

We leave Marquette the next night in complete secrecy. Phineas has received a gift from Constantine while I was away, a low-born Nightmare. This is, in reality, a thinly disguised show of support for our operation. I suspect that by now most Wardens know that Illinois is being contested anyway. I make sure to bring my armor and have personal effects sent by carriage. As for us, we will ride through the countryside in travel clothes. I did not have the time to find anything better than a chest protector for him and his Knight armor should not be worn.

"Is this really necessary?" Phineas asks, "Do they not know that you have returned?"

"Our enemies do not know where I am and what I am doing right now, and I intend to keep it that way. I want the element of surprise on our side."

"You have burnt down a farm."

"And among our enemies' agents, I left no survivors. You would be surprised how easily one can achieve discretion when there is nobody left to observe."

Phineas gives me a glare from the side as we rush past a small pond, grown smaller by a lack of rain.

"I have grown familiar with your methods and the underlying philosophy."

"And it is such a good one too. You are welcome," I finish with a smile. Truly, it should be common sense. I would have killed the family too but it would have gone against my code.

"What do you plan to do once we arrive?" Phineas asks, this time more seriously.

"We know very little about the situation. Our first priority is to reconvene with Melusine. She is a shrewd woman, and will no doubt have knowledge and strong opinions on everything. She usually does. Her help will prove decisive."

"Should you not be the one who provides help? She is a city master."

"And I am a war lady as well as the Warden of this state."

I realize that Phineas stopped me on a question of etiquette and amend my remark.

"Melusine cannot possibly lose unless she is being heavily outclassed. We have already determined that the scale of the assault is at the level of the state, therefore the responsibility to repel it falls to me. Do not be concerned, Melusine and I have cooperated on several occasions with great success, despite her natural prickliness. I blame it on her English heritage."

Phineas and I engage in a brief staring contest.

"How dreadful," the Lancaster man retorts, *"especially when compared to your French and American tendencies to start revolutions."*

Touché.

"The Watcher saves me, there are two of them now," I lament. We both smile and keep riding into the night.

It takes us a few hours to reach the outskirts of Chicago despite our speed, and I am amazed to find that the city has continued its explosive growth. Tatty wooden houses and shops sprawl explosively from the beating heart of the city, pulsing in time with the stock exchange and the innumerable train lines. It even smells a bit cleaner with the recent addition of an excellent sewer system. I just find it slightly disappointing that the sewage would spill in the city's freshwater source but what can I say? I am no civil engineer.

We ride through deserted alleys on our way to Melusine's compound. I have to admit that the poverty and squalor are not as dreadful as I had feared. Melusine always said that many of her more influential citizens promoted clean living and that she would support their impetus. We even come across a natural park, a surprisingly fancy addition to an otherwise poor district. I have Phineas dismount shortly before we approach Melusine's compound in case there are hostile sentries and we take to the roofs, or at least I try to before I realize a bit of a conundrum. There are no wooden roofs in all of Chicago that can support a vampire carrying five hundred pounds of eternal ice battle armor on her back. I am reminded of that fact and hope that the cost of repair will not prove too taxing for that innocent family.

I also discover that accidentally and forcefully entering someone's home uninvited feels terrible and disturbing. I was essentially shoved out.

"Nevermind, you stay up and scout for the both of us. I will walk. Contain your aura as much as you can."

A click of the tongue to mark his acknowledgment and we are on our way. Melusine has set her base next to meat-packing factories, and while the smell is not the most pleasant, the lack of late night entertainment allows us to easily spot groups of individuals with questionable motives. We avoid them and find our destination guarded and fortified, an immense relief. I dreaded the unlikely possibility that Chicago had been entirely taken over. If we have a base, then we have a chance.

I signal Phineas. We move through the shadows, then circle the main entrance. A tall, protective stone wall encircles the brick buildings my ally made her seat of power. I glance up to see a subtle line of enchantments surrounding the entire perimeter. The hint of fire in the methodical work reminds me of Melusine herself. She must have spent some time setting it up.

"We should get in," I suggest. I jump and allow the alarm to trigger. Phineas lands by my side shortly after.

