

The exploratory group walks into the dead world with care but without worry. All of us working together would be enough to topple a small nation, so I am not overly concerned, but it is the truth that our destination hosts strange creatures and that we had fatalities fighting off only a portion of the Last City's skeleton mages. We need to keep our eyes open.

The landscape before us is both familiar and strange. The same bland, colorless desert of dust extends to equally bland mountains on the horizon. The air smells of little except brine, the explanation of which can be seen in shallow pools far to our right. The main point of interest stands around us, however. We have landed in a small depression surrounded on all sides by black monoliths jutting up for dozens of yards before retracting inward, their ends tapering into cracked spikes like the ribs of a fallen titan. A quick look reveals the faded remains of unknown glyphs. We have barely started to fan out when Jimena calls out.

"Hm, you may all want to see this."

The Cadiz lady points at the back of the portal. At the edge of the circle, we find a skull. Or rather, the top of one, its sockets filled with sand to a quarter. The two most striking details are its surface as it seems to be plated with gold or some similar metal, and its size.

"By the Watcher. The entire skeleton must be, err thirteen yards tall?" I hazard.

"Probably closer to eleven if you must use imperial units," Constantine replies pompously, *"the local natives are more squat than a regular human."*

"Really?" I ask.

"Yes. The scientific community even calls them Homo Alien as they believe them to be an entirely new hominid species."

"Would you two please save the scholarly debate for later?" Jarek interrupts.

He goes for the skull and we follow. I would rather find out if it represents a danger sooner rather than later, especially because mana hounds will not fail to perceive our intrusion if there are any around. On cue, Adrien strides to the edge of the clearing for a better look while Sephare takes position behind us and next to Nami, the only master present. The seven of us eventually form a half circle around our findings when it becomes clear that we are not in immediate danger.

The skull is just that, a skull. I feel no aura from it. The surface intrigues me, however, as the metal plating shows fine lines engraved with what must have been painstaking patience.

"Perhaps the metal can be harvested? It could be valuable," Sephare says.

"I would be interested in examining the spellwork first. This was clearly designed by magic users," Constantine replies reproachfully.

I understand him. What do we care about a pile of gold when we are already wealthy? This new finding could revolutionize our understanding of magic, and possibly not in a way that would destroy the world! Truly, we might have found ourselves an unexpected treasure.

“Am I the only one who is concerned that we have faced skeleton mages and this is a giant skeleton... and possibly a mage?” Adrien asks.

“It has not moved so far...” Jimena says, unsure.

“Only one way to find out,” Jarek declares.

He takes a step forward. His armored gauntlet soul weapons materialize on his fists.

“Jarek?” I scream.

Constantine protests vehemently as well, undoubtedly out of fear the markings might get damaged. Nevertheless, Jarek punches down.

The skull shakes under the jab. Cracks expand over its surface, but not very far, merely the size of a large plate perhaps. I have seen Jarek pulverize rocks with that amount of power.

“The thing is quite durable.”

“What are you doing?” I hiss. *“Remember your oath. I have not approved of attacking it!”*

“You have not forbidden it either. Hmmm. It does seem dead.”

I open my mouth to argue that there is a difference between proactive thinking and recklessness, but I am interrupted by an earthquake. A very small, very localized earthquake. I shift to the side when ribs, actual ones plated in metal, breach the dusty earth. We all scatter except for Jarek who hammers them with limited results. A patella pierces next, followed by the whole leg.

“The Watcher dammit JAREEEEEEEK!” I say.

“At least we got the first hit in. What are you all waiting for?”

We all attack at once. Just as we expected, the creature proves incredibly resilient. Even repeated hits do little but open tiny crevices in its reflective surface. Jarek’s deafening blows prove the most effective at damaging it. I decide not to waste anymore time.

“Magna Arqa!”

No matter the circumstances, letting go will always feel amazing. The roots explode from the earth normally, wrapping around the skeleton’s leg and making it stumble. Constantine’s chains grab the other leg while another of Jarek’s fast series of strikes pushes it back, on its, well, pelvis. Despite this, the creature rises again until it towers above us.

