

Cliff camp, the night before.

After leaving Sheridan, I patrol around but find no recent traces of the natives. Most of their patrols must have retreated after I killed the first one, and nobody else tries to set up an ambush. I find quite a few watchtowers but no trace of the forest being exploited for wood, or food, not exactly a surprise when nothing larger than a mouse remains.

I make my way back to base camp shortly before dawn and find Syrrin waiting for me in my tent, by the sarcophagus.

“Yes?”

*“Nirari. Follow.”*

I stare askance at the tall shaman. She bends slightly.

*“Nirari. Follow. Please. Syrrin begs.”*

I feel a tug, the barest hint of fate urging me on, and it has never failed me yet.

Well, there was that time where it sent me on a collision course with my sire and his damned servant, but that was a necessity. Probably. It remains that her request has weight. It must be answered.

I cannot afford to ignore my instincts given Sheridan’s involvement.

I grab my weapons backpack and follow the fishwoman out. She turns only once to see if I am following, and that is after crawling through an opening into the cliff barely large enough for her muscular frame.

We are in a damp cave lit by glowing mushrooms. A rotten pile of supplies lines one of the walls. Syrrin sighs heavily. She is... tense. I can taste her weakness in the air.

She turns and leaves.

I follow her through a network of small caverns, many of those crudely excavated. She knows the path well. Even when the tortuous tunnels take unexpected turns, her slithers never falter.

Syrrin comes from here, I realize now. She is familiar with the place.

How far from her home she must have been when she found me? How desperate! I can tell now from the frantic determination of her movement that this is what she had been waiting for.

Eventually, we stop in a large circular cavern with a pond at its core. Blue mushrooms emit an appeasing radiance and paint the walls in strange patterns of color. Syrrin rummages behind a pillar and shows me a tight sleeping place cleverly hidden behind a stone.

*“Nirari sleeps. Syrrin watches. Tomorrow. Nirari hunts.”*

My caution screams at me not to believe the strange fishwoman, but I know in my essence that she will die before betraying me. I hide my supply backpack and my spear behind another column and tuck myself in for the day.

It is afternoon now. The cavern possesses a timeless quality that soothes my mind, even if I can feel the cruel orb travelling through the sky from beyond layers of rock. I recover my gear and follow her, until we arrive at a crossing. She goes left, but I stop her and point right. She tilts her strange, flat face. I felt another tug. This one was important, vital even.

*“Instinct,”* I inform the fishwoman.

She follows. There is no need for me to explain. She understands magic better than any of our own customs.

My steps guide me up until I find light blocking my path.

Sunlight is a curious thing, when it is so diffuse. The frail radiance here is but a reflection of a reflection, not the purge of direct rays that torched my side back in Alexandria. It still carries with it a hint of blister and the taste of ash.

I stop.

What now? I feel like I am in the right place.

Above, there is the bang of a discharged firearm.

*“What...”*

And then I hear it. Curses and the impact of armor-covered flesh on stone.

*“Aw! Fuck! Shit! No! Jesus! Fucking.”*

I step forward, blinking owlshly against the pallid glow coming from above. I jump and grab Sheridan before he can land painfully

I end up on the other side of the passage with the Ranger in my arms. He is breathing hard.

“Well well well, look just what fell into my lap.”

“By God. Ariane?”

“Yes.”

“I think my back is broken.”

He would be screaming if it were. I put him on his feet and inspect the cause of his worries. I find the characteristic round mark of a shot. It must hurt like hell. That is where his fears come from.

“It is not broken,” I tell him, as I feel rage filling my heart.

“It feels broken?”

I tsk.

“Have you ever had a broken back?”

“No.”

“Then how can you tell?”

He turns around, blinking like a mole and I realize that it is too dark for him to see. He lifts one arm and waves it around, then repeats it for his other arm. He moves his shoulders around.

“Huh.”

“Who shot you?” I ask.

“That little fucking backtabbing rat. I will snuff out his sniveling life with my own two hands, I swear.”

My anger recedes. It is the *Vassal's* prey.

“How do we get back up, anyway?” he asks.

“We do not get back up. Syrrin and I have... unfinished business.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

I realize what Syrrin is. She bowed. She asked. The strange fishwoman is a *Suppliant*.

“*Lead the way,*” I tell her.

The shaman moves up as if nothing had happened.

Our path is slower now, since I have to hold Sheridan by the hand so that he does not bump against every wall. My *Vassal* is clearly eager to pursue his vengeance and yet, he does not object even once to being left in the dark. Metaphorically.

The caverns start to widen soon enough and to show signs of passage. The light remains minimal and the silence, absolute, until I see our destination.

We arrive on a balcony overlooking a breathtaking scene that I would have never anticipated.

The mountain is hollowed out! A giant cavern of amazing size hides within its mineral envelope, and with it, the strange dwellers of the island have built their den. I watch with interest as the strange beings cobbled together anything they could find to assemble a fantasmagoric construct of wood, rock, and shells held together by faith and moldy ropes. Shipwrecks tied to ancient statues lean dangerously over edifices smashed together in one pathetic hovel of a city.