We have arrived in a small courtyard. The windows leading to the two-stories building in front of us are all boarded cleanly. It takes less than thirty seconds for three familiar auras to arrive. Melusine lands first, traits tense in an armored dress I made for her. To my dismay, it

looks damaged. John and Urchin follow in similarly patched-up gear. My joy at seeing them again withers at the pain I notice, and the palpable relief when they recognize me. All of them show clear, distinct physical signs of mental exhaustion, a shocking display for us. It makes me angry. This unprovoked attack will be punished. I will make sure of it.

“Ariane. I dared not hope. It really is you, but, your aura? I cannot feel it.”

“I would be better if we two kept a low profile at first. Everyone, meet Phineas of the Lancaster. Phineas, those are Melusine of the Lancaster, Urchin of the Vanheim and Doe of the Natalis, by order of seniority.”

“A pleasure. It is good to finally see you again after hearing so much,” Phineas smoothly greets.

“Only good things, I hope?” Melusine asks with a hint of her old abrasive self.

“Naturally. Gentlemen, an honor.”

“Likewise,” Urchin greets as he spins his silver dollar. John merely nods, then our eyes meet and he lowers his in shame.

It makes me distinctly uncomfortable.

“We should talk more in a more secluded place. There is much to do,” I say.

“Yes, indeed. Yes. Congratulations on recruiting someone normal, Ariane. Everyone, follow me please,” Melusine declares.

What is that supposed to mean? Pah. We move between densely-woven defensive enchantments and sturdy bricks then to a fortified door. Guards on the outside are few and grouped, a sign that Melusine expects a vampire attack. Isolated sentries are of no use against vampires. Worse, being picked off tends to affect morale adversely. Those few we come across share the fatigue and stress I detected in my allies. This is a siege and it has lasted for far too long.

Finally, we climb sets of stairs to an elegantly decorated boudoir. The understated luxury belies the base’s rough exterior. I wait for Melusine’s invitation to sit on the nearest couch, a courtesy that she acknowledges with a minute smile.

“Before we begin,” she says, *“may I ask if you are back for good? We were informed that you had returned by Sephare, however...”*

“Yes. My stay with the Knights has been cut short.”

Phineas makes a choking sound.

“By this, I mean that a member tried to assassinate me and we parted as a result. Violently. Under Jimena’s initiative, I might add.”

“Jimena?” Melusine exclaims. *“Really?”*

“Yes. Really. It is fine, however, I have my aura firmly under control.”

I show a bit of fang.

“Trust me.”

“Well that will be more than necessary, because we are facing a lord.”

I keep calm. I expected such an outcome, of course, but to hear it from Melusine herself confirms my belief that we are facing a coalition. Between the financial means and the presence of a lord, whoever is attacking us has invested a stupefying amount of resources for the sake of taking me down. I almost feel flattered.

“Please do elaborate.”

She sighs, and her shoulders slump. Melusine almost never loses her composure.

“We have been under attack for months. At first, those were just hostile financial moves, then our enemies escalated to physical attacks against supply convoys all masked under the guise of banditry. Even carrying goods by train could not stave them off. Wagons went missing. Entire shipments were sent somewhere else by mistake. Tracking down our enemy proved useless as most of their agents were disposable stooges hired by proxy or simply bitten. I was compelled to ask Sephare and Constantine for assistance.”

She stops then and passes a hand through her thick red hair. She searches my face, perhaps waiting for judgement, perhaps comfort. I signal her to continue. I cannot rest until I know.

“With their help, we managed to stabilize the most vulnerable ventures but I must warn you, we have to abandon the expansion west and some of our reconstruction projects.”

“Naturally. You were under attack,” I say.

Another nod.

“I am comforted that you would agree. With our assets in relative safety, I finally managed to follow the money trail out of state. More specifically, to the south. I could not send agents to investigate while we were under siege but there were enough hints to locate a base east of here, on the edge of the lake. Urchin and Doe joined me on a determined assault.”

She winces.

“We were soundly beaten. The attack started normally and we managed to disable two courtiers and wound a master. Then the lord arrived with reinforcements. He disabled all of us. A clean blow to the heart.”

"He was trained for war," John says. "Like Jarek."

"It is as he says. He knew how to fight and so did the others."

"They had Roland aura, Mistress," Urchin says. The silver dollar disappears somewhere and a knife replaces it.

Melusine huffs at the memory.

