

The strings of fate tease me once more, sneaking upon me one fine summer night. I am more sensitive to them so long as I am in my domain, or the lesser version of a Dvor domain in any case. I can feel her when she crosses the boundary, making her way to IGL's front door without hiding. It has to be a decoy.

In a way, it was inevitable that we would meet again.

I feel a flicker in her form once she enters the range of my Magna Arqa. I remotely open the door to what has to be a simulacrum and enjoy the hesitation in her step. She stops and speaks in a low voice.

"I request your hospitality for the night, and all rights it implies in spirit."

In answer, I use a small root to write in the wet mud near the entrance.

Only if you face me in person.

The simulacrum chuckles and suddenly, the real person jumps down from a nearby roof. She moves between guards to the front door, then makes her way to the room after I call reception to let her through. I can hear her steps. I can smell the barest hint of perfume, floral, with a hint of amber. I cannot, however, feel her aura. It is close to me, even through the sphere of perception I have gained.

Very impressive.

She comes in and closes the door behind her. I look. She has not changed at all, still gorgeous and deadly with wavy black hair, brown, soft eyes and a body poets would write about. I would bet some did.

"Good evening to you, Semiramis," I greet.

The ancient queen of Babylon and Nirari's mommy dearest smiles in a perfunctory way, her eyes sweeping over the room and stopping at every hidden defense.

"Please, take a seat," I graciously offer.

"Thank you. I must admit that I miss speaking in the tongue of my people. Only my son's heirs have maintained a proper diction."

"And to what do I owe the pleasure?"

A touch of annoyance seeps through the cracks of her facade. It takes only an instant, yet I see it clearly before she restores her composure.

"Back home we would talk and drink before getting to serious affairs, or 'business' as you modern ones tend to say."

“That is between friends. In our latest and only encounter, you tried to kill me three times through semantics and technicalities.”

“You speak the truth,” she freely admits, “then I will speak plainly. I am here to forge an alliance.”

Ah.

That is unexpected.

I thought I would have to contact her myself.

“I assume you want help with your ascension.”

“You could not help me if I personally taught you for three decades. I do not need assistance with magic. I have all I need. I must have protection during the final ritual.”

I lean forward.

“Do elaborate.”

Once again, annoyance pierces through the veil of polite detachment. Semiramis has interacted with our kind throughout the years, though mostly with Rosenthal and her brood. Isaac mentioned the woman only valued power and the arcane arts. I have gathered my power fast, and my knowledge of arcane is merely functional as its more subtle aspects escape me. I have kept the approach of an engineer while she is an artist. In fact, she is the artist.

“My warrens are no longer my own,” she says. “Even now, my son’s minions course its length in a brute force attempt to understand its function. I have lost the last effective tool I had to waylay him. The ritual I will conduct requires time, focus, and it will be felt across the planet by anyone with even a smidgen of talent. My little Adad will not fail to detect it. He will come for me and I need someone to stop him.”

She stands and paces, her voice growing more animated.

“It will take time to complete my preparations, yes, a lot of time still. Several key locations must be seeded. The undead must be driven away from them.”

“The undead?” I interrupt. *“From the wasted world?”*

“Them, yes. They showed me the proper way to drain energy, though their methods were crude, brutish, and destructive.”

“I will not help you slay the world!” I say.

Semiramis dismisses my concerns with a wave.

“Those morons had no idea what they were doing. They killed their planet through a thousand cuts, biting at the life force small morsel by tiny bite until it bled out in the void, perishing from the compounded loss. No. A single world contains more life force than any creature can contain by an astronomical amount, and it recovers. My harvest will be less than the sting of a single mosquito, but it must be done equally across the globe, or both it and I will suffer. I need more time. I also need... an army. One I cannot gather by myself.”

“You know much about the dead ones’ past and methods.”

“Of course, I do. Have you not guessed why?”

And I have. I have guessed why. All the pieces were here for me to see. She mentioned finding knowledge in a book coming from another world. She found knowledge on how to ascend, which is what the skeleton mages have technically done. I also remember visiting her abandoned workshop during that very brief period in captivity, down south during the American-Mexican war. The tools and tables had been slightly too low, the measurements slightly off.

Semiramis was using dead world citizens. She has been in contact with them since before she even aligned the spheres, bringing our worlds closer.

“Give me one reason why I should help you,” I tell her.

“I shall grant you two. First, I will leave this world immediately upon ascending. I shall not return. I give you my word.”

“You would simply leave?”

