

“Is it her? She doesn’t look like much.”

“What did you expect? A tail? Bat wings?”

The young guard crossed his arms defensively. Hazel was against ribbing but this time, the little twat had it coming.

“Shut up you two. Vampires have excellent hearing,” she said in a low voice.

Joel sulked in silence while the older man, Willis, gave her an irate glare. She widened her eyes in the universal ‘are you going to say something’ message and he relented. It chafed Willis to be under her because he, too, had fought at Black Harbor. That made him a veteran of the scourge war. It just didn’t make him a good leader.

He still hadn’t got it.

Hazel held her gaze for another second. Willis was getting to be a pain in her arse but so long as he remained professional, she wouldn’t act. Rules were in her favor. Politics was not.

Fucking politics.

“Roth, stop scratching your ass, Jesus.”

The hairy soldier jumped and straightened. His uniform stretched over a small potbelly that had never disappeared even during the lean months of the war. Poor sod was not the brightest but he was trying. The last member of the fireteam, Moise, stood straight as a rod in perfect silence, every brass button shining on his impeccable vest. He was holding a repeater polished to a shine and looked straight ahead instead of gawping at the newcomer. Like her, he didn’t have politics on his side, and so he made sure that he had everything else.

The vampire slowly made her way to Avalon’s ‘Spider’ gate, looking incongruous with her exquisite lavender dress against the background of ancient forest. The evening wear was the sort of custom work that cost an arm and leg. Hazel had to admit that she was a little bit envious before reminding herself that this was a monster. She would not envy monsters, or associate any sort of normal emotions with them. That’s how they got you.

“Welcome to Avalon, ma’am. Name’s Hazel Zellik. My fireteam and I are charged with your safety. Our first task is to escort you through the compound and to the council room, where the archmages are waiting. Are you ready to depart?”

There, all prime and proper.

The vampire nodded once. Her hair was held high in a complicated hairdo. It was slightly asymmetrical as if readjusted in a hurry.

There was a gash on the carriage, she realized. Hazel frowned.

“Something happened, ma’am?”

“Nothing to concern yourself over, corporal. Please lead on.”

Hazel removed the concern from her face. She had a mission and she would get it done. Let the brass worry about the rest.

“This way,” she said.

Her four squad mates closed around her and the vampire, as if she needed any sort of protection. Hazel took out her key from her uniform vest and inserted it in the metal gate’s lock. Something shone briefly. She knew that they were wards and alarms though how it worked was beyond her. Some magical thingamabobs. The key turned once more with the clank of released mechanisms before the imposing steel slab rotated on well-oiled hinges with nary a sound. They moved on. Hazel took a last look behind at the carriage they had left. A single lantern shone at the edge of the Spiderwood like a candle at the edge of a nightmare. She had to remind herself that the woods were just old and gnarled and that the true monster stood by her side, looking all proper and smelling vaguely of jasmine.

“Oh, I forgot. Do you have any luggage?” Hazel asked as an afterthought. Damn, did she already fuck up?

“I have what I need with me. The rest will be delivered through the front door.”

The vampire daintily reached into a recess in her skirt and pulled out a black caster glove with nasty obsidian knuckles, because of course that thing would have pockets. She put it on in one smooth move, without looking, and fastened the clasps with slow and precise movements. There was nothing too predatory yet. She was slow and graceful. The only weird thing was how she was not looking around and yet still managed to evade the occasional puddle of mud. Hazel felt like she didn’t depend on sight that much and that was just a tad off putting. Little things, really.

The path from the Spider gate first led them through a thicket of oaks, a remnant from when that place was just untamed wilderness. They emerged on the other side through peripheral barracks meant for scouts returning past midnight. The academy was further away. That late, no one was out except the odd patrol. Hazel shivered in the fall air, even if it wasn’t that cold yet. A gust of wind rustled the leaves until she finally found the silence abhorrent. Empty. The vampire was just by her side and suddenly it didn’t feel like such a good idea to imagine what she, or it, could do. The memory of Black Harbor came back, unbidden. Steel-clad forms cleaving through huge drones with practiced ease. A shower of bone and ichor with every strike. She had tried to reload but her old rifle was so hot that it had burned her fingertips. It had not mattered. None of the drones had made it through. Hazel’s gaze landed on the woman’s pale fingers and caught a hint of onyx claw. Her breath hitched in her throat and perspiration made her back wet. She shivered again.