“What monstrous strength,” Constantine remarks.

“Should we focus on its right leg?” I ask no one in particular. I already scratched it pretty well.

“You will notice that it is indeed eleven yards tall.”

“NOT NOW, SPEAKER!”

The massive skeleton does something and the world is drawn in.... but nothing happens to us. The same cannot be said about our equipment, however. I feel Aurora’s cold radiance diminish.

The skeleton bends forward and reaches for Sephare, who dodges with a curse. It is quite fast for a construct yet still pales in comparison to us. Despite that, our inability to hurt it means a stalemate. Uncaring for the growing network of rifts marring its surface, the giant swipes at Sephare, this time much, much faster. She still jumps over the blow. Then, the creature’s fingertips grow transparent as if clad in ghostly talons. It reaches down for a lost piece of metal on the ground. I recognize one of Sephare’s side weapons, a dagger of exquisite make.

It disintegrates.

“It’s starving. It will feed on our magical items!” I warn everyone.

Constantine already guessed it and forfeited his spells in favor of blows from his chain-like soul weapon. As for Sephare, the destruction of her blade sends her in a fury.

“Agh! This was a gift from... HOW DARE YOU, YOU OVERGROWN ANATOMICAL DISPLAY?”

She screams incoherently and attacks with utter savagery. I find it a little adorable, but cannot let myself be distracted too much. There are too many powerful fighters in a crowded space. We cannot use all of our strength. I decide to focus my effort on the same side Jarek and Constantine are attacking with my roots and Rose’s shredding edge. Despite the improvised nature of our team and the lack of room, we work together rather well.

“Magna Arqa!”

Adrien drags Sephare out of the way of the thing’s attacks by jumping at her from her own shadow. The creature appears to be at full speed now, and I assess that its claws destroy magic on contact. I would complain if I were not cheating in a similar fashion.

Finally, with our combined attacks focusing on its right leg, the wobbly tibia finally fractures to show actual bone and the fossilized marrow underneath. We jump on the weakness like wolves on a wounded stag. The creature kicks, which we avoid with ease. It opens wide its toothy maw.

The world shakes. Sand at my feet dance in strange patterns while my ears burn with a searing pain. I lose my sense of balance. My vision turns red. Pure instinct makes me raise more thorns to block a wide sweep from the skeleton. It tears off at least five of the trunk-sized offshoots. That thing is impossibly strong!

Around me, the others pick themselves up. They are all bleeding from their ears.

A pop and an itchy sensation let me know that I am already healed.

"Can we ward against screams, somehow?" I ask, attacking the leg again.

"WHAT?" Sephare answers.

"No magic will work against this thing, it will just consume it," Constantine replies soberly.

The Aurora picks this moment to flicker.

"That thing is killing our gear!"

"It is of no use anyway," Jarek replies, "Magna Arqa!"

Power fills him as he launches himself at the beast. He lands squarely on its ribcage and sends it crashing on the ground.

"Remove them! They will not save you if you get hit! Go!"

He is right. One glancing blow from those talons and the armor will simply be gone, as well as whatever part of us it touches. It serves no purpose. I race away with the others except Jarek and Nami. The shameless woman simply tears off her light armor and sends it flying far in the distance. She now fights in the state of nature, smiling all the way. Ah well.

"Wait, the portal is closed?" I exclaim.

"I told them to close it for ten minutes. Security protocol in case we meet more than mana hounds, remember?" Adrien retorts reproachfully.

Ah, right. I insisted on it too.

"I had not seen you do it."

"All of you were obsessed with hitting that thing, you battle maniacs. Nobody cares about the plan, ever," he grumbles. The sourpuss.

We run at full speed for a few seconds until the depression is far behind us and the Aurora's power picks back up. A signal, and we all drop our belongings where they are, leaving only the under armor and our soul weapons. I end up in a gambeson with — and may my papa forgive me — trousers.