“This miserable ball of mud has held me back for far too long!” she spits with more venom than I expected. *“I have no equal here. Do you know how boring and frustrating it is to live in a place without peers? I know there are other practitioners of the arcane arts out there whose skill and experience surpass my own. I will find them. You are free to keep this inflexible old crusted world to yourself. I wish you all the best with it.”*

“And the second?” I ask.

“The second? Ah, yes. I will take my son with me.”

“You will remove Nirari?” I ask, because I require confirmation.

“That is correct. You and your friends will have the planet to yourselves without ancient beings to hold you back. A world at your disposal. Help me and you will solve both of your largest concerns.”

It is indeed tempting.

“I will require a carefully worded contract in writing.”

“Yes, yes, you shopkeeper, you estate louse, yes. I will submit to your barbaric ways.”

She sighs.

“Back in my days, a queen’s word was enough.”

I resist the urge to call her a queen of nothing, but I control myself. I did offer her the hospitality.

“Why me?” I finally ask. *“There are other factions out there.”*

“Foolish girl, you know why. Others may face your sire, but they do not have any hope of winning. Only you can stand before him without being swept aside. Do not waste our time with silliness. We are both busy. Ah, time, so plentiful yet so easily spent. Where were we?”

“Contract.”

“Find your Rosenthal pet and let us get this over with.”

The Dalton’s Revenge approaches its final destination, the sun-colored tip of the Eiffel tower, even now covered in the glittering lights of thousands of electric bulbs. Below us, Paris sprawls with the illuminated and fantastic buildings of the ‘Exposition Universelle’. The year is nineteen hundred.

I stand on the ship’s deck during the last maneuver under the vigilant gaze of the Baboeuf, France’s Minotaure class heavy cruiser. This vessel can pack a punch. I would know. I worked on the plans.

My ship moors without difficulty. Tonight, we are tame and innocent, weapons tucked, guns hidden. I even forfeited the tricorns for more traditional hats and helmets. Slowly, carefully, men in the blue and red of the French army attach a bridge to our lower hatch. I am the first to lower myself in the protected tunnel, though the wind still batters at my dress. My steps carry me into the glass-covered observatory of the third floor, the thick panes covered with a criss-crossing field of gold-painted steel. The entire structure forfeited stone and wood to flaunt modernity. With the warship domineering the sky, it represents one more boast that the national pavilions below will surely match to the best of their ability. The Exposition Universelle is the vitrine of the world and the major powers will stop at nothing to impress upon their visitors that, though they tread on French soil, there are mighty industries and flourishing arts beyond the alps, the channel, or the Atlantic. I cannot wait to see this all.

I smile to the welcoming party, but mostly I smile at Torran. He looks handsome in a modern gray suit that marries his muscular form, his gray hair pulled back to show a handsome face. His steely gaze softens when it meets mine. For a moment, only he exists, but reality is quick to reassert itself. An unusual group has gathered around us. Besides a majordomo of sorts, I count an officer and a few soldiers armed with swords and sheathed revolvers including a severe lad with a cross on full display, his hands stained with paint. An artist! And a mage, according to his aura. I also notice a photographer with his cumbersome contraption already deployed on a voluminous tripod, and a few gruff handymen with the bearing of infantrymen. The soldiers do look fine in their navy and red uniforms under kepis decorated with gold threads. I appreciate the visuals. Unfortunately, I predict that they will come with some degree of frustration.

“Bonsoir, mademoiselle,” the officer greets. “You are Ariane Nirari, I presume?”

He is quite young, handsome as well, which does not surprise me. As first impressions go, one may impress or one may seduce. Apparently, the person in charge selected option two. I look at his pencil-thin brown mustache and consider that he would look better with a beard as well.

I also smile at the deliberate jab. The French have grown defiant of nobility and titles since their more radical members have taken power, following the Commune. They have settled down without rolled heads this time, but there remains a resentment of particles they cannot quite let go of.

“Ariane of the Nirari, as my traveling documents state,” I reply in French.

This time, I am much more confident that my accent does not sound like I was raised in a barn by a particularly rustic cow. The Watcher knows I have spent enough time working on my pronunciation. I hand him a perfectly valid and legal identification paper which he carefully inspects before handing it back to me.

“Bienvenue à Paris. If you will follow us down?”

“A moment, please,” the photographer interrupts. “My name is Henry Duplessis with Le Parisien newspaper. I must take a photograph of all the guests, if that is fine with you? This way, please.”