The spectacle further lowers them in my esteem. If they had spent millenia in isolation, I would have given them the benefit of the doubt, but they had seen the wonders of the outside world and decided to salvage it to make pigsties. Hah. There is not a spark of innovation, of insight, in this entire place. Not one of the precious qualities that we love and admire in humans. Those are scavengers and cockroaches, barely better than animals.

I shake my head as Syrrin stops by the opening to meditate. I cannot approach anyway. Pure sunlight descends from a crater in the city’s center. This land is forbidden to me. For now.

“*Why did you bring me here, Syrrin?*”

“*Nirari. Grants. Life and death. We wait. Then, I show.*”

She knows the place for sure. The question then is...

“*Syrrin, how did you find me?*”

“*The Dreams show you, and the black one. You, better.*”

The little Shaman is a seer as well! It would appear that they do enjoy dragging me in their games. She is correct, of course. My sire would not let time-consuming request distract him from his goal.

We settle down for a few hours. Sheridan tells me of the event of the day in a slow voice as afternoon goes on.

“Miranda ran into the woods. Do you think that they will manage to catch her?”

“Perhaps. I am not entirely sure about how godlings work with death, only that it is a possibility. I will look for her when we are done with our current task.”

“I hope she makes it. She is arrogant and stuck up, but she has courage and her heart's in the right place.”

If Sheridan had died, her heart would be all over the place by now. As would the rest of her internal organs.

“*Follow,*” Syrrin finally requests, and we leave the balcony behind. To yet another side tunnel.

The path leads down this time, and soon we hear the roar of the sea.

The stench is abominable.

I have had worse and merely stop breathing while Sheridan swears softly and covers his mouth and nose with a scarf. I give him credit for his iron stomach. Others would have succumbed to nausea by now.

We end up in what has to be this place's sewers. I am thankful for my boots being so thick. The path broadens until we arrive at the lowest point of the city.

As we enter the large cavern, I notice an opening to the sea on our left, and something else that surprises me.

There are fishmen and women swimming in and out of the secret cove's entrance. They appear... sick. Their scales do not share the lustre common to their brethren, and their postures are down and submissive. The sight immediately fills me with disgust.

Fishmen are predators and man eaters. It is an established fact. A known fact. Every interaction I have had with them always ended in bloodshed and slaughter. To see them desperate and submissive fills me with a deep sense of unease and anger. I would not mind slaughtering an entire tribe in battle, because it would be the proper order of things. I would not impose their current fate on them unless I was overcome with rage.

Perhaps that is why I have been reluctant to create cattle unless I had to prove a point.

I turn back to Syrrin to ask questions, and instead find her physically struggling. She is holding her coral armband in one hand and fights on to keep moving, her eyes glazing over before a good shake allows her to trudge on. I do not know what is wrong with her. Even Sheridan appears unaffected. He stares at the shaman's back with worried curiosity, one hand on his revolver.

Our ailing companion guides us through the worst part of the shanty town and everywhere we see more of the same. The fish folks are occupied with menial tasks, and otherwise kept in cramped, squalid cages mired in filth by patrolling creatures that we avoid. I see sores and open wounds on their backs and limbs. Some of the older members of this tribe have been amputated.

"Jesus," Sheridan whispers, as we see some of the primal humans drag a screaming child to a slaughterhouse.

We do not react yet. Both my Vassal and I can tell that Syrrin decides what the best course of action is to continue, for now. I wonder why they take such terrible treatment without complaint, and if it relates to the strange mood affecting our guide.

As we move further into the city, the full extent of the tribe's sufferings becomes even more obvious, and the heart of this ignominy is the breeding pen. I am forced to avert my gaze as I pass it by, so dreadful the state of the fishwomen is. So humiliating. I have seen atrocities before, of course. What really affects me is the casual cruelty involved in the treatment of the prisoners, the systematic destruction of everything that qualifies them as people. I push away the sights and the small voice at the back of my head telling me that such things exist everywhere, and that I have just closed my eyes to it. Sheridan is to blame. He is turning me more... human.

Syrrin slithers between two sentries and goes deeper into the shanty town. As time passes, I start feeling it as well. Something is spreading an impressive aura over the entire town. It is not attuned to me, hence why it took me so long to detect it. I can still taste it in the air. Despair. Void. Apathy. A sort of drunkenness that robs the will and smothers the flame of life. It is a detestable thing. It violates the spirit of the Hunt.

Disgust is replaced by anger inside of my heart. The whole city is a sore on the face of the earth. It is lucky, then, that it would be made so poorly.

My hands contract into claws as we move on and Sheridan's heartbeat rises in answer. We fan the flames of each other's anger the more our exploration goes on. The betrayal. The abuse we see. The extent of the primal humans' disdain for their prey. They mix and merge in a torrent that cascades from him to me, then back again. It takes all I have not to hiss.

