

The Silversmith estate stood near the center of the town. From the outside, it did not look like much, merely a brick building surrounded by high hedges. The waxing days of winter had revealed holes in that protective embrace, beyond which waited a naked, rain-stained wall.

The season did Indianapolis no favor.

A prudent observer would note the lush, thick curtains behind tinted windows. The entire ground floors had been reinforced with bars and the door was solid oak, newly painted. Despite its barren state, the garden showed signs of care in the empty flower patches waiting for spring and the hand of a loving gardener. A marble table sat at a corner with three ornate chairs delicately decorated with whirls of colored glass. Wealth was here, although it was hidden.

Beyond the mundane, I could see no obvious flaw behind their protections. A double circle of alarms encircled the outer perimeter, one at chest height and the other above the hedges. The first floor was thoroughly reinforced around the fortified door while the upper levels were more modestly covered. All in all, rather adequate for a bunch of provincials. I watch my proteges ring the bell. A moment later, the outer gate opens to let them into the garden. They hesitate before taking the stairs up. They knock.

A nifty piece of enchantment, remote activation. It always has its effects. I can feel and hear people waiting near the entrance. They detected the Red Cabal apprentices before they even approached. Now, they will make them wait. The power games have already begun. It takes a good thirty seconds for the door to finally open. They get in.

My Magna Arqa cannot penetrate this place. Stronghold it might be, but this is the stronghold of a clan, and they consider it their home. I will not be able to enter without an invitation. That does not leave me without tools, however. A simple remote casting targeting their unprotected walls allows me to see inside the house with minimal interference.

I find the interior of the house fascinating. It has four floors plus an attic, but only the upper one follows conventional architecture. The first to third all center around a large, central open chamber with each floor linked to every other by thin stairs. Warm electric light shines on shameless opulence.

A grim majordomo leads the squad up the stairs under the condescending gaze of various clan members dressed in finery. Crystal carvings in many hues hang from balustrades or from small brass statues set on the railings. Most of them are enchanted with deadly spells. The entire place is a death trap, though not a very smart one. Aramis notices he is being watched and turns around, meeting the gaze of a beautiful brunette in a red dress showing a scandalous amount of cleavage. Those young mages grow more daring with every generation. Back in my days... No, I need to stop saying back in my days. I am far too young to fall into this trap. Besides, one day, I may wear trousers. That would be nice.

A pair of young men wearing smirks and tuxedos wait near the third floor landing. They have cast a small spell force at knee level to make their guests stumble. Ah, so we have fallen off the thuggish intimidation ladder and crashed face-first into kindergarten bullying. Soon, they

will start calling Constance names. Professor Schindler casually walks over the trap without a word, making the sneers fade ever so slightly. Constance does the same with an expression of confused contempt that sparks the flame of anger in the would-be hobblers. Minnie walks over with her nose up while Jacob takes careful steps, looking particularly annoyed.

Aramis smashes into the trap and breaks it on impact.

“Grow up,” he casually drops as a parting gift.

A decent show, I suppose. After that little incident, the squad follows a stuffy corridor lined with gaudy paintings of ancestors sitting besides glass-making implements, a really pretentious display considering the whole glass theme was started by their grandfather and the family was made of sailors and cheesemongers before that, according to the files. What a bunch of pretentious, gilded twits.

The first true hurdle comes when the squad enters a heavily warded room, possibly a sanctum of some sort. I simply cannot pierce it from outside. I suppose I am already doing well, seeing through walls and eavesdropping on private conversation. The world should be grateful that I do not use my forbidden knowledge to spy on rugby players as they bathe! Fortunately, enough sound escapes through the unlocked door to let me follow the conversation.

“Welcome to the house of the Silversmiths, Cabalites. I am Loretta and this is Douglas.”

Female voice, on the older side. Quite possibly the matriarch.

“And to what do we owe the honor?” a male voice says with dripping sarcasm.

There is an edge to that voice, one that does not come from grief.

I do not hear the sound of chairs, which means the squad has not been invited to sit. A quick exchange begins under the careful arbitration of Professor Schindler, with her pupils realizing that no, they are not seen as defenders of justice and protectors but meddlesome strangers, no, people do not share their dogged pursuit for the culprit and that no, the family will not help them.