Ah, so that is how it is. If that gentleman is a journalist, I am willing to drink tepid, boiled coffee made with used grounds. His ramrod straight back and calloused hands betrays his military origins. The French must know of vampires, particularly because their neighbor across the Rhine employ them semi-officially. Mysterious, rich, and young-looking individuals will be suspected now. The photographer's purpose will be to identify me as a denizen of the night because of the blurry image he will eventually develop, then the dour soldier wearing a cross will paint me so that my likeness is kept in the archive for later recognition. Very daring of them, to create a file on us, especially considering that the Mask vampires certainly have access to it. Perhaps they consider it a spare depository, or a free and freely accessible archive. A little rude, I would say. Nevertheless, I nod and step in front of the tripod holding a state of the art camera and focus on the ring on my finger.

We have long since perfected the art of the masquerade ring. At first, our attempts led to unnatural pictures with wrong angles and dubious lighting, but we have refined the process since then to include many variables. Essentially, the ring will add a layer of light slightly below skin level so that a picture of us will fail to hold onto our real form, but will latch on the illusion and process it. There are limits, of course. The complexity of the adjustments means that only a single, stored facial expression can be used. It also requires the vampire to focus the ring on the camera's aperture.

A click, a flash, the unpleasant smell of smoke. The crew unloads my and their personal effects near the lift while we wait.

I use the barest hint of Magna Arqa to shred the picture inside of the camera itself. A matter of principle. They will see the ravaged remains with hints of unblurred images and wonder.

"Torran dear," I greet in Hochdeutsch. "Such a pleasure to see you again."

The soldiers frown and glare as I close the distance between us. Whatever goodwill I gained by speaking French has melted like snow under the sun when I demonstrated an equal mastery of Goethe's tongue. The two nations are in a constant state of tension over Alsace, and only ever a spark away from war, I believe. With a sweep of my hand, coasting under that deep-seated resentment, I grab their minds and muddle my appearance in their recollection with the lightest of touch, so that they will struggle to remember more than a vague impression of me. I do not, of course, touch the man wearing a cross. It would not do to bring an ominous blue light to our current golden arrangement.

No, for him, I use another method.

I use Vanheim essence to change my appearance, hooking my nose and changing a few other details. My eyes tilt, giving me a less conventionally attractive appearance yet also a more striking one. I see the man inspect me with intense care from the corner of my eyes as I greet my lover.

"Torran, dear. It is so good to see you."

"My star. I owe you for your gift, the armor performed wonderfully. Truly, fae craftsmanship is impressive."

While it is the first time since the prison break that I visit Europe, Torran has made use of flying ship to visit me on occasion, and I have already gifted him his fae equipment, a stone armor that merges with his Magna Arqa and can even imitate its effects to a degree when he fights outside of his domain. It appears the addition to his arsenal has made him even more formidable.

"Oh yes. I heard you were involved in a little kerfuffle?"

"Just a small incident to decide the future of the Austrian Empire, nothing too dramatic. I won, of course. Me, and a few others."

"You know what I love with you? You are so humble."

“I thought it was how I played the organ?”

“Torran!” I reproach without meaning it.

Ah, he must be as pleased as I am. I kiss him chastely and use this brief window to turn my traits into a more Scandinavian version of myself. Torran has noticed my little game, if his smirk is any indication. As for our would-be illustrator, his shock is so great that I could shove an entire egg down his throat without touching teeth. Or perhaps it is outrage. That is quite fine. The true issue is not with intelligence officers having access to my likeness, though it chafes. Father used to say that a woman’s beauty is not just her own, when I would grow tired of the gazes of my suitors.

Especially when they were staring at my backside.

No, the issue is not the ownership of my image. The issue is that this likeness would be captured under false pretense. Mortals need to be taught that playing a game of deceit with a vampire is a losing proposition. Either they are honest, and they are part of the game, a game that has run for a long time and known many competitors, most of whom are dead.

With any attempt at identifying me compromised and my baggage inside of the iron cage that will carry us down, the time has come to depart. An orderly shuts down the metal bar, then we are off and aiming down. I watch Paris get closer, hand held in Torran’s own. They are quite large and touching them makes me feel relaxed. We do not speak for now because there are too many people observing us, which irritates me.

“We have no record of a previous visit,” the officer tells me suddenly, his head leaned forward to look at me from beyond the vast expanse of Torran’s chest.

“Is this your first time here?” he asks with an inquisitive smile.

I feel Torran tense, so I squeeze his fingers to let him know I am fine. He gnashes his teeth yet relents.

“I have come before, by train. To visit a museum,” I reply.

“Is that so? Which one?”

“Oh, a private collection of impressionist artists.”