"Unfortunately we cannot prove anything. We woke up at the base with half of our standing forces decimated. I will be honest, I could have kept fighting but it was not worth it. I know when I am outclassed. The plan so far was to hire Natalis mercenaries from Jarek, discreetly. He has been reluctant to send them. He called it a show of weakness but what can I do against this aggression? We are weak, comparatively."

"Not anymore. You have me now."

"It will not be enough, unless you are suddenly a lady."

"I am."

"Then... Pardon me?"

"I am serious. I ascended. It is done."

Melusine glares though I can feel hope bubbling in her carefully-controlled aura.

"You are going to be so insufferable."

Oi.

"I shall permit you to bask in my illustriousness after we have triumphed," I generously allow.

"I would rather bask in the morning sunlight. I... cannot feel it in your aura."

"I am aiming to become nearly invisible. I suspect that several local lords have reached that level of aura control. Mine is still insufficient but I have had an excellent teacher. Enough of this, we must strike at our foes before they realize that I am here."

"Are you fully confident that you can face a battle lord in combat?"

"Yes."

"Then it would be best to defeat them before they go to ground. Unfortunately, they have since moved from the base we found. We will have to find them either in or around the city, and with that size..."

“Ah, this is where I come in!” Phineas says with a smile.

He picks a folded paper from his breast pocket, then places it on the coffee table between the five of us. It contains a summary map of the warehouse quarter along the shore of lake Michigan. Phineas briefly explains how he followed the paper trail to what seems to be the logistics heart of the opposition.

“It should be in this warehouse.”

“Yes, that makes perfect sense...” Melusine muses. *“This place used to belong to a wizard cabale called the Dresden group. They and the other practitioners left following a citywide edict against magic.”*

“Oh?” I exclaim with some surprise.

“Yes. Chicago is almost exclusively white and magic free, and therefore respectable enough for east coast citizens to move to. It cost me my detail of magicians but in the grand scheme of things, I deem that it was worth it. They would not have made a difference.”

I would think that she underestimates how resourceful a group of supported, trained mages can be. She should not. We sided with one when we escaped the Gabrielite trap all those years ago. She has forfeited safety for profit. Perhaps this is why our enemies wormed themselves in her city while only sniffing around mine. Nevertheless, she has brought us great wealth and will again, given the chance. It is only fair that I should protect our interests.

“Let us return to the subject at hand. The warehouse.”

“Yes. I had no interest in it when it was sold so I did not follow but it appears that it was acquired by our foes. The proximity to the shore means that they are well-positioned to receive shipments of supplies while only having to keep an eye on a few key streets.”

“Why would they only keep an eye on a few key streets?”

She stops.

“Hm, I suppose that we would be expected to approach by land? Since we already live there.”

“Then we shall approach by sea. Or lake, in this case.”

“Do you know how to operate a ship?” she asks with some surprise.

“We will not ride on a ship of the line, you dunce. Can you not row?”

“I will row,” John says with finality. Melusine’s aura reflects her true nature. She is pouting.

“This hardly counts as a plan.”

“We get a rowing boat, we sail along the shore to the warehouse and disembark. We identify which building or buildings host the vampires and attack them before they can plan a defense. We capture as many as we can and use their supply routes to wipe their organization from the land in one fell swoop.”

“What if the lord is out?”

“Then we capture his underlings. This is a key location. They will not leave it defenseless.”

“Their supply routes will surely be coded,” Urchin remarks.

“And I am confident that those in charge are scrumptious. I already have the wolves handle a few of the groups we found. We will handle the rest and use my security forces to mop up. It is time to send a message.”

Something shifts in the auras of those I call my friends. I realize that, until now, they had held little hope that the situation might be resolved. A siege of several months has a way to sap even the most stalwart defenders. I do not envy them.

“Very well. This is more a guideline than a plan, but with so many unknowns, anything too elaborate will be of no use anyway,” Melusine admits.

“What if they have two lords?” She continues after a moment of hesitation. I slap my hand against the coffee table just hard enough to receive a satisfactory reaction from the harried vampires. We do not like sudden movements and unexpected noises. This jolts them awake like a cold shower.

“Stop thinking about worst case scenarios. If they decide to violate the Accords that brazenly then there is nothing we can do. Plan for the likely, not the technically possible. We will go there and we will retake what is ours. First your city, then our state. They will rue the day they thought us weak, because we are rising vampires and there is no battlefield we cannot tread.”