“Surely you care about safety as much as everyone at least? So long as this thing is out, none of you are safe!” Minnie argues.

“Our safety is our business and, as we mentioned, we do not recognize the authority of the Red Cabal or your right to come here and interrogate us,” the man replies.

“We are not mandated by the Red Cabal. We represent the mayor’s office in this regard. I am sure they will appreciate your assistance in this matter. Before the creature makes another victim.”

“You have no reason to believe it will make another victim.”

“So you believe this is personal?” Aramis asks.

“Old Ichabod? Pfft,” the man scoffs.

Silence fills the room for a moment. The next time the woman speaks, her tone is chilly.

“Thank you, Douglas. We have no reason to believe that Ichabod was targeted in particular. It could be that the animal you are pursuing already moved on, or it could be that it is still here, around, and you are wasting your time doing police work rather than laying traps.”

“You know this is no normal beast,” Aramis says. “No such creature could kill in the middle of the city with no one the wiser. It has to possess some measure of intellect.”

“Then you should ask the werewolves,” the woman insists.

“They do not care about Ichabod. They do not know why he was killed,” Constance states decisively.

Hmmm. A bit abrupt. Let us see where she is going with this.

“He lived isolated on the other side of town, as far away as possible without completely leaving your sphere of influence. He lived alone. None of you went to check the crime scene or the officer or chief of police would have remarked upon it. Some families would avenge the murders of a member no matter what, but not you. He must have done something truly horrific.”

“You have no right to judge us,” the man hisses.

“Some of the activated defenses cannot be sustained for very long,” Jacob observes.

“You are preparing to hunker down, weather the storm and see what’s left at the end. More than half of your family watched us climb those stairs. You are bringing everyone home. Everyone who matters, in any case,” Constance says.

She sounds bitter to me. Her voice is harsh and her tone icy.

“You’ve already left him behind.”

“I think you have enjoyed our hospitality for long enough,” the woman replies with equal disdain.

“We have all the information we need,” Schindler says, “thank you for your time.”

The squad leaves in a line of offended, dignified heroes. So precious, so adorable. They walk out without comment until they reach the end of the nearest street, then start complaining all at once in a gesture of unity and camaraderie. Before I can terminate the spell, I hear the Silversmith side of the dispute.

“We can’t just let them go like that! What will the negroes and mongrels think if we don’t fight back? That they can just come here and waltz around our city?” Douglas erupts.

“They are useful idiots so long as they are just visitors. Those voodoo heathens will use them then toss them away like yesterday’s toothpicks. In fact, it would be best if the two groups do not get closer. Perhaps a casualty in the line of duty for our crimson friends wouldn’t be amiss. Nothing like some blood spilled for the ungrateful to sour relation. Have Walter do it. One of the girls for best effect.”

“Yes, grandma.”

Ah, no.

Ah, no no no no. That will not do. That will not do at all. This is not some farcical Bingley I am attending right now. I cannot rely on just fate and Schindler’s vigilance to protect them from an assassin, not when they are expecting a beast instead. I cut the connection to call Lafayette instead.

“Lady Ariane?”

“I just found out our dear locals wish to assassinate one of the pupils. I think they need a courtesy visit.”

“That would be best. My visit would be less courteous.”

“We will resort to that if they refuse to comply. Their fortress is a home. I cannot get in without leave.”

“I will come up with a plan in the meanwhile.”

I cut the communication and race down the tiled roof where I was waiting. My automobile is waiting nearby. The chauffeur does not even look when I get it, lower a screen between his side and mine and then get quickly changed into a more official outfit. Soon, I am dressed to impress in a blue and red dress of exotic make based on a Summer court design. I have to say, the back of an automobile is not the best place to change clothes. My embarrassment will fortunately remain private since the windows are one way.

Now ready, I return to the estate, knocking on the door after jumping the wards.

Someone swears inside.

“Hey, Francis, were we waiting for someone else?” the farther man asks.

I use a small spell to carry the sound forward. A minor feat of magic, but one that produces the desired effect.