The vampire sniffed the air.

“So, will you be staying at the inn?” Hazel asked. Her voice had only wavered a little bit.

“No. That place is not secured. I have made... other arrangements.”

“I’m sure that the Black Dog could accommodate.”

“I have an understanding with his predecessor. Mr. Hopkins.”

No one said a word though she harbored no doubt that they were all as curious as she was. There were rumors. Fuck it, she wanted to know.

“Is it true that you two faced each other in combat?”

“Traps, mostly. Hopkins is far too cunning to attack one of us directly. He almost gave me a fright.”

There was amusement in the vampire’s voice and Hazel felt a smile on her lips. She killed it immediately.

“Ah, thank you for indulging me,” she continued. That was probably the polite thing to say.

“Not to worry. Since we started talking, you smell less of fear, which is desirable. And so does our escort.”

Hazel almost froze in her tracks. An escort? But then someone swore from behind a trunk thirty paces to her right and she lifted her rifle. Her barrel was stopped by the unyielding grip of the vampire.

“None of that now. They are also White Cabal.”

“I didn’t know...”

For some reason, that pissed her off. Didn’t they trust her? Why didn’t they tell her anything if they were going to send nannies to watch every last step?

She grit her teeth but she kept going. There was nothing to do.

“Not like you need any more protection,” she said out loud this time.

“You are not protecting me,” the vampire stated.

“Then what are we protecting?”

“The peace.”

More cryptic bullshit, just what Hazel needed. There was not much to do except moving on. Her squad soon arrived at the expanse of kept grass surrounding the White Cabal’s political heart.

The more Hazel looked at the circular building and the weirder it got. The columns and fancy exterior reminded her of the government buildings back in Washington she had seen once towards the end of the Civil War. It was like a government outside of the government and that was all sorts of strange. It was also built with white stone to the contrary of most everything else around here. Hazel thought that it stuck out like a sore thumb but what did she know? Rich folks probably had their reasons.

“Hmmm so we have arrived. We’ll escort you in, unless you have orders or something?”

“No, I do not have orders,” the vampire replies off-handedly. Hazel blushed when she realized her blunder, but the vampire didn’t seem to mind.

“What I expect is for you to lead me up the steps and announce my presence, then your council will make me wait for a few minutes because they are a pack of grumpy old trouts and they can get away with it. A few hours of speech and grandstanding will follow. After that, we will retire to a place I shall inform you of at the time of departure to spend the rest of the night.”

“Oh. Okay.”

There was a soft hiss, then the vampire forced a smile.

“Proceed.”

Hazel moved on with her squad dutifully keeping formation. Their mysterious escort stayed in the woods, though she caught a hint of mage armor and assumed that they were there as insurance. Typical. She climbed the marble steps to the council’s antechamber and realized that she’d never been there before. It was... better than she expected. A large, circular corridor extended left and right. It was filled with paintings. Her eyes traveled despite herself.

Many depicted landscapes. Meadows, cities seen from afar and even an enchanting sea both blue and grey that almost melted into the cloudy sky above. Those were relaxing and absorbing, but the paintings that bordered the entrance to the central chamber were different. She mechanically announced the vampire’s presence to some posh asshole dressed like a butler, but her attention was on the work behind his head.

It depicted a line of soldiers in dark uniforms executing a group of civilians. The light centered on a man in white, arms stretched in supplication or to cover those behind. She couldn’t tell. There were bodies on the ground. Blood too.

“El tres de mayo by Francisco Goya. The soldiers on the right are Napoleon’s occupation force in Madrid. The people on the left rebelled the day prior.”

“It’s... different from the others.”

“It remains a revolutionary work in every sense of the term, though I suspect that your council placed it here as a reminder.”

“A reminder of what? That people die?” she spat. The work of art was so poignant. It grabbed her by the chest and didn’t let go. It annoyed her that someone would use this as a deliberate tool. It was meant to be free.