For the first time tonight, Melusine gifts me with a genuine smile. Three knives appear in Urchin’s hands while John rolls his shoulders. They are ready.

“Go and take your best gear. We leave in ten minutes.”

Melusine and Urchin stand to leave, and so does Phineas when he realizes that John has stayed. The tall man has regained some of his countenance, and yet I detect an underlying frailty so unlike him that I do not know what to think.

“I have failed you, Miss Ari,” he says.

Ah, so this is what it is.

“Explain.”

"You tasked me with defending your territory. I could not."

I nod to myself, but really this is just a show.

"In truth, I should be the one who apologizes."

He frowns mightily after hearing such an outrageous claim. Good.

"If the leader gives her follower an impossible task, who is to blame when the follower cannot complete it?"

He tilts his massive head, considering.

"I could not know that we would be attacked by such a foe, and you could not have defeated them. Now I am back and you will be by my side when we teach them a lesson."

"As it should be."

"Good. You still have that maul I gave you?"

"Shiny as a new dollar, Miss Ari."

"Go get it for when you need to make an entrance."

With some privacy, I quickly change into my armor and we reconvene outside. They all inspect it in silence. Urchin even raises a hand, marveling at the coat of frost decorating his sleeve like a frilly ornament.

"Now I can believe it."

"Show some patience and you will have proof," I tell him before turning around.

We rush silently through the streets, dodging sentries until we arrive at the shore. It is a matter of moments to find an embarkation large enough to accommodate all of us, but when I alone am left on the dock, Melusine tsks.

"You are too heavy to join us."

"Then I will not," I reply, and step down.

The placid water freezes solid under my feet. I stand on the quickly spreading ice while an entire blanket forms around me. It is time for a nice, polar stroll.

"Follow, please, and let there be darkness."

Under the protective aegis of the spell, we progress quickly to the warehouse where our foes gather. The fae spell hides aura as well as magic and vision. We move unimpeded in the relative darkness of the cloudy night like wraiths on the surface of the unmoving, fetid waters. The city might be working to clean itself but my friends row through its dirty bath water on our way to an equally dirty deed. In a way, tonight links back to my early years as a courtier. Cloaks and daggers have led to more cloaks and daggers, but this time, I hold the blade.

“We are here.”

Melusine’s whispers only reach me because the darkness spell likes me. It remains the first one I cast perfectly, and I feel a deep understanding of its nature. It will hide me until the time has come to forfeit stealth.

The warehouse complex stands on a more desolate part of the shore. It does not even have a proper pier, merely a few planks jutting forward so that midnight travelers can pass their cargo from hand to hand without wetting their feet. Crates and boxes pile up against a rickety wall but I can pierce through the illusion. Those are creaky things that will betray any attempt to climb them. The wall is high and sturdy. The only door has been reinforced with metal. There are no enchantments I can detect, however. We all gather next to it.

“There is a sentry farther up. He hasn’t noticed us,” Urchin whispered.

I saw him. He is remarkably vigilant for a stooge, but he is looking in the wrong direction. A quick spell and the door opens without a sound. Behind, we find a large courtyard with more crates and jars. There are three large buildings inside of the compound that I can see with one being little more than a barn used to store goods. I dismiss the second immediately because there are no lights there. The third is the right one.

“Enchantments. Defensive wards,” Melusine whispers. *“And here I was afraid that we might not have the right place.”*

“They would not place them on their walls. Too obvious and they still pretend to be hidden. Far sight.”

The spell opens a smooth window into the interior, showing a slightly distorted image of a serious man in black pants and shirt inspecting notes with a frown. I recognize a vampire from his immobility, though his aura is hard to perceive at this range. He, too, makes some effort to keep it under control.

“One of their masters. I do not know his name. He was masked last time but I would recognize that frown anywhere,” Melusine says. I nod and inspect the rest of the structure, not too worried about the being found out. This spell was specifically designed to go around wards. A careful inspection shows many mortals hard at work around an improvised office, I count another Master cleaning a sword as well as three Courtiers on the second floor currently busy getting ready for some unknown task. We caught them all, it seems.

The lord sits near the entrance to my right, brooding.