“I know you can hear me ‘Francis’. Open the door this instant or I will peel the wards off and remove it from its hinges.”

The closest man jumps. I hear a spike in fear from his heartbeat. A moment later, I see a shift in a carefully camouflaged peephole. I turn towards it and lean forward a little, meeting Francis eye to eye.

“Hello there,” I greet.

“The Silversmiths are not receiving anyone at the moment,” the man replies somewhat carefully.”

I smile more, revealing fangs. I let a hint of purple shine in my eyes. The eye in the peephole disappears.

“Is this your final decision?” I ask

“Shit,” Francis whispers to his companion, terrified.

“What?”

“I think it’s a vampire.”

The other man rushes away. I hear him confer in a low voice, presumably through an enchantment of sorts, though I cannot tell without a line of view and with this much interference. A moment later, the door opens to reveal a panicked majordomo. Sweat pearls on his wizened brow, but he still stands tall.

“The matriarch will see you now,” he says.

This counts as an invitation. The gates open again, revealing the same man who had tried to hobble my proteges with a cheap trick and the majordomo, the man by the name of Francis. I follow the sweet-smelling older man up the stairs and notice that the mages are still there, though I can tell from their concerned gazes that I was not a planned visit. Now that my Magna Arqa can deploy, I notice they have a deep basement filled with booze, a still, and a hidden exit in a nearby warehouse. Ah, illegal alcohol distillation. Such a standard post-war occupation for those who wish for quick money. A little pedestrian, but I cannot exactly comment since my first major operation was a brothel.

It feels amusing and strange to walk the same corridor I have seen several times through my spell, to feel the lush carpet under my bottines and smell the faint touch of cigar and mold. I find the two same people waiting for me in the sanctum.

I have to say that I have seen gaudy, barocco horrors in my long, God-forsaken life, but that place takes the cake. It takes all the cakes under the sun, the moon or the Watcher. I cannot find a single free spot from the bookcases overwhelmed by old tomes to the desk covered in jewel-encrusted baubles. Most of them are enchanted, of course. I am getting a headache.

By contrast, the two people waiting for me show the most restraint out of all their relatives. I see a young man with a square jaw and a vicious glare, with the solid shoulders of someone who does not shirk physical activity. A stubble covers his handsome cheeks. The woman is older. A human would consider her to be mid-forty, but her aura indicates she is significantly older. Jowls and a carmine complexion hint at the abuse of the very same thing they peddle. In fact, I can spot a freshly uncorked bottle of brandy on the shelf behind her. Under her outward appearance of calm, her heart thunders.

I sit without waiting for an invitation.

“I could not help but hear the end of your little discussion. I ‘request’ that you desist. Those young ones are under my protection.”

The matriarch’s fear spikes at the same time as her associate’s anger. The violation of their privacy hits a nerve in the young man. Only his partner understands the implication. I suspect she may be more familiar with my kin. I lean forward, deciding to give them a little respect rather than just demanding. Let it be known that I do not always jump to the big stick part of the negotiation.

“You have played games with them, which I do not blame you for. Defending one’s territory is a perfectly reasonable reaction to what you perceive as an intrusion,” I say, giving the young man a passing glance. “However, their purpose remains to solve a murder. Even if you intend to catch and punish the perpetrator yourself, surely cooperation would be preferable to sabotage. You can certainly appreciate that now is not a good time to rock the boat, particularly not with an organization with the... reach... the Red Cabal can display. If you let go of your anger, you will see I speak the truth,” I tell the matriarch.

Our eyes meet, though not for long. Fury does not turn her lungs into bellows, or her heart into a drum. Fear does. We both know I am merely being polite.

“What tells us you are not the murderer?” the man coldly asks.

I wave his comment aside.

“Nothing does and I am not interested in proving myself. The only question here is: will you let your perceived offense go?”

“Of course,” the man smoothly lies.

He is a mortal and so the outright lie does little more than to sting him. If he were to swear first, it would hurt him more, but not as much as an oath break might hurt me.

That is the punishment magic would inflict. The punishment I would inflict, though? That would be an entire other question.

