

Power feeds into the construct from four cardinal points. Sinead and Sivaya stand in the innermost circle where they will stay for three days until the ritual is complete, hands linked in symbolic union. Other fae and powerful mages like Ollie line the middle circle. We will be able to come and go thanks to the ritual's extraordinary flexibility, so long as enough people remain to assist at any point. From behind Sinead, the first stone burns the yellow gold of August noon. Crimson red bleeds from the second one, clockwise, while the stone behind Sivaya radiates a polar blue. The last one pulses green and verdant like a dewey May lawn. Between the encircled arms of the royal couple, the last and largest shines a terrible white so intense it casts shadows behind the outpost's tent. The last parts of the construct are the chalice at the edge behind the autumn stone, and an arched gate behind the spring one, currently empty. To goodbyes and new beginnings, I suppose.

I will take part in the ritual as the mage closest to the winter gate due to my new affinity. The fae to my left and right taste of darkness and cold, but not yet the ravenous claws of winter itself. I pride myself in my raw power if not in my control, yet the energies deployed here surpass all but Semiramis' ritual, and we are just getting started.

Slowly, the outer circle's electrum turns an intense silver, then the power slowly fills the delicate engravings going inward. When it reaches me, I feel a pull and allow my aura to feed into the ritual, contributing to it yet also directing the energies to grant them meaning. One by one, the others join me until the last inner circle ignites in turn and we are set, or that is what I believe.

Instead, the power keeps increasing. If the spell were to destabilize now, the resulting explosion could be seen from the horizon, but it will not. Sivaya's weave is a thing of beauty, an exquisite system built with failsafes and redundancy to satisfy the most paranoid of mages. It gorges on our combined power and the energy stored in the stones until the combined auras give me a sense of vertigo. Only after the inner circle glows incandescent does the royal couple speak in Likaeen. Even though it is the language of adults, the meaning is so clear that I have no difficulty following it.

"We call upon you," they say, "we summon you here. Wanderers, return to us and find your path. Warriors, return to challenge us if you dare. Prisoners, return to find your freedom. We call upon you. Return to us, return to us."

Even I feel a tug, the power of which would steal my breath if I had one. The call they make is so compelling and so strong that even I, an outsider, feel its pull to the bottom of my essence. Sinead and Sivaya draw on the bonds of kinship and shared legacy, but also their shared suffering and their longing for acceptance as who they are. The sky above the inner circle changes, images manifesting almost too fast to see. Golden halls filled with lifelike statues alternate with vertiginous spires over a frigid lake, then gloomy caves lit by strange mushrooms where dwellers sleep forever. A forest of nets and webs where small winged beings flutter gives way to fiery cliffs dripping molten rocks, thick and bubbling. A still forest. A lush jungle made of dancing, singing plants. A monumental tree. A palace bathed by moonlight. The colors swirl in an ethereal mirage until it merges into an ocean of possibilities and landscapes of the mind, the true soul of the fae spheres.

"Return to us. **NOW.**"

A woman appears in the air with a loud pop and falls with a yelp. She is dressed in a strict brown dress, but her matronly traits shift as I watch. Her nose grows very long and pointy and her chin expands, square and stubborn. Her entire eyes shift to a warm brown.

She stands up with a huff and walks out with dignity towards the outer circle where she stands, aligned with the spring stone.

Another pop. A child-like Likaeon falls on his butt with a complaint, but he soon walks behind the autumn gem. A tall, powerfully-built woman appears and almost collapses, but she grits her teeth and goes to stand behind summer. A shadowy fellow in a shift bites back a sob then crawls behind me. Blood drips from thin air into the chalice. I feel giddy. By the Watcher, this was the first prisoner. We are doing it. We are stealing the Likaeans!

More and more join us, in all shapes and forms. Most of them appear to be in proper shape with few exceptions, and I assume that those are the most geographically close and thus not the result of centuries of systematic hunting. They appear with regularity, maybe one every three minutes or so, yet the ritual never falters despite its expenditure. Instead, it grows in power with every new addition. The summoned fae flock around the circle in an eclectic mix of features and clothes, of moods as well. I recognize a winter fellow, his teeth still stained with fresh blood and he waves a bone club at Sinead with the promise of violence. Nevertheless, he, too, joins the circle. We are a court, I realize. This is the first and hopefully last gathering of the Earth Court. The Court of Exiles.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, the winter fae by my side smiles and gives me a crazed glare of agreement.

“Yes. The Court of Exiles. It will do, for now.”

The power increases yet again until it grows absolutely overwhelming. The Likaeans will answer. Nothing, no chain or enchantments will hold them back. The summoning may be slow, but it is the slowness of the changing of season: no less inevitable for its tectonic pace. At some point, some of the mages and fae switch position between circles to rest and recover in the adjoining tent. I also give way to the winter fae as dawn approaches, and when I walk out, the dizzying switch that comes with leaving the spell's embrace makes me lose my footing. Suddenly, the delicious scent of potent essence replaces my serenity with a dull ache. I stand in the richest hunting environment I have ever been in. The number of fae present is close to two hundred, and many more will join us before this is over.