“Yes, that, and the dangers of tyranny I supposed, but the warning is also for the councilors themselves. You see, Francisco Goya supported the revolution before it soured into an aggressive empire. Many forces start as protectors of freedom and justice. Few manage to keep to those ideals.”

“That must have stung. For the artist I mean.”

“Ah yes, poor painter. I managed to acquire one of his works. Such a talented individual.”

“You did?”

“Saturn Devouring His Son. Ah, the circus begins.”

The butler guy invited the vampire in. For some reason they didn’t close the door and Hazel could see the court inside. They had a central open space then big chairs hosting old coots in fineries, then lesser geezers in lesser fineries above that, all in concentric circles of wealth and age. A large man with a small hammer — a gavel maybe? — had an entire side to himself. He looked quite tired.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please reveal and verify your protective amulets, thank you. Everyone has done so? Good. The council welcomes the Ambassador of the Accords, Ariane of the Nirari. You have the floor.”

“Thank you. I will be brief. You should have all received the report we compiled on the Supernatural Task Force by now, including the agenda for implementation. Their avowed function is to monitor and police America’s magical population. We, however, believe that they will be used as a tool of control to list and monitor us, as a first step. Once the Congress and the White House have a firm idea on the current magical landscape, they will use it to shape their policies up to and including extermination. The Accords propose the creation of a committee to coordinate actions on and against units of the task force that endanger us in one way or another through infiltration and coercion. It must happen now while the hierarchy is still being selected. That is all.”

She stopped speaking and Hazel waited for the rest. That... was all? Most politicians really liked speaking. Maybe they were like that in private and saved the big words for public events. Those always made her drowsy.

She wondered why the vampire wasn’t trying to be smoother. They were supposed to be good at it.

“Thank you, ambassador. Now for the questions. Anyone? Everyone. Alright, we will do this by seniority. The Chief Librarian has the floor.”

“Who’s in charge of that idea and why haven’t you killed him yet?” an old woman asked. Hazel couldn’t see her from here yet the voice carried a great deal of annoyance.

“Senator Williams from Massachusetts, and we believe that the task force remains the better option because—”

“How is that a better option?! Will they be putting all our names on a list to grab us at dawn and drag us to the pyres?”

There was a moment of silence and Hazel leaned forward under the disapproving glare of the butler. The vampire was sitting in a comfortable chair, reclining as if it were a throne. Her talon beat a little staccato on the polished arm. Tic tic tic. It resonated terribly in the following silence.

“And we believe that the task force remains the better option,” the blonde woman — no, vampire — continued, “because this solution involves mages every step of the way and because all of the alternatives are worse. We do not go against the grain. The integrists will take southern states by a landslide in the next election.”

“They are a bunch of inbred morons. They couldn’t take their own asses with both arms.”

Once again, the vampire stopped talking and the atmosphere grew heavier. Really. And perhaps a little cold. Some of the attendants shifted in their seats. Hazel was familiar with the concept of aura but she also knew that it was rude to use it on someone. It felt like you were being pushed by an unseen hand, but this was different. The room was deeper. Larger, perhaps. And darker.

And then the vampire audibly sighed and everything returned to normal. The butler blinked and readjusted his tie. Moise rolled his shoulders.

“I would advise you not to underestimate the power of a mob. The integrists will ride on a tide of resentment. If a legal, legitimate organization is not in place by the time they reach congress, they will push for more drastic measures. We cannot undo centuries of fear and resentment through assassinations.”

She leans forward.

“Or we would have done it, of course. Next question?”

“Right. Next is finance minister and opposition leader Hoffenstadt.”

“Thank you, president. Now, please tell us what is preventing me from walking to archmage Lewis who still heads the ministry in Washington and telling him to hunt all of you monsters. You, the werewolves, and those fey creatures? Hm?”

The inflammatory comment was received with a roar of disapproval from the majority, but quite a few people cheered as well. Insults streamed across the amphitheater.

“Order! Order! Councilor Hoffenstadt, you are out of line!”

“I will answer,” the vampire said.

Calm progressively returned. The vampire still lounged on the throne, no, in her seat, Hazel corrected.