We finally arrive before a cavern out of the way. The three of us kneel behind a stone looking over an opening in the sheer wall in front of which wait two primals in wood armor, their faces hidden behind elaborate clay masks. Apathetic fishmen and women lay in dejected piles around it. They stare into nothingness, overwhelmed by the powerful aura radiating from the mouth of the passage. Syrrin is shivering now. She holds her coral armband in a dead grip.

It is, I realize, her focus. She has been casting without reprieve to fight off the deleterious influence of the spell.

When she lifts her flat, ugly head to me, her eyes are filled with tears.

*“Nirari gives life. And death. Please, give life back.”*

*Supplicant.*

There is no need to bargain now. There is no need to make a deal. The urgency is too much.

*“I shall grant you this boon.”*

I move down. The two sentries turn to me. I slap the first one's head off and plant my hand into the second one's chest. His lifeblood spills from his silent lips. The scent of the red nectar permeates the air. The fish people's nostrils flare, but they cannot fight yet. The chain on their mind is too heavy and the source is right here, behind a grate of rusted iron.

I grab the obstacle and bend my knees. I channel the Natalis and werewolf essences, pull with a grunt of annoyance. Metal moans and cracked mortar pops.

Behind, there is an old fishman attached to a rock under the malevolent glare of a smoldering red orb. A pendent adorns his skeletal chest and a scepter lays by his side. This is the source of the spell.

I can taste it better now, and my outrage only grows.

Whoever designed this was an artist, of jeweler of constructs. The weave is subtle and well-made. The delicate work was designed to subdue and calm targets based on a specific pattern of target. Another caster attuned the spell to the old one below, and now it has grown bloated, festered, a perversion of its intended purpose.

I feel it then, the pull of fate.

Magic is a fickle thing. It can be pulled and controlled, but sometimes it wants things to move and it wants cages to break. I do not believe I have ever felt my aura move so fast, nor the world respond to it quite so easily. The power courses through my gauntlet and I let it take over. I

allow the will of the world to act through me and in return, I am rewarded. Power flows like a torrent. The light of the moon through the crater takes on a purple hue.

*“So is the chain by hand unbound*

*The teeth unclenched and trident found*

*The mark on your head I erase*

*No tears to shed, and hell to raise.”*

The orb cracks.

*“Tide caller.”*

The orb shatters, and the crimson radiance spreads slowly, kept whole for the inevitable swing of the pendulum. The old man before me awakes, fixing me with milky white eyes. A tongue darts to taste the air.

Syrrin joins me, her head held high and her emotions raw. She places a trembling hand on the old man’s jaw. They join their forehead and stay like this for a breath as the world stands on the edge. Then, Syrrin steps back and grabs the heavy scepter from the ground. The man closes his eyes.

*“Thank you,”* he says.

Syrrin caves his skull in.

She approaches the body as it is still wracked with tremor, and grabs the pendant. She put it on.

*“Syrrin is queen now,”* she tells me, *“Nirari gives life back. Now, give death. We follow. We will always answer the call.”*

*Supplicant.*

*“Bargain struck,”* I inform her with a smile. I know I show my fangs and eagerness, and she sees, and she does not care. Sheridan waits outside surrounded by intensely focused fish folks, two of them already bearing the dead sentries’ spears. He is unafraid and so they leave him alone.

The red mist of the orb spreads around them and their wounds close, not completely, but enough. There is a glint in their dark eyes when there was nothing before. They flick their tongues and taste blood. Syrrin stands before them and they await, but they do not cower. She opens her bag and rummages through it.



I turn to Sheridan and open my own to show the contents.

“Wow.”

I place a box of silver cartridges before him.

“Enchanted bullets with an extra shred spell. Help yourself and don’t skimp, because we are going to have a battle on our hands.”

I stare at him as he empties his two remaining revolvers, —one of them is missing— and loads the bullets with malicious intent.

“Tell me Sheridan, on a scale from one to ten, how angry are you?”

The solid ranger looks at me with grim determination.

“Lady, I’m about pushing an eleven right now.”

“You want in on the party?”

“You could not stop me from joining.”

“Alright,” I tell him. I remove the Needle rifle’s two parts from my bag and screw the barrel on, then I hand it to him as well as a belt of cartridges and a set of grenades.

“Is it my birthday already?”

“Sheridan,” I tell him with deadly seriousness, “I need to inform you of an important fact. We vampires never fully reveal ourselves with humans around because it would attract too much attention. We hide our powers and restrain ourselves.”

He waits for me to continue, not quite yet getting the point.

“There are no humans around,” I finish.

“Oh. You are going all out.”

“Yes. Yes, I am. You will have to go with it and not let yourself be distracted.”

“No worries, I got your back. And if you see one of those heathen’s heads spontaneously explode. Don’t be alarmed. It’s me.”

We nod to each other and he finishes gearing up.

I turn to Syrrin as two burly fishmen finish tying pieces of wood together in a strange pattern. It is like a staff with a reversed triangle on top. I wonder what purpose it will serve, until Syrrin removes a roll of fabric from her bag. She sticks it to the prepared support and I realize that it is, in fact, a flag.