I also realize that many of the Likaeans were never prisoners of the vampires. Of course, we control only a fraction of mankind's domain and it makes sense that the lost fae would appear in random places when they first fall through. I wonder if we lost some to the seas, or to the unforgiving temperatures of the poles. Bah, the dawn is robbing me of my focus even on this side of the gate. I decide to return to our earth's starfort and fall to slumber in my sarcophagus.

I wake up in the early afternoon, excited and worried. A quick check with sentries confirms what my instincts and the Dvor essence tells me: nothing untowards happened on my land while I slept. I wash and dress in the gambeson I wear under my armor anyway. I quickly walk into the dead world to find that the ritual is still on course, but that the main tent has been joined by a smattering of smaller ones. Likaeans are resting and in some cases engaging in coitus within their confines. Smoke and the smell of food come in wafts from a central pavilion. Constantine hails me from a corner where he holds council with Likaeans I have never seen.

“Ah, Ariane, you are here,” he says in English. “Those are Tourneas and Secluded-Black-Sand-Beach.”

The Speaker waves at a man who shares Sivaya’s elfin traits, and a woman with thin scales seemingly drawn on her skin.

“They will manage the encampment while the ritual is in progress. You can rely on them if there are any issues,” he explains in English.

“There were issues?” I ask.

“Court of Shadows and Court of Stones have old feuds,” the woman whispers with a singsong tone in Child Likaeon.

“Old enmities should be on hold,” the man answers in chiding English, “but one can never be too careful. I have experience as a Master of Ceremonies. I am aware of conflicts both current and past.”

He sighs.

“Relatively current, in any case. I am also aware of debts,” he finishes, meeting my gaze. “You have our thanks. Will you join the circle again?”

“I prefer to wait until nightfall, unless my presence is required.”

“We have enough representatives for all sides now. Perhaps you should save your strength.”

“I agree,” Constantine continues, “Melusine used a beacon to confirm what I thought. The signature of the spell can be felt by mages, even those who are not fully trained.”

“How far?” I ask, though I doubt he knows.

“Everywhere, Ariane. The entire planet knows that we are doing... something. The Amaretta seers know exactly what we have been up to for at least a day now.”

“Here is to hope they will not have the time to react.”

“Regarding that, I forgot to mention it but Mask declared war on us. Ambassador Madrigal delivered the scroll yesterday to the Boston fortress. Wilhelm just notified me by spell.”

“Good, we will not have to parlay if they deign to visit.”

“Are you going to make a quip about southern hospitality?”

“Oh, hush,” I tell the Speaker.

We fall silent and pretend very hard that the ritual does not occupy our mind. Vampires come and go under the wary gaze of the gathered Likaeans. The freshly released captives in particular appear leery of us. Our gathering soon turns into a unique mix of nervous excitement and impatient wait, reminding me of Christmas Eve as a child. I find myself inspecting my nails while, a few paces away, history writes itself.

Soon enough, night falls. All the vampires breathe deeply at the same time. Urchin smoothly transitions from juggling coins to juggling knives under the amused gaze of some of our guests. Meanwhile, the tent gathering has grown to a festival. Music and dances fill the air for the first time in what must be forever in the dead world. Wine flows, and the cooks work overtime to sate those who catch a rest between casting sessions. In the innermost circle, Sivaya and Sinead have almost disappeared from view under the torrentuous flow of combined auras. I only catch flickers of their intertwined arms and the central stone overhead. Their indomitable will still calls more of their kin, and still more heed their call.

Unfortunately, my excitement gives way to concern, then to dread. The Likaeans still work towards their freedom and the spell shows no signs of being destabilized. No, the cause of my worries must be something else, but what? I close my eyes and realize that the Dvor essence in me warns me of something.

It should not be possible, and yet...

No, my instincts have never failed me. I rush to Constantine and signal.

“We have incoming hostiles.”

“Now?” he calmly asks.

“Now.”

“Gather everyone around the chalice.”

A quick surge of my aura and the vampires join us. It takes a few more seconds to wait for those who were standing vigil earthside, but eventually we all form a circle around the chalice. Even now, the enticing fragrance of fae blood lures us. The fae keep a respectful distance.

“Ariane, would you like a word?” Constantine offers.

“Right. I do not know how but vampires are coming and they will be here soon. My instincts tell me they are intruders. My dear accomplices in crime, I formally invite you to the greatest Hunt that can ever be, that of our kin. Ladies and gentlemen, a toast!”

John distributes tiny golden goblets. In turn, each of us approaches the chalice to harvest a tiny amount of mixed essence. I can taste the tension as everyone wants to drink it dry, and damn the others. John stoically retrieves his own after I confirm he is allowed. Urchin falters and stumbles, but with a supreme effort of will, he manages to return to his position without indulging. I nod in open appreciation, congratulating him before the lords for his restraint.

Soon enough, we are all gathered. Melusine is the only Master while Urchin and John, the only Courtiers. The two of them will remain behind while Melusine’s powerful magic can still make her useful. I raise my glass and declare with more confidence than I feel.

“Fellow warriors, to victory, freedom, and glory eternal!”

“Hear hear.”

I bring the lid to my mouth and drink deep.

CONFUSED.