"He is the one who defeated us," Melusine says.

"Alright, here is the plan. You four take the backdoor. When I give the signal, John breaks it and you come in to engage the downstairs Masters before they can regroup. I will attempt to disable one but be ready for anything. Once this is done, move up and catch the Courtiers. Disable them as you see fit. Try not to destroy the hearts and heads, normal wounds should suffice."

"Understood," Melusine says.

"Hold on," Phineas says, *"what is the signal?"*

I glare reproachfully.

"You should know."

"Yes," Urchin adds, *"the signal is always the same."*

I decide to explain a point I deem important.

"Please note that I do not mean it as a metaphor for the condition of women or young proactive vampires although it would be fitting, but sometimes, in life, you have to make your own doors. You can enter once I've made mine."

"Oh I see."

No he does not, but he will. I watch the four warriors walk stealthily to the left entrance. John lifts the maul. Time seems to slow down, heavier. Inside of the house, the lord blinks.

Good instincts, but it will not suffice. I sprint forward.

Despite my grace, the moving armor still produces a whisper of a noise. The lord jumps to his feet as the others look on with confusion. It does not matter. They are too late, because **I. AM. HERE.**

I hit bricks with my left pauldron and fully unleash my aura. The wall explodes inward in a shower of chunks and debris under my weight. Masonry flies and men scream. Dust fills the air just as my left gauntlet closes around the head of the nearest Master. I clench and pulp it like a ripe melon.

The door behind me shatters as well with the roar of a frustrated and rather pissed off Natalis.

The lord materializes a dueling sword. I let Rose grow from my hand.

"I FOUND YOU, LITTLE RATS. MAGNA ARQA!"

“Oh shit.”

Ah.

Yes.

I can feel everything. My four allies crash through the demolished remains of the back entrance, dogpiling the remaining master. Thorny roots shred beams and tiles. They turn bricks to powder as if they were sand. I only manage to stop myself from destroying the desks as the first one sags from a missing leg. This time, the area is considerably smaller and I can only control a handful of roots directly and yet there is no ruining the exhilarating sensation of utter liberation and power now filling me. I am exactly as I was meant to be, complete and free and fully myself. I can grow in strength later. Now is the time to enjoy the moment and this man **LOOKS DELICIOUS.**

He runs away.

Roland lord. Adrien. Adam's twin and the more quiet of the pair ruling Kentucky. We had an agreement made at the beginning of the civil war. **KILL HIM. CLAIM HIS ESSENCE.**

“COME BACK, YOU COWARD.”

He only wears a beige ensemble that would not look out of place in a salon. They always wear beige with their stupid beige hair and light brown eyes. Like looking at a backstabbing monochrome. Pathetic.

Adrien jumps through a lone window in a shower of glass shards. I demolish the entire side of the house on my way out and cleave the legs of an unfortunate Courtier who had the misfortune of running down the nearby stairs when I pass him by. A hint of Roland power feeds me. Just an appetizer.

“Magna Arqa!”

Adrien melds into the shadows of the courtyard, his form insubstantial now. No matter. I rush forth and flay the ground with searching roots. I can still sense his presence within the sphere as roots track him even now. A hint of movement leads me to the door we left half-opened. I race after the fleeing lord and turn right out. A root catches his leg when he emerges from behind a crate that would be too small to hide a dog. Reality shenanigans! Two can play that game.

More roots burst through the ground and out of walls to join the others, tightening the hold over my surroundings. Adrien frees himself and only leaves a piece of fabric and a drop of blood in his mad dash to get away from me. I sprint after him. The armor slows me but I care not because who would stop me anyway? I turn the corner to a panicked sentry and regrettable lack of fleeing Roland. I swat the man's mind like a fly.

“WHERE IS HE?”

Panicked eyes to a side alley. I stomp the ground like an unstoppable juggernaut and smile when I feel a presence in the corner, behind a discarded cart with a missing wheel. We are in my sphere. I have to struggle not to let my roots rip him to shred.

I walk by and lean to the side.

Adrien's soul blade grinds on my shoulder and bounces back. I angled it perfectly. I grab his wrist before he can retreat and snap it effortlessly. His handsome face is so close to mine that I can feel the small exhale of controlled agony drifting over my eyelashes. I pull him in and retract Rose but he melts again before I can bite down.