Made from human skin. Pirate, to be precise.

It has my sigils on it, inscribed in an ink so dark it swallows the light.

The gesture is so touching and attentionate that I raise my hands to my chest in delight. Such a delicate attention! Nobody has ever done that for me yet!

Then Syrrin grabs the flag and lifts it on her shoulder. She hands me a massive conch.

*“Nirari starts Hunt. We follow. We kill. We feast.”*

A horn to blow to start the hunt? Aaaaaaa if she were a man and had a ring now I would be doomed, flat face or not.

I examine the nice piece as the fishmen gather around. I see a red radiance in the air where the backlash from the shattered orb suffuse their bodies. They are hounds waiting to be unleashed, though they do not know it yet.

The conch is no artefact, merely an ancient work of exquisite craftsmanship. Nothing says that I cannot use it for my own design, however.

I raise my gauntlet and call an illusion spell, in the same spirit of those I use to spread darkness or baiting lights, but this time I use it to make my voice louder. I need them to hear and feel. The tongue does not matter. The magic will carry my intent through crags and cages and murky water. I merely need to seize it. The world is still waiting and now, it pays attention too.

*“Hunters of the abyss!”*

The diffuse light reflects on dark eyes, like a constellation on the bleak background.

*“Sharpen your claws and lick your fangs. Smell the ichor in the air. Hear the call; cast off your chains. Tonight is the night when the dream ends. A symphony of violence, an orgy of bloodshed. The Great Hunt has come.”*

I blow the conch.

I did not plan for it, but the mournful sound is amplified by the magic as well. It rolls over the shanty, slams against its many walls, only to bounce back louder, stranger, until the echoes mix and a thousand angry hosts answer the call of the Hunt.

The other side answers.

Gates crash and warcries resonate throughout the unholy capital as masked, fallen men muster their own forces. Their strange cry fights back against the tide. It sounds like 'Otto', which I cannot get used to.

*"To the cages,"* I say.

We move fast. Already, fish folks overwhelm the few patrols present in the lower levels with savage fury, swarming them in great masses of teeth and claws. I barely slow down to slay those who still stand. Syrrin is by my side, waving the flag proudly and the awakened mass swells at our back in an unstoppable wave. We encounter our first pocket of resistance just as we approach the cages, with primals standing in a line with spears raised.

We crash into them and do not slow down. The violence of the slaughter is stupefying. Fish folks are stronger than humans, I find, and the defenders are slain and dismembered in moments. The ground beneath us turns red.

The cages lay in front of us, rattled by their irate occupants as the free fishmen fight guards in a chaotic hand-to-hand battle.

"Go open the cages, I'll take care of the reinforcement," I tell Sheridan.

"Got it," he replies. He twirls his guns in excitement.

He did not do that before. Am I changing him as well? Whatever.

The ranger sprints and shoots off the first rudimentary lock. The enchanted bullets demolish the rusted metal with ease. He opens the first door and a sea of folks adds their anger to the conflict. I direct the bulk of our troops to a large avenue leading up, to the upper floors of the blighted mess of tied shipwrecks. Fish folks crash into the buildings to our sides, ramming through the moldy wood as if it were paper.

We meet the first real opposition very quickly.

Farther into the town, we find a piazza leading to a strange altar of bones at the back, and it is filled with natives as we approach it. There are bowmen on the walls of the nearby edifices. Sheridan angles right without a word and somehow manages to convince a tall fishman warrior to give him a lift by scowling mightily.

We are close now, a wall of scaly flesh moving forward and up. The line of spears is just before us, at least five men deep and supported by taller warriors in wood armor and more elaborate masks. Sorcerers agitate them, ancient foci held high. We cannot stop. We must not stop.

I need to find something inspiring to say to start the charge, for posterity!

*“REND THE FLESH FROM THEIR BONES!”*

Ah, oops. At least, it worked.

The mass of fishmen sprints forward and I cast a spell I have never used in a combat situation before.

“Shield.”

Obsidian-tipped arrows slam harmlessly into my erected defences. They would never pierce Loth’s armor, but Syrrin is just behind me and I do not want her to die.

The fish folks bleed and die as arrows rain from above and from behind the enemy lines. They scream and hiss, but they do not stop. I crash into the line of spearmen and cut three in half with a single swing.

“Flay.”

A shaman screams when the skin is ripped from his muscles. I grab the mangled form as it falls and devour it as, all around me, the melee is joined. Smaller, more agile fishwomen climb the buildings to dislodge the archers, throwing their screaming forms into the blender below. Every two seconds, a thunderous bang erupts and an officer or an archer falls with their chests skewered and their heads blown off. Our onslaught is unstoppable. I barely have to intervene.

To their credit, the primals do not relent. More of their numbers join the fray every second, grabbing spears and rocks from the hands of the fallen and throwing themselves at us with wild abandon. Women jump on fishmen warriors to drag them down while their peers stab them both, and still, they sing their strange cry with unwavering faith. This is a battle of annihilation.