I stumble, drowned by the recollection of so many different essences mixed together. The torrent of vitality floods my mind but destabilizes it, at first. Then, slowly, they coalesce at the most basic level to speak of only one concept, the only common ground shared by the diverse people that contributed.

Home.

I flare, I explode. There is so much of it that I cannot control it all. I tilt my head back and enjoy the tidal wave of energy. For one moment, I float in a sea of plenitude because the Thirst is gone, silent for the rest of the night.

Ah, yessssss. So much life, so much spirit. Such a powerful, delicious, delectable drive. What a rush. What an ecstasy! **MORE.** No, no more. That is more than enough to regrow a hundred limbs.

I am so very alive I could make my heart beat until dawn just for the sake of it. I could let a light blush linger on my cheeks, and breathe a thousand times. So that is what it feels to feed on the gratitude of so many supplicants at a crucial point of their life? I luxuriate in the feeling even as I know I will never experience it again.

I open my eyes to find that the others, too, are transfixed by the experience. Urchin is crying, while John has a knee on the ground and moves his lips in silent declamation. The lords and ladies stand like frozen statues, enjoying the experience. I am, curiously, the second to snap out of contemplation after Nami, who is frantically taking notes on a journal. We silently wait until the last of us recovers, then Constantine clears his throat.

"I believe some experiences speak for themselves. Let us gear up and regroup at the gates."

We rush to our own personal quarters. I put on the Aurora and pick my newest gun as well. I wish I could bring a utility belt for shield breakers and other toys, but alas, I have not managed to design one that would not bring its share of complications. It should not matter with how many lords and ladies backed by a progenitor we have.

In short order, we fan out of the starfort's entrance. The access will be blocked by heavy gates, while the defenses remain unmanned. At night, any mortal taking a defensive position among the fortifications will just be that much more collateral damage. Only we matter.

"We will adopt formation three," Jarek says, *"but Ariane and I will switch positions."*

It means a defensive formation where I take point, the best one under the circumstances. Once we are ready, I do not move.

"No need for us to go to them. They will come to us," I explain.

"Well, less walking," Islaev grumbles before squatting, one hand going over his bald skull.

I am tempted to start a Hunt despite my lack of Thirst, but whatever advantage we would gain cannot offset our doom if it turns out we are outnumbered. Here, we still have the luxury of withdrawing within the fort and forcing a chokehold battle through the gate. Out there, anything goes. I would also not want to leave the fort itself undefended. And so, we wait.

The sensation of violation increases, one that annoys more than it hurts. Someone has entered my land without my leave. They intend to stop me. That will not do at all, oh no, and with the strength flowing through my veins, it will take quite a lot to stop us. My main concern would be the timing. Anyone who was aware of our project would have attacked on the first night to guarantee many captures. They would have waited until we were committed, then struck. Those that were warned by the spell's aura and ferreted out its location with the help of the Amaretta or some other information dealer would need time to mobilize. Only the Mask vampires in Mexico could have reacted that fast, and even then it would take them at least two nights to find us if the stars aligned, given the distance and their complete lack of preparations. Even then, only their powerhouses with access to entomb spells could possibly survive the trip. What happened? I shall have an answer soon.

The intrusion gnaws at the back of my mind like a hound gnawing on a bone, but I have not come this far to succumb to my instincts, even as they scream at me to come out and track my foes. A patient huntress knows when to wait. And so we do, in perfect silence.

And they come to us.

The first one to emerge from the thick forest surrounding the camp on all sides provides both an answer and a daunting warning. I should have expected it. I really should have. Of course, there are warrens that allow one to move quickly from one corner of the world to the other. I knew it. I even walked them. And of course, my sire found them.

My only saving grace is that it is his servant who guides our enemies to my doorstep. Naturally, Nirari himself is no one's errand boy, but it seems he is not above renting out his minion's services. I only wish I had been wiser. Semiramis picked this spot for her ritual, and she has linked many of her bases to her network of space-bending passages. It stands to reason that an entrance would be nearby. I hope this oversight does not cost me dearly.

Malakim smiles uncaringly when he sees me. He wears no visible armor, though I know he is entrapped in one close to his skin. The ones who follow him do, however, but they do not share his mirth.

The first to appear is Martha, without her human mages this time. The powerful Lancaster mage steps forward with a confidence she might not be feeling, followed by a flock of masters. Andre and Vincent, the twins who stabbed me in France, are with her, as well as Jean-Baptiste, the scythe user who guided me through the Parisian catacombs. Truly, this exemplifies the nature of our conflict. Yesterday, we had courteous discussions. Today, we meet in the field of battle and tomorrow, if everything goes well, we will party together again.

"Evening, sister. I am delighted to see that your habit of reaching beyond your station has caused yet another amusing development. Our dear father sends his regards, by the way. I think he is impressed," Malakim begins.

"I am ecstatic," I reply in a flat tone.

"And a lady now. This brings our little family to four monsters. Perhaps I should query our sire to add another sister. What do you say?"

"That is quite enough, thank you," Martha interrupts.

She inspects us while we stand. I have no issues taking my time. There are more and more masters deploying around her in a half-circle, clad in elaborate armors and grasping a plethora of weapons. They also happen to be in range.