“Mundane people fear us. I am including the caster population in that statement. They fear all of us, even that washerwoman whose only quirk is to make clothes smell like flowers. And rightly so. If someone can access a power and you cannot, and they have hidden it until now, how can you trust them? What if they can influence your thoughts? Where are the limits? Right now, the world is awakening to a new dimension with unknown limits and they are afraid. Entire regions of Europe have outlawed any and all magic. It will happen here as well unless we whitewash our image.

“Now is the time to present an affable face as Lewis has managed to do so far. You will be rich, and clean. Handsome and pale. Your powers shall be obvious and useful. Government mages will wear easily recognizable marks and work under the direction of respectable and pious men, and still, you will be scorned. It will still take decades before you can appear to the general public without the stench of sulfur marring your public personae. No, indeed, now is not the time to give the opposite side more resources, because that mud will stain us all and the mundane population will not be able to tell the difference.”

The vampire shifted a bit and Hazel followed the languid gesture. it was a lie, of course, all a lie. The vampire had no need to move. It was just a mask.

“I assure you, acting against us right now... isn't in your best interest.”

Hazel knew a threat when she heard one. She didn't think that it would work against Hoffenstadt but it didn't matter, he was just trying to get a rise. Waste of time.

More questions came after that. There were a few about the Accords' opinions on several matters which the vampire succinctly explained. Inquiries on the Accords capabilities and military were politely yet firmly shut down. By this stage, Hazel wondered how important the Accords were exactly. Anyone who held a weapon in Avalon was taught of their existence and not to engage, yet for all those efforts she couldn't think of anyone who had met one of their agents. That was weird. Very few people talked about meeting vampires since the end of the war as well. Were they hiding? It would not be difficult. There were so few of them. Barely a few hundreds, spread across a large land.

Perhaps that was for the best.

“Thank you for your time everyone. It is now two in the morning. Two in the mor — Interrupting me will not change my decision, councilor Heynes. We shall retire for the night. Thank you for your time, ambassador.”

A collective hum rose Hazel from her torpor. Those old bags were finally done. After listening to them for hours, she wasn't sure what to think. Yes they knew a lot but did they have to bicker all the time? It all felt very childish.

The vampire was the first to leave. She strode out without hesitation sparing not a glance to others. Hazel and her squad scrambled after her with middling dignity.

"Should we proceed to the place where you'll be resting?" she asked.

"Yes. Follow me, Hopkins showed me the way before."

Silence returned and Hazel felt no need to fill it. It was dark. She was tired. Had to keep her eyes open.

They went past Dunley's which served a sweet wine she liked and Barnaby's with its affordable pulp books. Places she knew. The darkness made them menacing and unfamiliar now, and the worst thing was that she didn't know if it was the vampire doing something, or just her nerves. It was Avalon, god dammit, her home. Not some integrist den of drooling assholes.

The vampire walked confidently. Hazel could hardly see under what little light the group's sole lantern provided. They stopped in front of what could only be described as a gardening shack at the edge of pumpkin field. She felt stupid but didn't dare ask questions. The vampire picked a key from behind a log and opened the door for them.

She signaled the others and went in first. A part of her brain screamed that she was getting into an enclosed place, alone, with a monster. The more rational one told her that if the monster wanted her dead, there was fuckall she could do.

"Huh," Joel said as he went in. His youth was showing but Hazel agreed that this was strange.

Avalon's inner perimeter, inside of the walls, was quite large. There was the city, but also production and military facilities. Some fields too. The walls were more here to slow down invaders and provide increased security against spies than anything else. She had never known that places like this also existed. The cabin was a secured location with a small forward square, the visible part, and a much larger back one cleverly hidden under a thick copse of trees and probably a few illusions as well. She spotted four beds on the right and a table on the left with chairs, barrels of water, and packed rations. There was even a small open door leading to a privy. She made a note to use it before Roth did. Sometimes it felt like the man only ate dead skunks.

The implication was staggering.

"Right, everyone settle down. Ma'am, could I have a moment of your time?"

"Certainly, corporal."



They moved outside. Hazel pestered under her breath because she hadn't thought of taking the lantern with her. The night was dark and moonless.

"Nu Sarrehin."