“Douglas,” the woman hisses in warning.

I place my clawed hands on the desk and lean forward and to the side, towards the young man.

“We vampires have many rules. If you lie to me, you remove yourself from the protection of those rules. We do not take kindly to oathbreakers.”

“Douglas, enough,” Matriarch Loretta interrupts before the man can reply. He does not seem too impressed

Sometimes, my comparatively small frame, my gender, and the appearance of youth serve me well. This is not such a case.

“No grandma, I don’t think we should listen to another word coming out of this monster’s mouth. Your invitation is rescinded.”

I am taken as if by an invisible force, pushed out and I leave as fast as I can until the wind of my passage makes the majordomo, Francis, yelp in surprise. I turn to see the insides of the house, now barred to me.

Well! I tried. I could have Charmed them, I suppose, but that would not have been the behavior of a good guest. I suppose it will have to be the stick then. The younger, arrogant man by the majordomo’s side laughs with vicious glee.

“Hah! Thrown out on your posterior, were you? Begone, dark one, and if you dare return, we will show you the full might of the Silversmiths!” he yells at me from the entrance.

Ah.

Ah!

And here I was going to bother charming him into letting me in, this time for a more... direct negotiation. This will serve just as well.

It is true what they say. The devil is in the details. What an unfortunate phrasing. Like my sire, I keep to my word without treachery. Disrespectful boasts are an entirely other matter. One that we usually answer with a hand through the ribcage.

“I accept your challenge in the spirit in which it was given,” I reply amicably.

“Wha—”

I rip out his jaw before he can finish his sentence. His tongue lols from the gap while a massive geyser of blood stains the curtains. Ah well. It is not against the rules I set myself!

Francis screams horribly. Above us, the mages swear. Offensive spells are primed all around. I wave my gauntleted hand, casting a quick sound enchantment.

“I am going to go back up and you shall show me the might of the Silversmiths! OR ELSE.”

I form a shield around myself and walk. I have to give myself some challenges, or I might go rusty.

“She’s a vampire!” the girl in a dress screams. “Use fire!”

“Get the bitch!” another girl screams.

“No need for name calling,” I reply. “Shatter!”

The basic spell hits the railing against which my verbal attacker was leaning, disintegrating it. She falls down a floor below.

“Aaaarg my knee!”

Good, she can watch that and her tongue. Bolts of incandescent mana land on my defenses, peppering them without much result.

“Oh no!” I mock. “Fire magic. If only I had predicted that turn of events! I could have based my shield on ice!”

The barrage stops, soon replaced by a large glass javelin. Interesting! I have never encountered such magic before, at least not on earth. I let the projectile pass by me.

“The shield doesn’t stop glass! Shoot!” the female mage roars in triumph.

Shards land on me, most of which are, in fact, blocked by the shield. She cries in dismay.

“I did not fail to block the first spell. I merely ignored an attack that would have missed me anyway,” I chastise.

I have now reached the first landing, and without hurrying at that. Two of the locals flee me, casting panicked glances behind them. I do not bother. They would probably taste as bland as their personalities anyway.

“I am still waiting!” I say.

The next attempt also comes from the mage. She sends a dagger that would have missed me, except this one contains an explosive core that would have exploded close to my face if I had not detected the trap and blocked it. It is a good attempt that relies on my overconfident behavior.

“I commend you for your efforts,” I tell her.

“Fuck you!”

“Well that is quite rude,” I grumble.

Ah, we have reached the first of the brass statues, and I realize the crystal ornaments they bear are also complex, small objects designed to explode when triggered remotely with the use of glass magic. It is an ingenious design with an unstable nature that I would not personally use as a decoration on my house.

I stop and cast an illusion of myself walking forward, dimming my true body. The panicked casters take the bait without much problem. The ornaments explode and fill the air with shrapnel. The few that reach me are stopped by the shield. I merely resume my walk after most of the damage is done.

“Gah! Just keep attacking!” the mage exhorts.

I have reached the second landing and walk on the stairs to the third when a series of stomping sounds emerge from above. A towering golem of metal and crystal lumbers in plain view. I find the design elegant and refined. The transparent crystal hints at the cogs buried underneath. Serrated, transparent blades emerge from its fingers.