"We will be taking the second part of the contract, thank you," Martha continues.

"So soon?" Malakim asks with mock disbelief, and Martha bares her fangs. He certainly has a gift for getting under everyone's skin.

"It appears that I must leave you for now, sister dear, but I promise you that we will meet again promptly."

I ignore him as he departs without a word. It seems that there will be no confrontation tonight, yet his tone indicates that we will face each other, perhaps before the ritual is done. Did Mask retain the services of Malakim as a warrior? They must be mad.

Martha and I glare at each other. It flatters me that the one who so casually threw me around during the last conflict now considers me with wariness. It also flatters me that she would naturally regard me as the ringleader, instead of discarding me to address Constantine.

Yes, it was all me.

“I suppose I cannot convince you of the madness of your project. You would weaken us all as a species.”

“On the contrary, I have never felt so powerful,” I reply amicably.

“You are playing with powers you cannot possibly understand, child.”

Oh no she didn't.

“It is because I understand those powers that I am freeing them, before their relatives realize what happened and come seeking vengeance,” I spit. *“Do not speak to me of seeking common ground. We both know why Jean-Baptiste and the twins are here.”*

“This is bigger than even our conflict. Do you realize what you are doing? You will deny us fae blood?”

I give her a fanged, Devourer smile.

“Then you will have to hunt.”

“You are mad.”

“And you see nothing past your own self-interest. What is the point of living forever if you cannot accomplish great things? I am liberating a species tonight, Martha. What have you ever accomplished that could compare to that?”

“You have not succeeded yet.”

“Then stop me if you can. This is the eternal game, Martha, but you are one turn late.”

The canny lady lifts her gauntlet and immediately casts an inferno spell.

I have been expecting it, of course. Her essence spoke of embers while we talked, a sure sign that she was preparing her opening move. I am ready.

The Polaris spell I obtained did not work for me. It carries the cold affinity of its creator, a human archmage named Frost. His understanding of the cold is different from mine. He saw it as crisp and refreshing, icicles hanging from branches in the morning light like so many decorations, crystalline sculptures shimmering blue. His air is pure. Mine is unbreathable. To me, the cold is the infinite vista of the far north expanding to unfathomable distances where nothing survives. It is dark, the wind howls, and the only vibrant movements come from the aurora borealis dancing above my head, as alien as the star and just as unreachable. The Winter Court showed me the end and now I will share its strange allure with her too.

“Polar Midnight.”

Just like our spells, the opposing forces crash into each other. Constantine's chains break the masters as they align around us at optimal distance. The two sides collapse against each other with a blinding display of magic and battle prowess. As for me, I pour the limitless power running through me into the winter construct. Martha may be the better mage but I have power aplenty, and it has a quality of its own.

Our spells meet and my murky ball of greenish darkness pushes back her flames. With a hiss and a flick of her fingers, her flames concentrate until my spell explodes. A wave of cold expands towards her, then over her despite her flames. She pulls the spell around herself and her followers to protect them from the impending doom, as even vampires would struggle against the cold I unleashed. Chaos ensues, just the way I like it.

"Magna Arqa."

Thorn roots explode among the masters, wounding those who could not dodge on time. Martha casts something that disintegrates the appendages around her but I care not. Tonight, I have an endless supply of them. The shadowy garden blooms around us, adding to the confusion for their side. Before Martha can do more, golden chains smash against her shield and damage it. More masters fall, disabled, though not dead yet. We still follow the rules.

I disengage from the battle of magic to help a beleaguered Suarez fend off attacks from the twins. The powerful warlord reminds of Torran in his style, although he feels more scholarly. He smashes aside coordinated strikes with some difficulty while his opponents try to corner him with a level of teamwork I will never achieve with anyone. A sudden attack pushes them away, then it is our rhythm against theirs. We dance an unpredictable and deadly waltz, my devious whip with Suarez' devastating swings against the twins' needlework. An opening is all they need, and a trio of ambitious masters provides it when they dodge enough roots to distract Suarez. The conspicuous twin salutes and engages.

"Magna Arqa."

I remember that I must defend myself, though I forgot why. I pour essence into my chestplate's enchantment and surround myself with unyielding roots. My instincts tell me to defend myself.

He hits a mirage, the first illusion I cast tonight. Surprise grips him, but I fail to capitalize on it when another blade pierces my roots and buries itself in my torso. Fortunately, it was deflected enough that the tip bounces against my ribcage. I grab a delicate hand in my armored fist and pull in the subdued twin.

"THERE YOU ARE."

I cut his arm off, then pull the soul blade from my wound. The Aurora freezes again, sealing the hole.

The little aura I get from him tastes delicious. I must have more.

“THAT TICKLED.”

Suarez' counter wounds the other twin, but before we disable them, I feel danger and block while casting another mirage.

Something massive and quite sharp destroys the illusion and smashes into my guard, pushing me back despite my own strength. I turn and face death incarnate, or so the image of the grim reaper would have me believe.

“I HAVE COME FOR YOU,” Jean-Baptiste growls.

Adorable, but I must give him credit for the effort.

“You had your chance,” I reply, then I engage.