I drift across the battlefield, eliminating priority targets and supporting ailing fighters. I laugh and jeer as blood covers my armor in a thick red coat. It is inevitable.

And finally, we push them back. Their mass climbs the step to the altar and spreads left and right until I see it. On a platform of bone, atop a throne of skulls, sits a large form clad in black armor. The statue does not move as its sycophants die in droves.

*“Your god will not save you,”* I bellow.

Time to end this. I shall destroy that stupid effigy and break their spirits.

I move forward and sweep with my spear to cut the head off.

And then I am sent flying.

“Oof!”

Ow.

I am in the air.

Hmm.

What just happened?

I twist on myself and land feet first on a nearby ship deck. The planks crunch and groan under the impact, but they do not break and I can witness the unbelievable spectacle before me.

The statue moved.

The statue moved? No, impossible. It must be a golem then. I cannot feel its aura.

The imposing black armor walks forth ponderously and the fish folks waver. The primals now fight with an impossible frenzy, screaming ‘Otto!’ at the top of their lungs. All our fighters retreat in a confused mass.

All except for Syrrin.

She stands in her place, unmovable even as the fighters surrounding her try to drag her back. She slams her battle standard into the altar and glares up, defiant.

I extract myself from the planks and sprint forward as fast as I can manage it. The wind screams in my ear.

The golem lifts a heavy fist.

No you don’t.

“Shatter.”

I punch the descending limb with my own gloved gauntlet. The spell detonates on impact, sending shards of black metal everywhere. Syrrin still hasn’t moved.

*“Second round,”* I declare with a smile.

Finally.

A challenge!

I roar and kick the armor back, barely displacing it but Syrrin is smart and retreats now that I have returned. The combatants leave a ring for the construct and I to settle our contest. Blood flows on the ground, turning it crimson.

I dodge and move around my ponderous foe. I have fought large enemies before and close in on it instead of trying to create a distance, relentlessly attacking the weak points in the thick armor to get at the fragile articulations. Its plates are thick, but Sivaya’s spear tip is unnaturally sharp. I chip at the chinks piece by piece, never stopping, never getting hit. The golem has an impressive range of movements. It does not matter. I am faster, and I have sparred with the likes of Jimena, Nami, Torran. This thing does not even come close.

It finally happens. I manage to lock the blade in the weak point under the golem’s arm and push in. I feel a resistance. I feel it hit something.

The construct stumbles back on one knee. The fish folks roar in triumph, but the primals do not relent.

And then, the golem does something that surprises me.

Its two damaged gauntlets reach for the helmet, and remove it. Then, every piece of armor is patiently peeled off.

I stare in wonder at the man thus revealed.

I... do not understand?

How?

And then my gaze lowers to my spear and its tip. The deadly blade is covered with thick, black blood. The smell hits me an instant later.

The chest piece falls, revealing the lean and muscular form of a very tall man. He has white-blond hair that falls to his shoulders, a handsome face with a square jaw and two piercing blue eyes that open and blink in confusion.

Ah.

Fuck.

*"Who wakes Otto, Lord of the Erenwald?"*

Huh.

That... is unexpected.

Thoroughly unplanned for.

He must have masked his aura, or perhaps he was asleep?

The glare zeroes on me. His pale lips in a fanged smile.

*"A little Devourer."*

The man extends a right hand, materializing a soul weapon like a giant billhook. His aura explodes outwards and buffets us all. The primal assault renews with boundless intensity.

This is a lord.

A bloody lord in the middle of some deserted island. What in the world?

Ah dammit, I should have attacked when it was changing. I was too surprised to react and missed the window. Curses.

*"Let us dance, little Devourer."*

I could no more cut and run than I could face the sun. I must kill him, or at least, I will try. Nothing to it.

I grab my spear and charge.

Our blades meet and I back out to run to the side. We have a similar reach, but his weapon is definitely heavier and I have no interest in a fencing contest. I use the movements that Nami taught me to smack his blade aside for an opening, trying to get a hit in. He is fast, but not so fast that I cannot follow and his style feels designed to fell heavier foes, with movements meant to crush and disembowel in one strike. I prevent him from catching me in his rhythm with quick attacks that he must block. Black blood still seeps from below his right armpit. Sivaya's blade has a nasty bite.

First blood is mine when the hook slides over my shoulder armor to the man's surprise. His eyes widen and he dodges, but I still manage to trace a dark line across his chest.

*"Not bad, little Devourer. Let us see if your luck holds."*

The lord shortens his hold on the billhook and now fights more defensively. I know that one too. I move a bit farther and strike in more sweeping gestures, using my now superior range to harry him. I cannot pass his guard, but he cannot strike me either and I have time.

One mistake, and he manages to grab the tip in his hook. He slams the weapon down into the altar to crush the pole, snapping it out of my hand.

The bones give in, but the metal holds. It is made of an enchanted alloy of steel and silver that I reinforced to the brim. It could support the weight of a house.