“Oh no!” I loudly lament. “A bloodless, magic-resistant creature! My weakness. What am I to do? Shatter.”

The furniture-breaking spell fires. As it lands, the mage screams in triumph.

“Hah! Golems resist spells, don’t you know?”

There is a terrible crack, then my original target crumbles and falls. I was aiming at the floor under the golem’s feet.

Masonry and beams collapse into the void below, carrying the construct with them. It lands on the ground floor with a terrible shriek of broken glass and twisted metal.

“At least my weakness isn’t stairs,” I observe.

I only get incoherent screaming in answer. And to think some of the mages call us blood-starved beasts and other epithets deriding our lack of control when we fight. Typical.

“You know,” I tell her as she switches to proper insults, “people who live in glass houses shouldn’t turn them into death traps while they are still inside.

The shrapnel-spewing glass constructs follow a simple yet effective method. A cavity contains a charge of essence which has to be rearmed every few days. The Silversmiths can use their glass magic to remotely release a seal on the cavity, causing it to violently explode. The weakness of such a system is that the seal itself is fragile, and a sufficient impact will break it.

“Shatter.”

I activate the traps on either side of my adversary. One of the shards catches her in the cheek and she falls screaming. Below me, the golem has stood back up and climbs after me,

but it will be too late. A short hop, and I am past the hole in the stairs and on my way to the office I had so curtly left. At this moment, Loretta and Andrew appear in full battle robes, possibly to check what was wrong. Loretta's face twists into an expression of horror but Douglas lets his anger go free. He casts a powerful spell that tastes of crystal and edges. I lift my hand and use a basic telekinesis spell to grab a fallen brass statue, which I send into his rib with much less speed than I could. The invitation's purpose was to show me 'the full might of the Silversmiths' which I am in my rights to put to the test, but my honor prevents me from killing any one of them as I am still their guest. Nothing says I cannot make it painful.

The young man slams to the ground, first winded by the blow, then retching from the feedback of his interrupted casting. That leaves the matriarch now ensconced in a flimsy shield. This one tastes of crystal as well and I expect subtlety in the same way a subtlety in a house will protect it from a rockfall. She knows it. She takes a deep breath in.

"Please stop, dear guest."

Ah, a test. I do stop, slightly below her which is annoying, but I believe I am still the winner in our little disagreement..

"I suspect someone said something that could be perceived as an invitation. Who was it?"

"The one with the loose tongue."

Loretta steps forward and finds Francis kneeling on the ground, vainly attempting to stop the bleeding of the unjawed prick.

"I should have guessed. James, you have been nothing but a disappointment. Step aside, Francis!"

A glass spear pierces the fallen man's chest, ending his agony. It also digs a hole in the damaged parquet. Am I the only one who tries not to destroy my own space in every single confrontation? In any case, the terrified lady puts on an air of courage before facing me once more.

"What are your terms then?"

"The same as before," I reply, generously spreading my arms, "leave my proteges alone and I shall return the favor."

I would be in my right to ask more. In fact, I would bet a finger that Loretta expects it and even then considers various concessions. This is how her kind functions. They grab every advantage they can take, and this is how they have come ahead in their own city, local barons without competition.

I need to make it very clear that we are not playing on the same chessboard. They are simply not important enough, nor their resources valuable enough, to justify much of my time.

“Very well,” Loretta finally agrees with a slow nod, “we will not act against your subordinates in any way for the duration of their stay. You have my word. Now, begone!”

I am violently pushed back for the second time that night. Landing on my feet, I keep moving until I stop in front of my automobile and lean in, scaring my chauffeur.

“Young miss? I mean, Lady Ariane?”

“Where are the message canisters?”

“In the back.”

I hurry and find said canister along with a pen and paper. A quick message follows.

Remember that I do not need an invitation to get to you.

-A

The Silversmiths might not be worth my time, but getting the last word is. I use a spy spell to find Loretta’s personal bedroom, smashing the canister through her window before leaving like a hooligan and feeling absolutely shameless about it.