It is my first time facing a weapon I am completely unfamiliar with, and I do admire him for making it work. Jean-Baptiste strikes with wide, circular motions that sweep aside all opposition, including my poor roots. Mirages barely slow him down because he simply slices through them as part of his normal pattern. To fight him, I start by attempting to block his strikes, only to hiss in pain when a phantomatic echo sends wracking pain tearing through my arms. A transparent image of the scythe finishes the arc I interrupted, to my dismay. Fortunately, the longer our dance continues and the more I grow used to his patterns. Scythes are unwieldy and there is only so much he can do to compensate with techniques. I jump over a low swing, dive under the next and lunge, expanding Rose as I do.

Once more, my instincts scream and I feint at the last moment. A spear crashes in the ground where I stood an instant before, sending rocks and gravel flying through the air. Jean-Baptiste blocks my next counter with... a spear?

The grim reaper grins with skeletal amusement, and the spear becomes a scythe once more. It appears I am not the only one with an articulated weapon. Ah, but it seems he is quite proud of himself.

So I pull the repeater gun from my back and shoot him.

The roar of the weapon covers that of everything else and Jean-Baptiste attempts to block and dodge the hail of bullets. They gnaw at his dark halo. The skeleton cracks. I expect him to understand and close the distance, yet he does not.

In fact, he runs away. I feel all the masters and enemy lords disengage at full speed through my domain, going so far as to leave their disabled allies caught in my thorns. The decision surprises me, until I feel tremendous energy being pulled by Martha. As I watch, a desperate squad of masters sacrifice themselves to hold Constantine back.

I raise a wall of thorns before the Lancaster archmage, but in vain.

“King's domain,” she whispers, and we all fall to the ground, including her.

Such... oppressive weight. Everything is so heavy! Somewhere to the side, Adrien melts into darkness and reappears outside of the spell's reach, but his attempt to strike Martha fails because the troublesome woman included herself. I fully expect the Mask warriors to take advantage, but they are pulling back in droves.

With a supreme effort of will, I kneel, then stand. It feels like being crushed by a wall. I hear bones snapping from my victims and release them from the thorns. They will not manage to stand anyway. Step by step, I grow closer to a prone Martha who even now keeps feeding her construct. She glares at me from the ground, powerless against my slow progress. I wish the gun were not so heavy. It would have been the cherry on the cake.

Suddenly, I hear a bang, and something clangs uselessly against my chest plate.

I look down in disbelief but no, there is indeed a tiny impact on its otherwise pristine surface. A clump of heated metal shines at my feet.

No, this cannot be!

I look up to see a single master who remained behind, a ferocious bearded man in light armor. He holds a rifle in his hand, which he reloads with quick, practiced movements.

Another bullet hits my helmet and falls, forcing me to face the truth I had denied so vehemently in my heart.

"You shot me? You shot me! You are a vampire!"

"You damn walking apocalypse icicle..." he grumbles.

"How can you shoot me? How dare you?" I demand, scandalized.

I shoot vampires! And I make fun of them! How could this man even contemplate imitating me? Shooting vampires is my trademark! Aaaaarrrrg!

Jarek bypasses me and kneels by Martha's sputtering form. He places a gauntlet on her cheek with an almost tender gesture.

"Do you yield?"

"Yes, damn you. I do."

"Ariane?" Jarek asks as the spell lifts. *"Would you mind snapping out of it?"*

"But he shot me!" I exclaim, pointing at the guilty party who has widely decided to refrain.

"He shot me with a gun! What ammunition do you even use?"

"Hmm. Silver? With toughness engraving."

“You absolute clown! You must use chromium steel which you then anneal to add the runes, and only then can you use silver. How do you expect to pierce enchanted armor with those gumballs?”

“Well excuuuuuse me, we do not all have access to Dvergur engineers!”

“You could do it yourself for the price of the silver, honestly, an ounce costs—”

“So, we do not pursue?” Constantine politely asks.

I realize that my allies are busy watching the exchange with expressions ranging from vague annoyance to haughty amusement. Martha glares furiously from her kneeling position. When our eyes meet, she growls.

“I cannot believe I was defeated by an armored lunatic.”

I sigh.

“No, we will not pursue them. We would only take out the masters, and I would not want to be caught in the open. We do not know when their reinforcements will arrive, nor where the warrens’ entrance is.”

I glare at Martha on the ground.

“What she said about the second part of the contract must mean she wants Malakim to transport more people. He can cross vast distances over a short time, which means that even the ocean’s crossing will be of little concern to him. We can expect Bertrand and others to join in the next assault. It also explains why she was so quick to cover her men’s retreat instead of fighting to the bitter end. She preserved her forces for a final confrontation.”

The most minute flinch in the caster’s expression tells me I was correct.

“May I ask for mercy for my followers?” she politely requests.

The master who shot me takes a few steps forward and gulps, but I merely shrug. We are still playing by the rules. I have no interest in killing her here.

“Of course we will bring them in. If you swear an oath that you will act as a prisoner, I will even refrain from shackling you.”

“How very generous,” she hisses.

“This is more than you gave me,” I remind her with a slight warning.

“I consent.”