"I like it when you wriggle," I tell the fleeing form while I race after it. He turns towards the shore. He comes to a stop in front of a small fishing cabin. I do not. I rotate and cast a fast mirage to duplicate the following horizontal strike. Adrien gifts me with delectable consternation before vanishing again. Arg. So frustrating! I hiss.

The cabin explodes in a torrent of shards. Adrien slips through the rain to a barrel and then, to my immense surprise, jumps into the water.

I watch him disappear under the dark waves. Calm returns to the surface a moment later.

That feckless ruffian.

I cannot follow. I will not follow. I would only turn into a livid ice cube, propelled by rage.

The water is filthy.

I roar once and let the Magna Arqa fade away. He escaped, the slippery bastard. No matter. I can testify of his presence and we should have enough prisoners to put his wardenship to an end. Amusingly, Melusine was entirely correct. There could have been two lords here, with his twin included.

I turn and realize that this is almost a recreation of that scene in Savannah I survived back in eighteen twelve. I had to run from a furious lord Suarez after a small incident of bank robbery, only to dive head first in Savannah's tepid and filthy waters. How the tables have turned. I scrunch my nose under the face mask and thank the Watcher that I avoided an impromptu bath this time. Let another smell of pee! The curse has been lifted.

In a significantly better mood, I return to the abandoned base to find that we did indeed get all of our foes prisoner. Unfortunately, their base has collapsed. Only half of it still stands.

"What happened here?" I ask no one in particular.

"You, Ariane. You happened. We are lucky to have recovered so many of the documents, but the rest is lost under a significant amount of debris because of your heavy-handed approach!" Melusine spits with obvious frustration.

“Well excuuuuse me! Next time I shall leave you to beat the lord while I handle the housekeeping, yes?”

“At least my beatings do not extend to the architecture!”

“Really, little miss firebug? Really?”

“You are just as insufferable as I remember. Please let me know when you leave so I can tidy the city, your Hallowed Bumpkinness.”

“Next time I will bring explosives.”

We bicker with pleasure while packing up. All in all, tonight was an auspicious haul. I was right to act fast. I decide to head back to Marquette where I can securely hold prisoners while I summon Constantine or one of his enforcers.

The next day, Melusine presents me with a newspaper cut framed in elegant rosewood.

“Here, as a mark of my appreciation and to remember your timely assistance,” she tells me.

I frown and read in silence.

“The Chicago Tribune.

‘Panic by the shore!’

An unidentified lunatic terrorized the coast yesterday evening. At two in the morning, Chicagoans living near Menomee and Wisconsin streets were forced awake by the screams of a deranged individual of the female persuasion. Although many citizens opened their shutters to investigate the disturbance, the guilty harridan could not be found, leaving the inhabitants baffled and irritated.

‘Twas like a mountain lion in rut,’ Mrs. Culpepper reports to the Tribune. ‘If I wasn’t living in the city I would have sent my old Paul with a rifle and a prayer, I would!’

Since the harpy bellowing those horrendous screams could not be found—”

I carefully lower the frame.

"Your doing, I suppose?"

"I have no notion about what you could possibly mean."

"For the sake of the continued existence of our arrangement and your own continued existence, I shall leave this place. Please make sure to pull your own weight in something else than making bank, for once."

"Ah, concerning this," Melusine adds more seriously. *"I would be grateful if you could leave Phineas with me to help with the investigation."*

I turn to Phineas who considers the offer with greedy eyes.

"Phineas is his own man. If he agrees..."

"It would be convenient, yes," the man agrees a bit quickly. I bet a cotton bale against a twig that they plan on investigating each other's nether regions. Ah well.

"Please do your best to solve the current crisis," I remind them.

Urchin, John, and I ride out of the city at nightfall while doing our best to avoid attraction. I unexpectedly feel an aura tugging at us while we move through small streets surrounded by wooden houses of poor making. A fire hazard is what it is.

I keep moving at a slow pace until we find Adrien waiting for us. He wears a new, clean suit which annoys me a bit. I stop Metis, who snorts derisively at the vampire in front of her.

"This is not what you think. I would like to discuss terms."

"Why would I bother when I can have the Accords bury you?"

"Because that is what they want, and they have my brother. "