I believe I am finally at peace with my own vengeful pettiness. At least until someone else remarks upon it. Then I will be forced to vehemently deny everything. I also enjoyed this little challenge, stopping an army of mages while moving at a slow pace without using my physical strength. Games like these will keep me sharp, that and my occasional spars with Cadiz and his apprentices.

Satisfied, I return to watch over the squad, then once they have gone to sleep and the place is secure, I do a little scouting.

It turns out that Indianapolis hides more than I expected. Oh, this might turn out to be an interesting diversion after all.

The next day, I am back at the hotel with a tired mind and a pot of coffee I made myself. I have missed quite a bit during my slumber, the squad having been active since six thirty, before the dawn even disabled me. Ugh, I hate early birds! What sort of civilization is this when the day starts before the actual day even starts? Now I have to read a report by Lafayette before I can even start spying.

There has been another murder, this time of a local werewolf. She was killed early during the night in a deserted meat warehouse where she was employed. The modus operandi is the same. The victim was mauled to pieces while she was alone, caught off guard before she even had the time to transform according to the wound they found. There were little traces of

struggle except for a lone, spilled crate of pork meat cans. The entrance was forced open like before with a single, powerful blow that ripped the lock apart.

This leaves everyone absolutely certain that the killer was the same, but unclear as to its motives. The werewolf was a young woman while Ichabod was an old mage, Lucy was destitute and recently arrived while Ichabod was doing fine and here since birth. She was timid and social while he was an old grump. The two could not have been more apart.

With that determined, the squad leaves to meet Quill, the local werewolf leader.

I asked Lafayette to pull back for this operation. Amarruq, our furry-oriented squad member, has smelled sentries all around and they have no doubts done the same. Werewolves are usually better at defending their territories than mages are, because mages use passive countermeasures while werewolves will use their senses to actively track any perceived intruders. They tend to roam and patrol a lot as well, making them unpredictable. The other issue is the location.

Meat packing plants are busy places where foremen keep a constant watch. Outside, police officers check on passerbys for any hint of socialist activity. I run too much risk of losing an agent to questioning. As such, my only source of information is the faint trail coming from Schindler's own mirror. It appears I have already missed part of the show.

Quill does not look very threatening. Perhaps this is the reason why he has attracted so many outsiders to his banner. On the other side, the few followers he does have, and who are present for the meeting, will not empower him much. He is rather young with a narrow build and sad eyes of a color I cannot determine from what I see.

"It is not one of us, and yes, I am sure. Links between outsiders and the pack might be tenuous, but we can tell when someone has gone rogue, if only by smell. It could be a newcomer though. Recently, we have picked up the trail of a newcomer. The murders started the next day."

"Have you located him?" Aramis asks.

"Her, it's a she. We can tell from her scent."

I did not know that; I did not wish to know that.

"That person is not a rogue but that doesn't mean much. Sometimes, humans are monsters even before the conflicting instincts. She might just be a killer, or know the killer.

Quill shrugs.

"Who knows?"

"Could a woman be the culprit then?" Jacob asks to be certain.

Most of the rogues the Red Cabal hunts are always men. Female rogue werewolves are exceedingly rare, though I am not sure as to why. They do, however, exist. Not that it matters. The local pack merely picked up on Amarruq.

“Yeah. We love our ladies with a little bite,” a voice I do not recognize says.

The camera pans to the side where a handsome young man with a wild shock of hair leans against the wall. He winks. I notice that he has left his shirt open to reveal some impressive muscles, a daring choice considering the already cold temperature of this early November.

The male werewolf winks towards the side.

Where Constance is sitting. Ah!

“You don’t even know if the murderer is one of us. Lucy was weak and newly made, but she would have heard the attacker come. Tried to flee. Screamed. Something! You forgot? All the attacks happened at night.”

“You’re thinking it’s a vampire,” Schindler says.

“Maybe. I know there was still a lot of... her blood left on the scene,” Quill finishes with a heavy voice.

He adjusts his posture on the seat.

“But maybe it was a decoy.”