“Ariane, you think this creature is one of the skeleton mages?” Jimena suddenly asks.

“Undoubtedly, but it is obviously quite mad. Perhaps it starved?”

“Would you say it participated in the destruction of this world?”

“I am certain of it.”

“Me too.”

Jimena accelerates and points her sinuous sword at the large skeleton.

“I JUDGE YOU GUILTY! Magna Arqa!”

Vast wings of purple light grow from her shoulders and she positively flies at the creature’s head.

Her power shifts the balance of the local place. I can feel it. In the thin fabric of this world where reality was pierced before, our combined essence calls it. It draws itself forward across unimaginable distance.

On the horizon, the eye of the Watcher opens. Its black slitted pupil narrows and lands on us.

The time has come to leave a good impression.

Our assault redoubles and one last hook from Jarek cracks the bone. The skeleton tilts to the side and falls once more. This time, it will not rise again. The foot is severed. It opens its mouth and screams again. I do not even bother to block my ears, fully expecting the blaring sound to send me to the ground, bleeding, except it does not. A pure, clear note impossibly blocks it in.

Nami laughs, and laughs. Confused, the maddened creature screams again and again, Nami twirls her spear then sings. The world takes a purple shade.

She starts to dance. A ghostly music covers the monster’s impotent noise with drums and flutes. Nami sings still, then she pauses and looks at me.

“Pants, cupcake? How scandalous!”

“YOU ARE ONE TO TALK!”

But Nami does not care. She keeps dancing with the beat and I cannot stop myself from joining her as her eyes turn purple and feline as well.

“Magna Arqa!”

The fight becomes a dance. We strike with the tune and dodge with graceful steps. Our attacks beat a staccato on the beleaguered monster. I sway my hips suggestively.

"Is this really necessary?" I complain.

"Just relax, treacle pie, go with the flow!"

It takes a long time for us to detach the skull from its neck, but with its yells silenced and its patterns known, the skeleton no longer stands a chance. Nami's strange power forces me to be more predictable, yet at the same it enhances our coordination. Our range means that I can cover Jarek while Constantine covers Adrien. Nami forms a deadly trio with Sephare and Jimena, their attacks concentrated on a single vertebra. Going with the flow proves extremely easy while even thinking of resisting it hampers my movement. A vexing yet interesting development.

Finally, the titan collapses into true death this time, and we are left waiting to see if it will explode or some equally distasteful last gesture of spite. Fortunately, no such thing happens. We find ourselves in the possession of the largest pile of metal-plated bones in history.

I jump on Nami.

"Congratulations on your ascension!"

All of us greet the latest vampire to join our hallowed ranks, though she merely hums and smiles, then, without warning she grabs Jarek and Sephare before aiming for the slowly reopening portal.

"Ah. She is going to celebrate," Constantine remarks.

I glare at him. A bit crass.

"Do not look at me that way, Ariane, you should know that I do not enjoy intimacy of any sort."

"Do not flatter yourself! The only intimacy you will get from me is—"

"When you shove that sword somewhere tender, yes, I know, I know," Constantine replies with a look of supreme boredom. *"If you really want the throne, I might give it to you."*

I freeze at that and look at the Speaker, confused.

"You would?"

"Do you have any idea how much effort I spend every night regulating petty conflicts and signing things so that we remain the Accords and not some squabbling confederation of bloodthirsty old monsters? No one, not even I, have the power to put the likes of Jarek or even you in line. It would take the likes of your sire and nobody would benefit, but I digress."

Spend a week shadowing me and we will see if you truly have the stomach for it. You know enough by now that it should benefit you.

"If nothing else, you have my curiosity. Right. In any case, we should recover our gear quickly."

"Hm? Oh."

Constantine finally notices the approaching horde of mana hounds backed by their monstrous broodmothers and swarms of flying drones. The land is not quite purple, but it certainly is more colorful than it used to be. We quickly put on our armors and recover our weapons. Thankfully, whatever damage the creature did does not appear to be permanent.