I did not want my weapon broken again.

Lord Otto's face turns in surprise again and I lodge a throwing knife just below his eye, missing the organ by a hair. He smirks and throws the spear away.

*"Call!"*

The spear returns to my hand as if dragged by a magnet.

*"Your tricks annoy me, little Devourer."*

*"I like it when you whine,"* I retort, and the dance resumes.

The Erenwald lord pulls the dagger from his cheek and throws it back, but he clearly does not know how to use it and the strike goes wide. Our fight resumes, neither of us gaining the advantage, until he manages to hook my arm.

The blade bites into my armor, drawing blood. I turn on myself and kick the lord in the face before he can use it to his advantage and go in close. He disengages and I free myself in the same movement. During the fight, I let my instinct and my intuition guide me, avoiding tricky attacks and surprising bursts of speed at the last moment. I have to use every trick in the book, but we are evenly matched. Time is on my side.

Around us, the primals are dying. Without fear and without hesitation, but they are dying. The fish folks are still pushed forward by the spell and the years of pent-up rage. Sheridan methodically picks off their leaders and spellcasters, one shield-piercer at a time, leaving them disorganized.

I can see Otto's eyes wander.

He pushes me back with a mighty swing and turns to Syrrin.

*"Flay."*



I use the Likaeian terms. No holding back.

The spell hits the soul weapon and disperses, but some of it splashes over the vampire's pale chest and more wounds come to adorn it.

I am pressing him.

I am pressuring him, a lord!

The cold joy of battle fills my essence and my focus sharpens to an edge, because he still has a trump card and this is far from over. I will not let my guard down. I will harry him and take him down and I will not leave him a chance, because I am a **PATIENT HUNTER**.

The Erenwald changes once more. He attacks with very wide, very powerful swings and some of those kill my warriors. I merely place myself in a position to capitalize on the openings he provides. Syrrin has seen the way she was targeted and once more placed herself deeper into the formation. Those he slays are of no consequence to me and I punish every attack, even if he avoids mortal danger.

This lord is weakened. By what, I do not know, but he is no match for some of the fighters I have faced over the years. His wounds add and his mobility is affected. I see victory on the horizon. It will not be long now.

*"You are persistent."*

*"Give it up, old man. Playing god has made you soft."*

His traits twist with rage.

*"You have come here with a ship. It must be intact. I believe I will take it and return, now. See how much the world has changed."*

*"You had every opportunity to return before, you decrepit husk. You were either too passive or too scared."*

His fury warps his aura. I move low as the fateful incantation begins.

*"You overreach, pup. You still have much to learn. Magna Arqa."*

In the center of the corner, the light flashes purple. His aura spreads out and... solidifies. I do not have a better term for it. The closer to him and the more different the world tastes.

I jump out of the area of effect as soon as I can and watch, mesmerize, as the bodies by his feet wither.

Inside of the circle, both fish folks and primal writhe in horrific pain. Branches and brambles pierce their skins from the inside and they dry up in moments. Flowers and trees emerge from between the bones, only to perish a few seconds later. An eruption of nature explodes around my foe, life and death in a ceaseless dance fuelled by the blood of the fallen.

The wounds on the lord's body close. All my work, erased in moments.

The man sneers and steps forward, and the circle moves with him.

*"Back!"* I yell, *"back!"*

The fishmen do not need to understand my instructions to follow them. They flee from the altar as fast as they can, dragging the wounded with them. The primals care not and they die in droves.

*"I believe I will take your friends now,"* he says with a laugh.

I rush forth and stop at the edge of the circle. I am unaffected, thankfully. I charge and engage again, trying to keep him off.

I thrust and he... does not dodge. He barely redirects the blade low.

My spear digs deeply into his chest. To the hilt.

Only my instincts and training allow me to block the counter blow.

I scream in pain as the billhook hits my flank. Even Loth's armor cannot stop the edge of the soul weapon and the power behind it. I let inertia carry me off to minimize the damage. I still leave a trail of blood in the air.

Ow.

Ow.

This is going to hurt.

I crash into the throne. **PAIN.** it does hurt. I roll on my feet and channel the Ekon essence to stand up and pull a short blade from a sheath. The enchanted weapon stops the hook an instant before it can take off my head. Otto is not giving me a chance. His smile is obvious, as the ghastly wound he just accepted closes quickly enough for me to see it.

*"It is only a matter of time now,"* he adds, and kicks my intact side.

I crash into his followers.

I grab one of the few remaining leaders on my way down.

I stand back up and discard his freshly Devoured body. My own wounds close ever so slightly. Otto sees me and frowns.

*“Two can play that game.”*

*“This will not save you.”*

*“You will run out of pawns before I run out of fighters, fallen one.”*

I charge and pull the spear to me. My foe does not notice.

I let him hook the short blade.

I roar and push the blade down, burying it into the stone where I now stand. The hook is stopped for a moment, a fragment of a second, while Otto pulls.

I grab the spear and thrust. The lord’s eyes waver. I steal a gaze down.