“It’s a misconception that vampires drain a victim of all its blood. They consume the essence more than the liquid. The target dies of that. Not exsanguination,” Jacob says.

“So you know if a target was drained?” Quill asks.

“No. A vampire would know. Or we could with some advanced alchemical equipment we do not have here.”

“There is another way,” the handsome rake adds.

Quill sighs, not looking directly at him. I recognize a werewolf calming method. No matter what, do not meet the eyes.

“I could come with you, sniff the corpse and know if it was slain by one of us or not. Then, by process of elimination...”

“We will know if it is a vampire,” Schindler says.

“I have but one condition. I want you to ward my sister’s room. She’s like me but the curse...”

He frowns, suddenly less aloof.

“She did not take it well. She is scared to leave if I am not with her. Won’t you do it to protect her while I am gone?”

“I’ll help,” Jacob says.

“Not you,” the young man says. “She’s afraid of men. Her,” he says, nodding at Constance.

There is a moment of tension. Schindler returns her attention to Quill.

“He is his own man. I do not control the pack, merely provide a safe space for those of us who do not take well to a more traditional structure. Mathias will be on his... best behavior.”

There is a hint of threat underlying the last words, the meaning carried clearly when he turns to the roguish young buck. Said young man offers his open hands in return.

“I’ll be good.”

“Glad to see you’re not... all bark,” Constance finally says. “And I’ll help. And you will keep your paws off.”

“I promise not to get in your hair,” he replies with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

The two leave while alarm bells ring in my heart. Letting those two go... without a chaperone? What are they thinking? But no, Ariane. Different times, different mores. And different species, technically. I am sure the young Mathias will not try anything that will end with his pelt decorating my chimney. Yes, yes. It will be fine.

Just as the squad leaves the office to wait for Constance, I catch Millie’s voice.

“It seems those two get along really well. Maybe we can have her ask Mathias to join us for a longer time. I’m sure he can fight,” Millie says in a sweet voice.

I hear Aramis grunt back.

Wait a moment, did she just throw her best friend under the train, or is she trying to make him jealous? Damn those hormones.

Unless... Could Millie have designs on Aramis herself and see an opening? Oh, teenage drama. How refreshing. Hmmm.

As I think on it, the late morning leads to noon. A return to the morgue confirms that the two victims were not killed by a werewolf as no smell lingers on the wound. Interestingly and somewhat predictably, Mathias asks to stick around. Schindler agrees since there are procedures for working with local authorities and we tend to encourage cooperation. The group comes to the conclusion that a vampire is a culprit after a short discussion.

This is now beyond the squad's paygrade. Schindler says she has to report this possibility to her hierarchy, meaning me. I inform her that a vampire will come tomorrow evening to take over.

The news obviously leaves the young squad angry. This is their first hunt. They do not wish to just up and leave. With a short message, I tell her that they are free to search for the beast's lair before I arrive. After consulting with the local mages, the squad decides to visit some of the more remote and dubious meat-packing plants during the afternoon. That is fine. As they proceed, Mathias shamelessly flirts with a cold Constance and butts heads with Aramis while Millie drops a few hints that the two are together to the incensed young mage.

I frown and sit back, thinking.

We have two heroes, two sidekicks, a stranger, and a mentor.

The handsome lead is called Aramis Boone. No one is called Aramis Boone, 'tis a silly, romantic name based on Alexandre Dumas' Four Musketeers and some one syllable last name. Ridiculous.

The heroine's childhood friend is quite certainly jealous of her, leading to tensions.

Two love triangles have formed.

All on the background of a bog-standard monster hunt with a surprise twist at the end that I instinctively feel I should not interfere with.

Is... is Constance actually a godling? But no, it does not feel quite right. And yet... something is off. Terribly off. On a hunch, I call Isaac.

"What can I do for you, Ariane? How is your little trip going?"

"Would you happen to have any information on a certain Aramis Boone in those cavernous archives of yours?"

"Please do not refer to my head as cavernous, thank you. As for Boone, B O O N E? Like the godling of romance?"

The.

What?

No.

No no no no no no.

Nooooooooooooo!

"Watcher save us all, there are MORE OF THEM?!"