"Did those three just leave us all the work so they could engage in coitus?" the Speaker complains.

"Well, yes. To be fair, Nami's situation is a once in a second life-time experience and we would have refused anyway. I do not do groups."

Constantine blinks and turns to Adrien, as if seeking confirmation that this was normal. The Roland lord misunderstands his meaning.

"I do not mix combat and pleasure," he explains.

"Aintza has all of my heart," Jimena says in turn

"Oh, reinforcements!" I exclaim to lift the decidedly awkward direction this conversation has followed.

Said reinforcement are the Illinois vampires, Urchin, John, Melusine, and Phineas. The fire mage seems protective of the fallen knight, which I can understand since he was still far from dead when we escaped Europe together.

"Did you not have more Courtiers?" I ask the prickly redhead.

"They are not ready, you bull-headed barbarian."

"I was not ready when I escaped your clutches. Those sound like excuses to me."

"We cannot all improve our strength by traveling the land and eating its people, you juice-brained slurper."

"Is it jealousy I hear from my lesser, Master Melusine?"

"Yes yes, enjoy being a lady through power because it would never have been by your manners. Speaking of dignity, Isaac of the Rosenthal has sent a package for you."

"Oh?"

John fetches it. At first, it looks like a sealed sarcophagus and quite heavy to boot, but as soon as I read the message attached to it, I know I was mistaken.

“My dear Ariane,

As you expected, I cannot assist you since the Rosenthal enforce a strict neutrality policy. We cannot involve ourselves in matters that involve two or more factions, as your current project does. Nevertheless, nothing says that I cannot hurry along the secure transfer of some mail orders, so to speak. I wish you the best of luck in your endeavor.

Yours sincerely,

Isaac.”

Curious. The envelope contains another letter, this one in Loth's familiar script.

“Lass.

I finally refined and finished our little project. Gatling might be a smart lad but I'm an efficient one. The handle and firing mechanisms are isolated against temperature changes. I added silver bullets for your immediate enjoyment.

Have fun.

Loth.”

Ooooh yes.

The hound cleanup takes all of two hours but was otherwise uneventful. Regular castings lure the attention of the beasts away from the portal. Constantine also successfully altered his chains so they would not snap immediately under the anti-magic effect of the disgusting creatures. I believe his inability to act against the skeleton must have frustrated him, because the ensuing rampage is quite spectacular.

Loth's weapon turns out to be a portable machine gun with a shortened muzzle and a higher rate of fire. It takes me a bit of effort to get used to the recoil, and also to realize that I need a small moment to dig my feet in so I can compensate for its tremendous recoil. I wonder if I could use a hydraulic shock absorber in a portable weapon but it will have to be a

consideration for later. After a quick test, I am forced to switch to Rose because of the lack of ammunition. It was fun while it lasted.

With the land under our control, we spend some time clearing the corpses, gathering them in a mound a distance later which I propose to set on fire. Unfortunately, my proposal is refused on account of the inevitable plume of smoke it would create in this otherwise cloudless land.

“We are half a planet away from the last city,” Sivaya explains. “The gate spells links locus that are only related to true distances, not bound.”

“What she means to say is that the distance between two portals on earth and the same two portals here would be different but not so much that it would make portal-based movement very attractive,” Sinead explains.

“So we should have no interference from the Last City,” I reply.

“There is no evidence that they are, in fact, the Last City. That was my actual point,” Sivaya continues. “The present skeleton proves that this world is rife with old dangers and ancient traps. We must remain cautious.”

“Very well.”

A large number of mages come through the gate including Ricardo, the man I saved in Alexandria and had forgotten since then. It feels strange to see so many old faces, and I am reminded that our current task is the result of years of efforts and resource-gathering from everyone involved. When I told my allies I had been part of the conspiracy for seventy years, it was an approximation. I was more a willing and constant ally ready to provide support whenever needed but otherwise busy pursuing my own interests. Only now do I realize the extent of efforts invested in the liberation when dozens of fae join our encampment as it transforms into a starfort. They immediately get to work casting, enchanting, and reinforcing our defenses under the watchful yet respectful gaze of the Accords and our human guards. Our numbers swell to hundreds, forcing me to increase the delivery of food and other necessities. Although I am concerned about operational safety, there is little I can do beyond increasing patrols and traps. Fortunately, the fae rise to the occasion once more and I successfully intercept a Mask spy before she can find more about our project.