Constantine handles the oath part, as I trust him to voice it properly. The rest of us retrieve the wounded masters and bring them in so they can heal safely. Those who are still

conscious swear as well, and I can tell that most of them are more curious about our project than angry at their defeat. Mask vampires enjoy schemes and grand projects, it seems, even when they are at the receiving ends of them. We even end up allowing them into the Dead World since their oath would prevent them from helping our foes even if they were to be freed. Martha walks to me while I prepare to join the ritual again.

"I must admit, you are considerably more prepared than I expected," she grudgingly allows.

"I did not work alone."

"Nevertheless, I am quite impressed, and..."

She licks her lips. Her heart-shaped face scrunches in a curious expression of longing.

"I would not be adverse to participating."

"You would betray your side?" I wonder.

"Not betray. I am a prisoner, and this ritual would complete even without my contribution."

"She just wants to experience this magical masterpiece," Melusine comments as she joins us. *"The old witch would give up an arm just to inspect the runework."*

Martha scowls at her distant offspring, but Melusine shrugs and crosses her arms.

"You can join if you tell me what you paid to retain Nirari's assistance," I reply on a hunch.

The archmage flinches while I politely wait. Melusine inspects her fingers.

"Our magic is compatible with the autumn stone, by the way," she announces offhandedly.

"Curse you. I suppose it doesn't hurt to let you know. We agreed to serve Nirari in battle, once."

Horror fills my heart. I slap my forehead in despair.

"You absolute fools, what have you done?"

"Only five of us lords and ladies, and only for one night. Bertrand and I are included, but the others are exempt."

"Do you not understand what you promised?"

"You backed us into a corner. Bertrand felt he had no choice."

"And you jumped down the well. By the Watcher, you are certainly not helping."

"What do you mean?" Melusine demands. *"What battle are you referring to?"*

“Child, later. You have my answer, Ariane. Will you uphold your end of the bargain?”

“Yes, yes. Melusine will show you how to participate safely.”

The vindictive redhead smirks as if I'd just offered her the moon. She clears her throat and takes an affected tone while Martha fumes quietly.

“Listen well, child, and pay attention. This is Likaeian magic, not your pathetic backwater—”

I let the sassy Lancaster take her revenge on her equally pompous ancestor and rejoin the ritual for a while, feeling its amazing intensity with the same wonder as the first time I beheld it. Sinead and Sivaya still stand silently in their circle, arms linked in symbolic union. A naked man appears and falls with a scream of infinite misery while I link arms with others. It takes him a full minute before he recovers enough to join his kin, whose assembly has grown to the population of a respectable village. A song starts from the tent circle and drifts to us. It speaks of lost childhood. Some of the Likaeians stand straighter.

We are still doing it. An army could not stop us. Another one will come tomorrow, but for now, the sense of violation that comes with intruders has retreated to the back of my mind and I know we have caught a little reprieve. The winter fae steps to my side and offers a bloody smile, then we close our eyes and pour our focus into the ritual.

The setting sun marks the beginning of the third night of the ritual. As I watch, the last of the fae, the ones from the farthest reach of the world, come forth wearing strange guises and exotic traits. Some are clearly of Asian descent while others are dark and unfamiliar. With their coming, the spell sighs and shudders.

Sinead and Sivaya separate. I have never seen the prince so tired, but his eyes burn with resolution and when he sees me, he smiles. His gaze hardens soon after. This is the last stretch, yet also the most difficult. The royal couple turns to the closed portal and calls as one.

“Part of the whole, key to the gate, shore by the sea.”

The wand we recovered the first time I wore that ridiculous armored tutu rises from the ground. It dissipates into strange motes that swirl in the portal's location. The essence I taste on the still air of the dead world speaks of green life and growing things. I can almost smell sap and loam with strange spices mixed in. I have run quite a few times through a great many forests, but I have never experienced such a rich scent. If it does belong to a Likaeian world, then I fear John's suggestion of leaving might tempt me after all.

The entirety of the Likaeen population on earth clutters on the outside ring to bring their support and the ritual's intensity grows deeper and sharper. The summoning part is finished. They are all here, and they are free. Now, they will find their way home.

Power flickers in the arch. A shard the size of a needle materializes from thin air at a small distance. It grows at a snail pace. Hundreds of Likaeans pour their heart, auras, and beliefs in the tiny spike with the hope that it will achieve the impossible and find them a way back. Their voices rise in unison, singing strange hymns that make the air quake around them as the corpse of this old world shakes in its death throes. Even the vampires pay attention, because the tongue of the Likaeen speaks to all even if they cannot quite grasp it. I see them as well, the elusive wisps of memories I have no words for. We are so close, so close that when the feeling of intrusion returns, I am angry. I signal the others and like one man, we gather around the chalice to drink the last fae essence of our world. As before, power courses through us as we leave without a word, only this time, there are more of us.

The chalice is empty now.

We file out of the starfort at a leisure pace, armors glittering under the moonlight while our blades absorb it. I signal, and we jump on the ramparts to form a battleline, then wait. I feel the enemy come and when they encircle us like wolves, I raise my gauntlet.

“Nu Sarrehin.”

Let there be light. I have no concerns using Likaeen to cast now, and why should I? The secret is no longer required. Tonight, I have no need to pretend.