A purple light revealed clawed fingers entrapped in a black gauntlet and the vampire's cold, perfect beauty. She was close. Her skin didn't have the pores and blemishes that everybody else had, a bit like a statue. Hazel wondered if men got trapped by that honey pot or if they realized on time that it was too free of defect to be true.

"What's going on?" Hazel asked without preamble. No need to play coy. The vampire knew what she meant. She had to.

"There will be a coup tomorrow."

Hazel gasped. The vampire kept talking without care.

"A group will attempt to capture and execute a number of councilors during tomorrow's afternoon session. They will attempt to capture and kill me."

"How do you know?"

"Hopkins, of course. The old fox forfeited the post of Black Dog to better focus on internal security."

"A secret police?"

"Of a sort, yes. He shared this detail with me and asked me not to intervene."

Hazel looked for signs of deceit, but of course she might as well have stared at a log. The vampire did not move. At all.

"You are wondering if you can trust me. In truth, your confidence is not required. You merely have to follow orders."

Hazel frowned.

"To guarantee your safety?"

"Precisely. You will watch over me just as you were tasked to. Nothing more, nothing less. I warned you so that you would not be caught off-guard."

Hazel pondered that for a moment.

"Why us? Is it because we are... who we are?"

For the first time, the vampire smiled. It was thin and skin-deep but it did disarm a little bit of the tension that had been building in Hazel's mind.

“The mundane soldiers’ only female NCO, promoted on merit, leading a squad of undesirables. Yes. Let us say that the members of the cabal who will conduct their uprising wish for a more... traditional ruling body for their organization. You would have no part in it. A curious thing, really. In Europe, the revolutionaries I met were progressive but here they are conservative. In any case, Hopkins trusts you. That is why you were selected to cover me.”

Hansel’s mind reeled. Hopkins trusted her? She didn’t even think that he was aware of her existence, except in reports. The hound himself! She felt a blush coming to her cheeks while pride swelled in her chest.

“You should go back in and rest. You will have a long day tomorrow.”

“I’ll set up a guard...”

“No need. I will retire at dawn. You are safe until then.”

“We are in charge of your safety.”

Something rustled behind Hazel and she jumped, turning around to find that the vampire was there.

The light still came from her back.

Hazel swivelled to find the light hanging in the darkness. The vampire walked by her.

“Trust me, corporal Hazel Zellick. I could slaughter my way from here to New York and nothing could stop me. I will survive for a few hours without your monitoring. More seriously, I will need all of you awake and ready tomorrow at dawn, so please do as I say.”

Dawn came and the squad settled to wait. The vampire had retreated underground where a large storage room led to a secure place for her. Nothing was happening. For one terribly long hour, she thought that the vampire had manipulated them into doing something strange and unthinkable, until Willis found a note in the supplies they had.

“Do not abuse it,” it said with Hopkins’ hand. She could recognize it anywhere.

The note came with a deck of cards.

Hazel had one sentry look outside the windows at all times. She would be the second one. Discretion was their sole advantage here, so they should not show themselves. It made their quarters cramped and malodorous. Her uniform was wrinkled. She felt a bit grimy even though she had washed her hands and face with the barrel water.

A coup huh? She supposed that it had to happen at some point. The White Cabal had been through a lot of changes over the past few years. There was resentment going around. Still... at a time like this?

It bothered her deeply. It also bothered her that the vampire had been told before they had.

The hours passed. Dawn became morning. The sun crept over a cloudy sky. Outside, nothing much was going on. A few pedestrians walked by on morning strolls and she made sure to stay hidden, not that anyone was paying attention.

The first shots rang at around ten. The squad members at rest froze in the middle of a game of poker.

“Corporal?” Willis asked.

“We have our orders. We stay put and do our duty.”

“Corporal,” he insisted, “I can’t be on the wrong side. Are we sure?”

Hazel almost lashed out then. Her grandmother had told her never to give an inch or it would be all over, and the old woman had been right. She did not. Willis was not challenging her. He was terrified. His hands shook with panic and sweat covered his wrinkled face. No. She had to be calm right now. Show she could be the leader they needed.