“This is not especially alarming,” Constantine says as we are gathered inside of the starfort one evening. “Few factions would fail to identify that we are working on a major project, but so far they must not know what or they would have tried to intervene. Your warning about the Amaretta seer is concerning, however. Although we are moving at great speed, I am concerned that we may be found out too soon.”

Sivaya lifts a dainty hand to speak. Her elfin features show more confidence since Constantine has taken a serious interest in her and her research. Honestly, I would be concerned if I were Sinead, intimacy or not, but the Likaeans are much less exclusive than we are.

“The manipulation of fate is more the domain of my father, however, if I would hazard a guess, I would say that the trigger will be the start of the ritual which will take three days to complete. My understanding is that our foes could reach us before we are done.”

“It would cost them much resources and probably leave them with no avenue of retreat, but perhaps, yes,” Sephare confirms.

“If that is the case we can delay the trigger until our defenses are complete.”

“Will you call upon your allies?” Adrien asks.

I shake my head.

“If we face any serious opposition, it will be vampires and for one night only. I see no other way for them to react. Any mage or werewolf deployed to face a host of lords and ladies at night will only be wasted.”

The others agree with me, and our work continues.

Over the month of March 1871, we finish the starfort around the permanent portal. The loyal workers are returned to Marquette and the other surrounded villages they came from with the expectation that informers will get at them. Fortunately, none of the mortals present saw the portal open or, indeed, recognize the Likaeans for what they were since their existence has always been kept a secret. We begin working on the necessary elements of the rituals, firstly by deploying a magic-blocking seal. Sivaya explains its purpose while we use basic spells to flatten the ground around the ribcage-like structure.

“The dead world drinks magic like starving land drinks rain. I suspect it might live again but not easily, and especially not with the power we possess here. Our first order of business is to keep the spent energy inside. It will serve a double purpose by also protecting us from detection and questing hounds.”

“Will the ribcage not affect us?” I ask as I work.

“I examined the mark and believe that it was used to create one of those skeleton mages you speak of, and that we call liches.”

“Wait. You have seen this process before?”

Sivaya nods.

“It is an inefficient technique that mortal species can resort to if they wish to fend off the end of their natural lifespan. The spells I know require objects of great vitality, but the people here used the essence of their own planets. Such shortsightedness can unfortunately be found regularly among the more ambitious species. In any case, the ritual dug a deep wound

in the fabric of reality which will serve our purpose well. The ribcages are inert now, their purpose fulfilled. I suppose it could be used as a focus in certain rituals, but will be used for what it represents and not as an active ingredient. We are safe.”

Well, she is the expert.

Once the ground is flattened, Sivaya and a few others harden it until it has the resistance and consistency of stone, then trace an intricate network of glyphs in a large circular band around what I suspect will be the heart of the ritual. They use strange tools that emits a blue flame to dig. Physically imposing Likaeans then fill the grooves with an alloy molten in an engraved furnace that I suspect might be electrum. I dare not think how many rich widows Sinead seduced out of their savings to achieve this level of financial liquidity.

Curious, I ask him when we take a break. We have installed a massive tent at the edge of the working place with sentries all around. Guarding the unmoving dust desert has to be one of the most boring tasks in existence. One might as well watch wallpaper dry.

“So, how many banks have you robbed to afford that much electrum.”

“Many, but not the way you think. I took some loans.”

“You intend to dodge repaying those by escaping to a new dimension?” I gasp.

“You have to admire the elegance of the solution. Do not be afraid, I mostly scammed banks tightly linked to the Rosenthal and other vampire organizations.”

“You have defrauded vampires.”