“When was it?”

“A few years ago. I even purchased a few.”

The man leans even more.

“Would you have anything to declare?”

This time I do not hold Torran back when he replies.

“The Fraulein is a little weary from her travel,” he replies in passable French tinged with a powerful Prussian accent. “Perhaps all those questions can wait for tomorrow.”

“Certainly. Around breakfast?”

Torran smiles.

The man smiles.

Torran draws the soldier’s saber from its sheath and twists it like a pretzel, showing an incredible amount of control since the steel does not, in fact, break. In the confines of the elevator, the shriek of metal is positively atrocious.

“I would love to have you for breakfast,” Torran pleasantly agrees.

I can feel his rage bubble under the surface, which I find so very endearing. On the other hand, they ruined our reunion with negative emotions and teased us without... knowing their place. Yes. This is the proper term. Most humans are not prey, but when they are, they should not act so rashly. We can tolerate games but not blatant disrespect.

It appears I need to drive the point home.

“Je vous trouve très grossiers,” I say, informing the soldiers I find them rude.

We are approaching the first floor. I already feel the engine linked to the left and decide to act. Using a root, I push the shut down lever and the cage in which we are slows down. Below us, the operators watch the tendril lock the mechanism tight.

In the awkward silence above, the majordomo frowns and looks at the buttons. I make several tendrils appear in an effort of will and drag the cabin to the first floor’s landing link by link, inch by inch.

The soldiers gasp when thorny branches push the doors open. Nevertheless, they do not move. A wise choice.

A few civilians turn to watch us. The first floor is bathed in the glow of electric lamps. Families watch maps showing the Parisian landmarks visible from here with an accent placed on the Exposition’s main attraction all the way to the Seine and the bridge Alexandre III. I take a few steps forward and clap, once.

The susurrus of conversations dies down. I have grabbed the mind of every mortal present, around fifty, in a single second. Children hang from their mothers’ arms while gentlemen remove their hats, slack-jawed. Hundreds of glassy eyes focus on me.

“Mesdames et messieurs,” I greet in French, “if you would give us five minutes, please?”

Without a word, they file out until we are left alone in the well-lit room. I drop all pretense and twist at maximum speed, then slowly form a ‘come hither’ gesture with my fingers. I am wearing my birthday gift gauntlet which looks like a normal glove. The soldiers are picked by the scruff by an invisible hand one by one and carried in a line amidst curses and imprecations. The cross-wearing man’s flabbergasted expression when his prayer fails to break the spell is simply delicious.

Torran walks by my side and manifests his humongous zwei-hander, letting the massive blade casually rest on his shoulder.

The temperature until their breaths leave little puffs of mist in front of them, despite the mild summer night. I let roots crawl on the edge of the room, thorns scraping grooves into the polished marble. Some try to swivel their heads to spot the unseen terror but I do not let them.

They smell like terror.

“There is a drive among mortals that I do not quite understand. The very same that pushes you to investigate that strange noise in your backyard, or that glint in the tunnel. You walk up to your ceiling bearing a lantern and asking: ‘is someone there’? You feel the overwhelming need to follow the giant tracks to find what is at the end and I always, always wonder...”

I step next to the officer and lower him until our eyes are level. At the same time, I remove the illusion I always maintain over my eyes. His own brown orbs stare in the depth of the Watcher’s gaze, all purple sclera, iris, and yellow slanted pupil.

“When you do find what you seek, what will you do? Well, mortal. Your suspicions are confirmed. Now, what?”

“I will... tell the Babeuf... to fire on you.”

Ah, a nice bluff, but it is a bluff. And like all bluff, it must be called. I smirk and grab one of my trunks from the elevator and approach the mage painter soldier believer, as the cross glows with some strength. I take out a communication mirror and offer it.

He takes it. I release him, sending him to the ground with one more curse. He stands back up with all haste.

“Go ahead. Call it,” I say.

The painter observes the officer and the officer, the painter, wondering which one will ask a warship to open fire on a civilian-filled landmark in the middle of Paris with the risk of sending hundreds of tons of screaming metal on the top of the champs-de-mars revelers.

“So, which one of you wants to annihilate his career for no gain whatsoever? Hmm?”

An awkward silence follows. Outside, the civilians watch the city through conveniently placed telescopes while complaining about the need to leave.

“I thought not. Well, I believe a little lasting reminder would help drive the lesson home. Now, what shall I do with you.”

Some of the men whimper in fear while others feel more resigned. Only the officer boils with impotent rage.