“Come on out,” I whisper, *“stop hiding like rats.”*

Bertrand emerges from the edge of the forest, clad in his red armor and gold mask and followed by a smirking Malakim. With him come the elite of Mask. Orphee the tactician takes his place in silence, angel face grim under the purple light. Jean-Baptiste and the twins join his side, then a darkly charismatic man with a saber and gauntlet who must be Gabriel, the Lancaster's deadliest duelist. A diminutive woman with light brown hair and a calm beauty walks on in golden, form-fitting armor. I recognize Hastings from her description. The only person absent is Dominique. Besides her, we are facing the entirety of Mask's military.

This will be a true test for the Accords, and they are here to the last Warden. It does not even surprise me that they would all happen to be around, 'visiting a friend', as it were, when Constantine called upon them to fulfill their obligations.

Everyone is here. Haughty Roland and crafty Lancasters have gathered in a golden pack around Sephare. Jarek has gathered the Natalis and muscular Suarez around himself. As for me, I stand at the front with the Ekon and the Vanheim. Ako and Constantine occupy the center with the Speaker's bodyguards and his Erenwald steward. We are more diverse than our foes, but no less united in our desire to kick their collective arses back across the ocean.

The collected essence is so dense that the Watcher opens his eyes in the real world, and its feline pupil narrows on us.

The wind dies.

Bertrand and I match gaze.

We understand each other.

There is no need for talks.

It is time **TO HUNT**.

The world explodes around us. Trees are shredded. Rocks shatter. The ground erupts in so many geysers of mud, gravel, and crushed stones. Spells clash in a cataclysm of colors and sounds, sending out shockwaves so dense they impact each other with sonorous blasts.

In the chaos of battle, I rush Bertrand. **CUT THE HEAD**. No, I cannot triumph against him. Already, his size has increased while his blood red armor glows crimson. His Magna Arqa has triggered. I throw a heart seeker spell as an opener which he blocks with the flat of his axe. For a handful of seconds I have him on the back foot as we exchange very quick series of blows. The roots I can manifest hobble him while mirages disappear under useless strikes, but as I manage to hit his chest, a backswing sends me flying. More roots catch me and we stand apart, the eye of the storm in this fantastic battle.

Bertrand smiles while the break in his armor seals over with dark blood. I mirror his smirk when the Aurora repairs itself. His eyes widen in surprise and he charges back in. We fight in a duel, the others leaving us alone, and exhilaration fills my heart. I am fighting one of the deadliest warriors in the world and I am not losing. Or at least, not fast. Our dance shows he is taking me seriously, and so I use every trick I know to push him back, never leaving him time to perform full swings. Bertrand does not hesitate to take glancing blows to land a decisive one, but I am his equal in his regard and the Aurora truly shows its incredible craftsmanship, allowing me to match a Magna Arqa manifestation blow for blow. I laugh with delight for a while, but eventually our difference of experience is made manifest and I am pushed back. That is, until a freight train by the name of Jarek smashes into Bertrand's flank, carrying him across half of the battlefield. I can accept it. Bertrand may be **MY PREY**, but my priority here is victory and helping my allies. A quick glance around shows that Mask outnumber us with their masters, but that they are unable to bring those numbers to bear due to our tight formation. Normally, this would put us at risk of magical bombardments. Unfortunately for our foes, Martha is not with them while Constantine is free to unleash his full potential. Only Gabriel on their side stops him from having free reign and even then, it is an unequal fight.

I use my Magna Arqa to help where I can, covering those of us who are wounded while harassing our foes. The speed of the battle prevents me from coordinating well with my companions so I limit my actions to sure bets — truly, we should train together more — yet even those tilt the scales in our favor. I have the satisfaction of interrupting the fight between Jean-Baptiste and our shadow-wielding twins, and landing a very satisfactory punch in his skeletal nose before an unknown lord forces me back.

I race across the battlefield, destroying formations and maiming entire squads of masters. My instincts guide me in this whirlwind of violence, enhanced by the Dvor essence singing in my veins, whispering advice so I can defend my land. I attack Hastings as she is on the verge of defeating Sephare, our waltz one of guile and feints against unpredictable savagery, then Naminata triggers her Magna Arqa and the dance becomes real. We step up with the beat while our foes are left confused and disheartened. Hastings disengages, but not before I shred an entire side of her golden armor. By the Watcher this is GOOD. As it should be, with Rose singing and the roar of spells shaking the very air. The vitality of the fae means that I have no need to care for energy expenses.

Suddenly, I feel a pull and make my way to the entrance just in time to see Islaev's muscular arm flying through the air. Jarek's kin falls to his knees with a triumphant Malakim preparing a killing blow. I extend my hand and cast our sire's signature spell.

"Heartseeker."

For one faithful moment, delicious terror twists his vicious grin into an ugly grimace. But it is soon replaced by deep rage. I charge him.

Malakim salutes.

"Magna Arqa."

My roots disappear, as if swallowed and I feel a block on my domain. My perception narrows to my human form.

Malakim lands his jagged longsword against Rose, locking guard and pushing me back by exactly one step. I trigger the whip and a long, dark gash opens across my brother's rictus. He flinches.