“Tis only fair,” he replies with a shrug. “Our liquidity for their liquidity, thank you.”

I hear an edge under the joke but do not remark on it. Sinead is nervous. I can feel it in the most minute variations of his colorful aura, in the way he has stopped lounging. The Prince of Summer is afraid. Too much hangs in the balance.

Uncharacteristically, I grab his shoulder and massage it a little bit in what must be a brazen display.

I have not been tactile, not since I was changed. Vampires hate being touched. Any unsolicited stimulus tends to trigger extreme responses while we rely much more on our sense of smell. Sinead feels how much it cost for me to bare myself emotionally, somehow. His smile softens until it feels genuine to my less sophisticated social perception. His hand squeezes mine once, softly. He is quite warm and smells of the sun on fresh linen.

Gah, I wish I fancied him less.

Sinead sighs deeply. tension leaves his dancer’s frame. When he looks at me, the intensity of his gaze reveals that this will be one of his few serious moments.

“You have helped me so much Ariane. This liberation, this return home, it means more than you could possibly imagine. We had no hope, no hope at all, but you gave us some. You freed me. You freed Sivaya. You found us Ricardo and saved us years of research. We are building a fragile edifice made of a hundred machinations and much of it rested on your shoulders, and you have never failed us. You cannot possibly imagine the impact your actions will have. And do not pretend that you did it out of self-interest. We both know that the debt I incurred cannot be repaid with all the gold of your world. Freedom, Ariane, is priceless. If we achieve success, I promise to make sure that your altruism is rewarded, the spheres know you will need some help. And I will never forget what you did.”

“Well,” I retort, suddenly embarrassed, “I think freedom is priceless too.”

Well done, Ariane, very smooth. Eighty years alive and that is all you come up with. Truly, what is left unspoken weighs heavily on my mind. Sinead and I have made no real secret of our mutual attraction, merely skirting the issue since we could not even kiss without me feeling an overwhelming urge to kill him. I would not accept to be bound just to enjoy intimacy either, never again, not even with someone I trust. We are at an impasse. And he is leaving, possibly forever.

Perhaps there will be a time when our worlds finally align, but I know that we will have met our end before that one way or another. There is a non-negligible chance that the earth he finds will be under the thumb of Nirari, meaning that I will be dead. It all feels so far away. There could be centuries, millennia before we could meet again. We do not grow old but we grow... tired. I know some have fallen into slumber. It could happen to me too. Despite all of this, we have not broached the subject and I dare not address it lest we are distracted from the more immediate matter. This is the endgame for the fae. Soon, the vampire world will realize that they do not just face serious opposition from the species, they also gathered allies and are capable of freeing their kin. We only get one opportunity to succeed before many doors close to us. I cannot lose sight of the goal, no matter how meaningful his absence would be.

With the first circle finished, work continues unabated. Many of the vampires including myself spend daylight hours in the dead world rather than the confines of the starfort with no negative side-effects beyond the vague impression that those are poor hunting grounds. The lack of background life would render us insane in short order if we were isolated, but it is, for now, compensated by the strange impression of being out under the sun. The local pale light shyly piercing through the eternal cloud cover does not trigger any of our fears in a curious phenomenon none of us can quite explain. Regardless, I would not want to live here.

As the hour draws closer, I spend more and more time imagining the world beyond the portal. In retrospect, this should have raised an obvious question but it is John who asks it.

“Will you go through the portal, Miss Ari?”

“The portal? To the Likaeon worlds?”

“Yes. If you go, he will not come after you.”

I will be able to live free of Nirari until I die or until he annoys a Likaeen king and loses his life in the process.

“You are right of course but... I cannot. Earth is still my world. Perhaps, one day, I may leave it, but not while it teeters on the edge of the abyss. I would never be able to forget the ongoing conflict. It would weigh me too heavily. Besides, would everyone I care about leave with me?”

“I would,” John replies, *“but Jimena would not. And you would not leave her to die.”*

“Indeed not.”