A black, thorny root encircles his foot. This one is not on his side, and I recognize the plant as my own. I do not know how it appeared, but I am not going to complain.

*“But... how?”* he whispers.

I snarl in triumph, and yet despite the circumstances, he still manages to lodge the spear higher, missing his heart by a hair.

But Sivaya’s blade still has a trick.

“Shield breaker.”

The tip flashes blue as the fae’s magic takes hold. Otto’s face shows utter shock as the powerful enchantment slices his insides. I grunt, and pull. The blade slices through ribs as if it were butter.

I touch his heart.

The lord slackens instantly, eyes wide. The last of the flowers dry up and die.

I pick him up by the throat and move him closer. He is lost. He sees me. He knows.

Around us, the primals fall to their knees and the fish folks lay into them with wild abandon. The air is rich with the smell of blood and death, in a background of screeches and cries. The hunt is over, The quarry is captured.

I have won.

I can hardly believe it. I have faced a lord in battle and won. I care not about the circumstances or his strange state. He was a lord. He called the Magna Arqa. And now, he is at my mercy.

This will taste so sweet.

I bite down.

Ecstasy.

*My ship crashed on a small island after I killed most of the crews. Incompetent fools! That said, this island houses a population of natives I can bring under my dominion until the situation in Saxony calms down.*

*It has been two years since I arrived here. I managed to pacify a local tribe of these predatory mermen by giving a repellent to my minions, thus stopping the raids. Another ship has crashed here, beyond repair. I wonder if the strange magic around the island interferes with navigation?*

*It has been ten years since I have arrived here. The local simpletons built me a shrine, from which I oversee their pitiful civilization, Everyday is like the last, and I feel torpor overcoming me. I will allow myself to succumb to it and wake up later, when a way out has been found.*

I pull back as the body disintegrates between my hands. The power of a lord courses through my veins and, within my mental palace, the associated essence grows further. My victory makes me feel incredibly powerful. I have slain a lord in single combat! No trickery, no explosives, no unfortunate swine set on fire. Just me, and blades. I did not even shoot him! Truly, I have grown beyond my own expectations.

I stand up and watch lazily as the last of the primals are thrown to the ground and killed. Even the younger ones perish, something that I do not condone but that I will not stop either. This vengeance is not mine, and my own rules do not apply. I use the time to consider what I learnt.

So, Otto of the Erenwald was indeed lost. Not feral, but withdrawn into his zone of comfort like an old, timid man. Encrusted. Frozen in time. How can one let themselves go so? They must have had nothing left to look forward to.

I know from my sire's influence that slumber only lasts a decade at most, and only for ancient beings like himself for whom such an interval means very little. Otto's felt longer. Deeper. Meaningless. Nirari had settled to plan his return, while he had simply given up on any action. I will avoid this terrible fate.

I am not too worried.

My failings are many, but inaction and melancholy have never been one of them.

Syrrin comes to stand next to me as the orgy of blood finishes and the victorious hunters gorge themselves on the flesh of the vanquished. Sheridan joins us with a clear air of distaste. A tall and powerful fishman warrior turns to confront him. I stop myself from hissing. The proud ranger turns to the massive creature. The barrel of his gun taps against the monster's chest.

"Try me," he states without an ounce of fear.

The fishman tastes the air with his tongue. He slithers back with respect but not without fear.

"You always show me the weirdest shit," he tells me when we are reunited.

"Language."

"Oh, fuck off."

A liver slides at our feet. Syrrin picks it up and gobbles it in one gulp.

"You may have a point there," I concede, "we should move out. I am curious to see that our little godling is up to."

"Breathing, I hope. What about Champignac? He's a dead man walking if I have any say in this."

"He was a dead man walking the moment he decided to double-cross us and the Consortium. He is your prey."

"What are the chances that he convinces Ozenne that we are all dead, and that he should leave?"

"Less than zero?"

Sheridan raises a dubious eyebrow.

"Oh you of little faith, who cast the spell to bring us here safely?"

"Ooooh, we need you to leave as well!"

“Yes,” I drily reply, “I am glad to see that my presence is appreciated. Enough talk. The main storyline awaits.”

“Excellent, let’s go.”

“One last thing, Sheridan.”

“Yes?”

“Give me back my rifle. Thank you.”

I will have to build him one soon.

Syrrin declines to accompany us. She has much to do to save her tribe, but she gives me a complement of seven muscular old fishmen who understand Akkad well enough to take orders. They guide us to yet another maze of corridors until we go sharply up.

“I recognize this place,” Sheridan informs me, “we came through here the first time.”

We pass by a tomb, where I am told that the dragon tooth had been. The powerful sword is now in the hands of the villainous Frenchman. I will have to make sure that it is properly retrieved.

We reach a promontory overlooking the forest. I raise my gauntlet and start a simple tracking spell, searching for the enchantment on my revolver which Sheridan so generously lent to the poor ingenué.

We follow the spell for only ten minutes when we hear a discharge. I press onward, and arrive in a clearing.