“Willis, this isn’t like your old group, I swear. We’re the good guys. Besides, protecting the vampire is important.”

The more she talked and the more she joined the dots.

“If the vampire is assassinated under our custody, the Accords will probably go to war. I don’t have to explain to you why that’s bad. The best thing we can do for the loyalists is to keep that thing alive. And we will.”

Joel stood up and loaded his gun. He made sure that the path down was open and ready.

“Maybe they won’t find us,” he said.

No one said a word and the game of cards stopped there. Moise made sure everyone had enough bullets and went to polish his repeater. It was already shiny enough to use as a mirror.

“People coming,” Roth mumbled from the window.

“Down,” Hazel ordered.

She had a look. The cabin had no fire and no light to avoid visibility. A large group of combatants walked past them with guns at the ready. They wore no uniforms. Many of them were mages with gauntlets and grim expressions. They went by without noticing them.

“They’re going to Hopkins’ house. It’s not far,” Willis said.

“They won’t find him there,” she said. No way the hound would be caught in the open. He will have brought his family to safety.

The others all nodded.

“Then we wait.”

They didn’t have to do it for long. Those they had seen soon returned and spread out. They were clearly looking for something. The sounds of distant detonations still rang across the town. Hazel was afraid, but she had to trust others to do their job like she was doing hers.

Sometimes she wondered what her life would have been like if she had just married Simeon the clerk like her father had ordered. If she would be happier being his wife than here, surrounded by enemies.

She gripped her rifle tighter and felt the smooth wood of the stock. Moise placed a cartridge in the chamber of his with a click. It rang like thunder in the silent room.

Hell nah.

Roth waved his hand to get her attention. He signed for one, rifle, walking here. She nodded and crawled through the door to unlock it. She then pointed at Willis and Joel to hide on the sides. The rest stayed near the door. The walls of the cabin were deceptively thick. Her squad would be hard to spot.

The sound of footsteps came from outside. She didn’t move. Someone was by the windows. She held her closed fist to signal the others to wait.

Silence.

The door handle rattled. She looked at Moise by the door. His brown eyes were on her. She made the ‘cut throat’ gesture to tell him to neutralize the threat. He nodded once.

The door opened in her face, blocking her view. She jumped up, heard the smack of wood against flesh. A man fell. She was on him in an instant.

He was clearly dazed. He wore civilian clothes with a white band tied over his right arm. She didn’t recognize him.

Moise and her dragged him in while Roth closed the door again as silently as he could. They found rope and gagged the man. Willis and Joel brought him to the basement.

“Alright, one down,” she said.

“Fifty to go,” Roth said.

They chuckled, but not for long.

“Hey, Jimbo, you there?” someone yelled outside.

Hazel gestured frantically and everyone moved up. There were two voices now. More came.

“He was supposed to be around here,” the first voice said.

“Maybe he’s a bit farther. Still think we’re wasting our time.

“They saw the bitch and the misfits walk in that direction, man, and they never reached the gate. Can’t be too far.”

“They could have just left, over the wall or something.”

“Why would they do that? The council is still debating.”

“Fair. Let’s check that cabin over there. Hey, Chuck, cover me will you?”

“Yeah yeah.”

Hazel risked a glance. There were three of them. One was a mage with a gauntlet moving carefully towards them. Another was a soldier with a rifle held lazily in his hands while the last had a revolver. He was checking the woods.

Hazel signaled Moise. The black man was their best shot. He took his repeater and aimed.

She drew her regulation revolver.

The door opened. She shot the closest soldier in the chest three times. Time slowed down.

Her target lifted a bloody hand and looked at it with disbelief. He was already dead. The rifleman fell with a bullet in the heart.

Willis and Joel’s bullets pinged on the mage’s shield. They didn’t have silver. Oversight. The man retreated with a cry but it was useless. The entire town must have heard shots by now. Distant figures already rushed at them from behind a bend in the road.

“Alright everyone give it to them!” she bellowed.

The men smashed the windows and started taking potshots at the enemy troops who jumped to cover and returned fire. The walls of the cabin held fast. They were thick enough that only a cannon could go through. A spell sent wood shrapnel flying by her though. She removed a splinter from her bleeding cheek.