John nods and, for him, this concludes the discussion. His trust and certitude ground me.

The middle of March brings us more news. A sudden war triggered between France and Prussia ended in the quick and total destruction of the French army and the creation of the German empire. Much to the general surprise, we learn that vampires from the middle faction, the Brotherhood, have been granted titles of nobility while mages are hired in legal positions. As for France, a grassroots movement installs a socialist regime in Paris while the republican government in Versailles is attempting to negotiate, the cause of their sudden tolerance being their lack of trust in the army. Many free spellcasters have joined the ranks of those they call the communards. For the first time in history, magic has made an open impact on the side of the leaders.

The second surprise comes from Mask's own defeat. Despite striking the first blow, a sudden and temporary alliance between Eneru and the Brotherhood, as well as the absence of some of their best fighters, have left Bertrand and his tactician Orpheus completely overwhelmed. We fail to learn much on the exact course of the conflict, only that Mask is currently in disarray. I fear their reversal of fortune might lead them to desperate measures concerning the incoming war. The stakes are now even greater.

The fae finish the construct on the seventeenth, right on schedule. We all stand witness to a spellwork as large as three tennis fields engraved on petrified earth with molten electrum. It is a sublime work of arcane knowledge and craftsmanship. Even Constantine is impressed by the displayed precision and dedication. The secondary stones are charged. The main stone is at full power. The only thing left is to place the focus and start, but the Likaeans request a break to recover, one I grant and that we spend exploring and hunting.

Two days later, Sinead gathers all of us. Ranks of loyal mages of the Red Cabale and fae of all origins stand shoulder to shoulder with us. On top of the previous lords, we are also joined by Lord Suarez of the Cadiz for the defense, Adrien's twin Adam, and Islaev, Jarek's second. The number of warlords and ladies present eclipses all but the most determined war parties.

Despite our presence, the Prince of Summer shows no trace of fear when he faces us, the men and women who will bring his people home.

“Welcome, everyone, to the second most important magical event of this century,” he starts in English.

A few of us smile. Everyone who matters knows that Semiramis’ work set the foundation for what we will soon attempt.

“This tent behind me doesn’t look like much, yet now it is the headquarters of the most culturally and ethnically diverse group of beings your planet has ever known. We have mundane humans, mages, and vampires. We have fae from the diminutive eye hunters of the Court of Wings and Keyholes to the giants of the Court of Stones. A hundred courts from dozens of worlds have lost themselves here and have or will join our numbers. Why, we are only missing the werewolves.”

“I could always use a snack,” Islaev grumbles, causing a few nervous laughs.

“And yet, we are still working together towards a singular purpose, but we have a flaw, a fatal flaw that could cause our demise in our hour of need.”

Sinead leans forward, stealing our attention with a conspiratorial wink.

“We are here for different reasons. We have not aligned.”

He stands back up and paces before us.

“Now I know that oaths bind all of us, not just you my fellow Likaeans but also those who could have been our jailors! But oaths can only force us to comply. It is not obligation that will push us to our limits, that will burn away the debris of our indecision until we fight, reborn in our finest hour, oh no! We will need more than this to triumph, because at the end of the day we are not evacuating, we are not depriving enemies of their magical juice. We are doing nothing short but achieving the most daring, the most audacious breakout in the history of this world and beyond! We are stealing an entire species. What bards will not envy us this moment? What seeker of adventure will look us in the eye and claim they would not have wish to be here?”

I think Naminata would spontaneously burst if she could. Sinead turns and spreads his hand like an entertainer

“Panache, ladies and gentlemen. Panache will bind us in that noble endeavor. There are no stories like the one we write now, no achievements like the one we shall claim, and it is you, all of you, who are the actors and architects of this masterful play. So stand straight and laugh, channel the powers of the arcane with mirth in your breasts, face your enemies with a smile on your lips, because when this is done, no matter what, we will be legends. The ritual starts tomorrow and will culminate on the night of the spring equinox, following which we will be free or dead. May the fates smile upon us all. Dismissed.”