivaya refuses to elaborate. It must be quite the experience to live in a world where the laws of nature are merely suggestions.

I interrupt a recollection of a three-days long dance because our guests have arrived, on foot of all things. I signal the fae and climb to a low branch, ready to intervene should a danger come. A discrete darkness spell suffices to hide me.

A trio comes into view. They wear boring brown and black garbs, not forester wear. Their heavy boots trample the wet soil as well as the errant twigs, except for the third man, who inspects my charges with obvious greed in his dark eyes. I almost expect him to twirl his pointy beard.

He is a Courtier, a rather old one. Decent strength. Interestingly, I recognize Cadiz essence which implies that he has traveled far for this meeting. The man in the center carries a locked box while the third bears a musket and a gauntlet, a sign that he is the muscle tonight. They approach with a great amount of caution for people who set up an ambush.

Once they are close enough, Sinead lights a blue lantern and welcomes them in a fancy grey ensemble. The scene is set. The beginning of the negotiation goes well, with both parties presenting the goods. I see that the Courtier attempts to smell or perceive the fae's auras, but he struggles to come to a conclusion. My allies are no castaways crashing down on this plane and stunned from the fall. They have learned to hide. The Courtier must be wondering if it is worth offending an unknown party just to realize that he only captured eccentric mages. Nevertheless, he takes a step forward and that, I cannot accept. I let the darkness spell lift. The blue lantern shines on me too now, playing strange tricks with the silvery metal of my armor.

“That is close enough,” I tell them.

All three newcomers jump. The muscle man aims the musket in my direction but he does not pull the trigger, possibly held back by my lack of motion. I slowly lean forward on the branch.

“You do not need to come closer, especially you, nightwalker.”

“If you know what I am, then you know better than to try and stop me,” the Courtier retorts, though he stays where he is.

His companions look embarrassed rather than scared. They already know what he is.

I sneer and my disdain provokes a reaction from the other vampire. He cannot feel my constrained aura, and so he attempts to charm me.

“Why don’t you come down so I can have a better look?”

His arrogance melts like dew under the sun when the attempt fails spectacularly. My grin widens minutely.

“You do not want me to climb down, nightwalker. In fact, I will even tell you what you want because I can see your destiny.”

I swing my legs a bit and twirl the massive battleaxe in front of me with as much ease as if it were a toy. The whisper of displaced air tells the little one all he needs to know. I enjoy watching his confidence decrease further.

“In the first future, either you or the mounted group by the mill attacks us. In the second future, you get to leave this clearing alive.”

“You do not know what you are doing. I represent powers you could never imagine.”

“Do not bark your desert tongue at me, nightwalker. Make a deal or attack, I care not either way, but you will stop wasting my time.”

The Courtier glares and hesitates, but at the end we vampires know better than anyone else that the world is dangerous and filled with unknowns, and some of the unknowns can rip your head off your torso with the spine still attached.

“Carry on,” he tells his associates.

They glance fearfully from him to me, then back, but eventually the leader relents. He presents Sivaya with an intriguing item. I see that it is a scepter of sorts made of a curious wood that shines deeply, as if lit from the inside.

“Dear?” Sinead asks.

“No need to examine it. The imprint has stayed strong. It will do.”

Sinead nods and tosses the ring to the leader, who examines it covetously.

“The seal of the Myrddin clan. And the mana signature as well. It really is true.”

The man frowns.

“You didn’t empty all their vaults before coming here, did you?”

“I am flattered that you would think me capable of such an achievement, but no.”

The negotiator shakes his head with disbelief before turning away, soon followed by the other two.

“You are mad to give away such a prize in exchange for that weird focus. Bah, no matter. I hope we work together again. Farewell.”

The trio leaves. I signal the fae and clad myself in darkness once more to follow them. As they approach the mill and their armed escort, the vampire stops and turns, considering.

I lift the veil of shadow and tsk in a low voice. Our eyes meet.

He stares at the axe, shimmering under the moonlight.

He turns away.

I join the fae a bit later as they pack and get changed.

“You can keep the armor. It will still be useful after we are done here,” Sivaya mutters, head turned away.

“Hm. Thank you for this wonderful gift,” I tell her with all honesty. Just the enchantments alone could occupy a team of Dvergurs for a decade.

“By the way,” I ask, “could you tell me what that focus is for?”

“It is not a focus, but a branch cut from an old tree. Here, take it. Then you will know.”

I grab the item and inspect it. It does not appear to have been worked on. In fact, the radiance appears to be natural.

“You hold an offshoot of the World Tree. Wherever it is, it still holds a connection to the primordial forest it came from. And now, we have our gate focus. We will use it to drill a portal home. You will get to see our forest soon, but for now, we have work to do.”