"Surely you didn't expect this to be enough," I mock.

Malakim attacks with a savagery that equals my own, and our duel is merciless. I find myself using my gloved claws as often as Rose herself in this snarling brawl. I claw his face once, but otherwise his blade finds flaws in my defenses and only my current vitality saves me from defeat. My only edges come from the mirage spells and Octave's training. Otherwise, the monster surpasses me in every aspect.

Sometimes, Naminata passes us by and her hypnotic dance grants me a few seconds of respite. I am, once again, losing my duel, when Islaev reappears whole and angry. He roars and a horse materializes under him. The resulting charge sends Malakim crashing back with both arms snapped.

"Why do they always cut my limbs?" The proud warrior complains.

"Have you ever considered wearing proper armor?" I ask, pointing at his naked chest.

"No."

Malakim comes roaring back, but he stumbles, and we all stop.

The world shivers and for one brief instant, our battle lines show the ghostly echo of a circle of dancing Likaeans. An inky blade the size of a menhir hangs ominously over the two assemblies, solid enough to be seen in both worlds. The ritual is reaching its paroxysm.

Golden chains encircle Malakim before he can react and Constantine smashes the irate Devourer into the ground, again and again, bypassing the beast's armor.

“Go.” Constantine yells. *“Make sure it works. Go!”*

I run, entering the star fort and leaving the battle behind me. Everyone seems to be holding well thanks to the fae blood they partook of. The same battle of attrition that almost defeated us in the first war is now carrying us through the second, but that is secondary for now. I sprint through the portal and behold the shard spinning in its axis. The chant of the fae assembly inflates with a terrible crescendo. Sinead lifts his exhausted arms in supplication.

“World tree of ours, blessed guardian, grant us your salvation. We beg of you, by all the courts and all the spheres, by your life and your kindness, we beg of you. Take us home. Take us home. Take. Us. Home. BREACH!”

The shard plunges into the flesh of space. Reality screams, then it gives way. Emerald light floods the dead world, casting the shadows away and with it comes the enticing perfume of other world flowers. Lilac and lavender flowers peek while from a window into a vibrant world. The cries of strange birds caress my ears like an invitation, or a lullaby.

The Liakeans cry and scream, struck with disbelief, but their leader has not lost sight.

“Through! Everyone, go NOW!”

The assembled fae form a snake pouring through the portal's aperture. As soon as they step on the other side, they shed their human form and transform into a kaleidoscope of creatures as strange as they are beautiful. I spot Makyas turn into a tiny sprite with fluttering dragonfly wings. He gives me a playful wink then disappears out of sight or simply shifts to some other locale. As for the others, they race in with abandon. It takes only a minute for the assembly to melt into a small gathering of the most determined ones, those unafraid to act as rear guard. I recognize Tourneas and Secluded-Black-Sand-Beach as they make sure no one was left behind. The winter fae walks by me with one last needle-filled grin.

“Perhaps we will meet again, sister.”

“I am not your kin, I merely ate him.”

“Then you know our way and you are kin. I will be seeing you,” he replies with a laugh, then he is through, a gaunt wight that freezes the loam with every step.

To my surprise, Naminata comes back through with bloody tears trailing freely down her cheeks. Of course, the Ekon would send an explorer. Ugh. They could have asked.

"You have to see this, my meringue, you simply have to. I have no words!"

I hesitate at the edge of the green as the last leaders walk through. Sivaya is the penultimate traveler. Her elfin face grows even more alien with liquid blue eyes and an ethereal quality that makes me feel like she could walk through a wall. Then it is simply Sinead and I. He takes my hand.

I do not resist when he walks me through the passage. The intoxicating perfume of the Likaeen world almost overwhelms me.

We stand in a small clearing under a green sky. A tree the size of the tallest mountain rules over an infinite forest of strange vegetation. Lianas fall like garlands from the heavy boughs. A rainbow-colored insect flies lazily through the clearing.

I am in the arms of dream Sinead, the true one. He is so tall now, and I lose myself in the molten gold of his eyes. Amber hair undulates in an unseen wind like the quiet flames of a campfire. His arms are so strong, now, strong enough to encircle me and make me feel safe. From a dilettante noble, he has turned into a royal heir. He gently grabs the back of my neck and I gasp under his controlled power. Even the Aurora's cold aura cannot smother the heat that now emanates from him in great waves. Sinead is himself, truly himself, for the first time I have met him, free of fear and the suffering of his people. A true Prince of Summer.

"Ariane, I love you. I have loved you since we met. I have loved you until it hurt. I could not stop loving you."

His kiss is fire and honey and a foreign sun, all things that should terrify me and yet do not because he is Sinead and... I love him as well. I drown in the passion I feel here, helpless yet unafraid. The urge to bite is drowned by his feelings and the power with which he embraces me.

"And I am sorry," he finishes.

Huh?

"Do it," he tells Sivaya. I barely manage to struggle, so surprised I am. I can only watch, lost, as the princess of the blue claps her hands and the portal winks out.

Sivaya teleports away just as the last notes of energy of the spell fade to nothingness.

My way back just disappeared into thin air!

I am trapped?

I am trapped!

“Sinead, what have you DONE?”