“You are about to commit a grave mistake. To threaten us is one thing, but to hurt a soldier...”

“Who said anything about hurting?” I ask.

When the lift resumes its journey, it does so with a laughing Torran at my side, as well as a dozen torn uniforms. I shall keep the French officer’s one and knit it back together for Jimena, whose collection of male uniforms only ever expands.

We leave the Eiffel tower without issue but we do find another reception committee waiting downstairs. I recognize the thin man with the air of a musketeer as well as his bear-like, bearded friend, coarse hair visible through his thin shirt.

“Cedric, Baltazar, gentlemen, it is good to see you.”

“And a pleasure as well for us,” Cedric replies, “since we once again meet without bloodshed.”

“The first time we came across each other, a terrible misunderstanding led to my arrest. I did give them hell before I was taken, however.”

“She smashed my head in,” Cedric helpfully says.

“She left me alone so I could help him and our other friend Ingalles, who is regrettably tied up on the Nile smoothing things out, as it were. We were sent to escort you and open whatever doors need opened without having to.. ah..”

His gaze travels up.

“Knock.”

“We would love to start with the Exposition, actually,” Torran says, anticipating my desires.

“Wonderful. Most of the buildings are staff and faker than a Montmartre prostitute, but the national pavilions are fantastic!”

“And the magical and technological innovations. You have an interest in technology, yes?”

We move on at a sedate pace.

“The Nile, you say? Could it be related to the Fashoda incident?” I ask.

I am referring to a war scare between France and the United Kingdom over who would add Sudan to their long lists of colonial conquests. The English won the diplomatic standoff, having brought considerably more troops.

“Yes. It would not do to have the two most powerful armies in our collection face each other off. We would very much prefer for them both to aim their efforts at the German empire, since the Brotherhood and Eneru have resolved their differences.”

“At the tip of a sword, but yes,” Torran helpfully agrees.

“We predict that the next war will be a large one, comparatively, although we expected it to have already happened,” Cedric says.

“Yes, thirty years and my compatriots have yet to reclaim Alsace! They must not be feeling very confident. An entire generation has grown fed on vengeance and... nothing yet? Most peculiar.”

“Do not be too hasty,” I warn.

“Oh, I know. Your civil war was bloody and that was even before modern weapons and magic came into play. Yet the war will happen sooner or later. We must prepare for it.”

“Since vampires fight for the Kaizer, Dominique will no doubt have us face them. It means we will take to the field, like back in the days. Oh, the tales those lords and ladies recount. Cavalry charges! Sieges!”

“It is said Bertrand destroyed a fortress gate by himself, once. Chopped it down with his axe!”

“Much less chances of that with star forts,” Torra observes.

“Spoilsport!”

We chuckle and I try to remember that when we face each other again, at the end, I will not have to kill them. Bertrand offered his service to Nirari for a single battle and there is only one my sire will fight at full strength. Ah, well.

“Ah, one more thing. By agreement, you are protected from Knight interference, but that is only valid for the official duration of your stay and within the walls of Paris, I’m afraid.”

“Do you mean they could attack the Dalton’s Revenge?” I asked, a bit outraged Mask would not extend its protection until I am at least over the ocean.

“Yes, although you know how they are, old fashioned and everything. Unless Octave has learnt how to fly...”

“They could commandeer a warship...” I grumble.

“And you would absolutely love it, my star,” Torran teases.

Ah, he knows me so well. My ship will be fine for now, but that might change in the future. Many engineering teams are working on a new kind of flying contraption that does not rely on magic: monoplaces, flimsy things. Like those steerable road locomotives I am investing in. Ah, well, we shall see.

The visit is as pleasant as it is uneventful. The colonial pavilions are interesting in themselves, but the Moroccan and Chinese pavilions display architectures so unfamiliar and strange that I feel a powerful drive to go there and explore. I walk on an electric carpet that carries me forward and see a massive telescope. We have a delightful time scaring people livid in the palace of mirrors, then ride the great wheel which grants Torran and I a moment of romantic intimacy.

By the time we are done, dawn is not too far away, and I have fulfilled my primary purpose which was, essentially, to take a vacation, yet a certain sense of worry lingers. In six months, I will start living through my third century. Change is all around us, a change that grows ever faster. I am not so much concerned about getting left behind as I am about it going the wrong direction. My homeland may enjoy its isolationist privileges, but here in Europe, they think only of the next war. With the size of the concerned empire and the network of alliances forming around us, I fear that this war and the next may reach levels of destruction the world has never seen before. I have to make sure it never happens.