“That fucker,” she mumbled.

For the next ten minutes, her squad slowed down and only took sure shots. They had to hold. Time was on their side, that was for sure. Moise got a guy crawling forward in the neck. Roth managed an impressive feat when he got a rifleman in the head through a thin birch tree.

“Nice one Roth,” she said.

“I was aiming for the chest!” the pump man bellowed as he reloaded. He was nervous. They all were.

Okay, doing well so far. Just had to last. Slow them down. Maybe they would think that it's not worth it.

She was trying to convince herself. It wasn't working.

Hazel lost her notion of time. Some people tried to flank them but the cabin only had openings at the front and the brambles were so thick that it would take hours to cut through. She shot someone trying to take a peek.

They were trapped. It was only a matter of time before everything went to shit. What were the others doing? She checked her watch. It was half past eleven. They had only been at it for an hour but it had felt like eternity. She was already drained, numb from being on edge for so long. She sponged the sweat from her face and took a swig of water. At least no one was seriously hurt yet.

“What's going on there?” an authoritative voice demanded. It was an older mage with a robe covered in talisman. It cut through the haze of the battle.

For one naive moment, Hazel thought the man might rescue them but it didn't happen. A man ran to report to the approaching figure.

Moise took a shot. It pinged against a massive shield. The man didn't even turn his eyes to them.

“No you imbecile. The vampire will be underground. Do you want to wait until the fire dies out?”

Hazel blinked when she realized that she had been very close to being roasted. Or not. Actually, setting the house on fire might be a good idea but it was too late to set it up.

“Alright, you lot in there,” the powerful mage said, “you have one minute to get out with your weapons down and your arms in the air. Do so and you will be allowed to leave Avalon safely. You have my word.”

“The negro dies though,” the rifleman added.

“No, he does not,” the mage added pointedly.

The foes waited.

“Right,” Hazel said. “Right, make sure the way to the basement is clear. Lock the door. Let’s put the table against it. The windows are too small for an adult so it might save us some time.”

The team scrambled to shove everything they had against the opening. Willis broke the nervous silence.

“If anyone thinks to say yes to those assholes, I’ll shoot him myself,” he grumbled.

“Not if I get him first,” Joel added with scowl.

“Alright we’re all very loyal in here,” Hazel said. “Now move those hips and grab me that chair.

“Time is up!” the mage declared.

The squad fired but they knew it was useless. All they had was mundane lead. A wall of shields covered the approaching troop. Their only saving grace was that the enemies could not shoot through that shield either.

“Fuck. Prepare to—”

Hazel’s order was interrupted by a cataclysmic blast. The door’s upper half was shattered and pieces of broken furniture rained in. Hazel’s gaze froze on the gaping hole left behind, uncomprehending.

“This place is warded!” the mage declared. “No matter, the windows are not. Fire at will, men!”

A torrent of bullets buzzed through the openings. The far wall and most of the furniture turned into a pitted wreck. Hazel had enough.

“Alright, back, back. Into the basement.

She shot blindly to give them a few seconds. Her squad ran. They jumped down.

She ran as well.

The gunshots stopped. She heard something fall down.

The mage was here, well, his head was. He was young with a well-trimmed beard. Quite handsome. He looked serious and uncaring. His gauntlet extended almost lazily.

She was going to die.

Then a chair smacked into it. The spell went off and demolished a cupboard. Roth was running towards her.

“Go, go!” he yelled. She did. Rifles roared. She jumped down onto packed earth lit by a yellow lantern.

Roth pretty much smashed by her side and rolled over, eyes vacant. Blood spread on the ground.

“Roth... Roth!”

The greasy man’s gaze turned to her.

“Yes.”

“Are... you alright?”

“I don’t know.”

She inspected him. He had a wound in the fat of his left arm. It had gone through cleanly. Otherwise he looked fine.

“You got shot in the arm.”

“Maybe that’s why it hurts.”

“Any other place hurts?”

He took a few seconds to answer.

“No?”

“Then stand up!”

He did so heavily and Hazel bandaged the wound. It didn’t look too serious. She just had to get him to a healer before it soured. Moise jumped down, having secured the hatch.