Miranda is on the ground, her dress stained with mud and her lush hair in disarray. She holds the borrowed revolver in two hands and stares, glassy eyed, at the body at her feet.

I recognize one of the disposable... one of the helpers we hired for the expedition. Not only is the rogue villain dishonest, but his dishonesty is also contagious! Scandalous.

And at her back, the second helper approaches with fury in his eyes, knife held high.

This is it, is it not? The reason why the Bingles always end up gravitating around me for some of their more defining stories. Cecil's last adventure and his marriage. His son's loss of innocence. Miranda's confrontation with the world as it is. Fate, or laughing gods, keep sending them my way and I keep saving them because, each time, I am given a choice.

Right now, I get to decide whether she lives or dies. Will her story continue, or will it end here, in the embrace of that cursed island.

I keep getting hassled because my answer has always been to save them.

I find the Bingles annoying and their endless shenanigans grate my patience, and yet, and the end of the day, stories are what define us as a species: the ability to lie. Nations are lies. Honor is a lie. They are intellectual constructs with no root in the real world, and yet those lies have propelled ships across the ocean deep and sent hundreds of thousands to their death. The lies we tell each other and believe in are just important as the fabric we wear or the food the mortals eat, perhaps more so. The godlings of adventure are that principle pushed to its limit. Stories that touch the world directly, instead of through our hands.

And I have always loved a good story.

I pull the trigger and the helper collapses, hands on his bleeding leg. Miranda shudders with fright, and yelps when she spots me.

"Miss Delaney? Mr Sheridan! Oh, it is so good to see you! I thought you dead! But how! And what are those creatures around you?"

"Do not concern yourself with them," I tell the novice adventurer as my cadre drags the screaming helper back for the larder, "they will not hurt you. They obey me."

Her eyes fill with tears as the events of the day quickly catch up to her exhausted psyche.

"But why..."

"Because they are smart, and you are not, little Bingle."

"But... those are monsters!"

Her eyes trail on my blood-soaked armor. I grab her chin in a light hand.

"Oh, my dear. If you had paid attention, you would have found that there were monsters here..."

I show her my fangs.

"From the very beginning."

I smirk when she screams, and wait as she stares with disbelief. To her credit, she does not faint. Her pretty visage simply turns hollow.

“All my life I always thought... But those were real. I feel so stupid now, I do not know what to think anymore. Is science missing the point?”

That annoys me.

“Science is a method, little one, not a religion. Who says you cannot take a rigorous and logical approach to monsters?”

She blinks.

“You are right, of course. Completely right.”

Sheridan helps her up. She thanks him profusely for the firearm and tries to return it. My Vassal turns to me with a question in his eyes.

I grab the hilt of the gun and close Miranda’s delicate hand on its cold, smooth surface.

“Keep it, my dear. I have a feeling that you will have a need for it in the future.

#### Deck of the *Corbeau*, past midnight.

I lean against the railing in my armor and admire the show.

“It is a horrible tragedy, captain, but there was truly nothing I could have done. They fell prey to terrible, bloodthirsty monsters. I had to flee for my own sake to bring you the tale of their demise,” Champignac claims as he climbs the gangplank. He has conveniently scruffy hair and a very tiny cut on his face, which lends credence to his tale.

His gaze sweeps the deck and narrows with worry before the sailors’ judgemental expressions. He stops in his tracks when he spots us.



Miranda crosses her arm in what must be a terrible display of raging emotions for her. Sheridan whistles as he checks the noose he prepared, and tied to the mast. He then steps down from the barrel and lowers his glare at the paling traitor.

Ozenne tilts his head in consideration.

“You see, Monsieur Champignac, those two have a much different story to tell, and the evidence overwhelmingly favors their version,” he finishes calmly.

“I demand to be judged before a tribunal, according to international laws,” the treacherous lout demands with a trembling voice.

“I wish I could accede to your demands, monsieur. Alas, it is a horrible tragedy, sir, but there is truly nothing I can do. You fell prey to a terrible, bloodthirsty monster. I shall have to decline for my own sake, to bring others the tale of your demise. Good day, sir.”

Sheridan steps forward and socks the man in the jaw, then drags the victim behind himself like a bear bringing an elk home. I let my Vassal handle his prey as he sees fit. This vengeance is his.

After Champignac is hanged, I am approached by Ozenne as I enjoy the lights now adorning several cavern entrances, far into the distance.

“It appears that there was indeed a traitor,” the daring captain comments in a deceptively light tone.

“As we both expected,” I remark ruefully.

“And that traitor happened to be the Frenchman,” captain Ozenne continues.

“So it would seem,” I admit between gritted teeth.

Silence descends upon the ship. I sigh deeply, and withdraw a small wallet from my backpack. I grab a ten pounds note which I hand to the smiling mortal.

“A pleasure doing business with you, milady. Until we bet again.”

“You do not have to be so smug about it.”

“On the contrary, milady, I believe I do. For mankind. I bid you goodnight.”

The Watcher preserve me from sassy mortals.