“That will get us a few more minutes,” the black man said drily. Willis was aiming up to cover them. Joel was reloading.

They were in an antechamber of sorts with a ladder going up and a door leading farther in. It was locked.

“That’s the vampire quarters. Should we...”

The door opened by itself.

“Come on in,” a familiar voice said.



They did and Hazel found the vampire sitting elegantly in a comfortable chair on a background of thick beams and naked walls. She was putting the finishing touches to a sketch she had been drawing.

Hazel noticed the sunken eyes and sickly skin. So they did have limits. But...

“Don’t you sleep during the day?”

“A common misconception, one we have no intention of clarifying. I take it that our guests found us?”

“Yeah. They’re going to go through the hatch really soon.”

“I see. That is quite alright. If things become difficult for you there is an escape tunnel behind that wardrobe.”

“No,” Hazel replied. “We’ll stay.”

The vampire returned to her drawings while Hazel pushed herself against the wall, and waited. She had never tried fighting in a room before. It felt like it would be messy. She was afraid. It smelled of gunpowder and perspiration, down here. And blood. Roth was breathing hard enough that the sound went through the ringing in her ears. She forced herself to slow down, let her thundering heart calm. Yes. Calm. Calmer. Everything was going to be fine. Everything was going to be just alright. Just relax. Breathe. She just had to open her mind to — oh shit.

The door burst open but Hazel could do nothing. The voice in her head was no longer her own and, no matter how hard she tried to push it out, it was too late. Her thoughts grew muddled until she didn’t know which one were hers and which one were the intruder’s. Should she fight back? The people in this room... had to shoot them. Or was it the ones outside? Hazel collapsed against the wall. Her body stayed mostly upright but her mind kept going down, and down, and down, into the darkness.

Hazel was in a room. It was hers, but not hers. It was a bit larger. Here was her bed with the knit cover she had received from gran gran, and there was her official contract, signed by Hopkins himself, that announced to the world that she was a corporal and no one could say it wasn’t so. A candle shone, bathing the open space in a dim light. Something was wrong though.

“You can’t be there,” she told the man rummaging through her meager possessions. That wasn’t right! It was her. It was hers! But her voice was small and childish and the man ignored her. She tried to move, and almost collapsed forward. The world was thick and syrupy and her hands were so tiny, with that scar she got while trying to fish so many years ago.

“Come on, come on, where is it?” the man grumbled. He was rude. So rude. But he was inside and she didn’t have the strength. Finally, he tossed the picture of her first love on the ground and turned to her. He was tall and terrible and she suddenly felt so afraid.

“Well, nothing to it. I will just kill you instead.”

Hazel almost choked with the anguish of knowing that there was nothing she could do. She waited for death to come. It did not. The man stood up and looked around instead.

There was a crash.

It should have hurt when that giant thorn trunk ripped through the door, embedding itself into the man’s torso before retreating with his twitching corpse attached like a grotesque puppet. And yet, the door was already open to some extent and so it was sort of fine. Hazel stood up and went to follow without really meaning to. This place was strange. It was playing with her mind.

Outside, she found a weird sort of piazza. It was night, she thought. The walls were made of thick walls of vegetation covered in thorns, leaves, and tiny white flowers. A massive statue occupied most of the center. It stood upright inside a white circle and depicted a werewolf of impossible proportions. She was aware that she was small here and it did not matter. The statue had to be as tall as a building.

There were no traces of the man.

She looked around and took another few steps forward. The statue seemed to follow her with its eyes until she passed between its muscular legs. They were so big! And the light was strange here. The wrong color.

Slowly, her eyes trailed up. Past the edge of the maze they went, to a dark sky and—

Someone’s hand grabbed her shoulder and she yelped. She was turned around with ease. She saw a pair of amused blue eyes belonging to a blonde woman. The woman loomed above Hazel with an indulgent smile. She seemed familiar.

“Time to wake up,” the woman said.

She placed her hand against Hazel’s forehead and *pushed*. Hazel fell with a yelp against the packed earth floor of the basement.

“FUCK!”

Hyperventilating. Her mind? No, later. First check on the squad.

They were still there including Roth who was still alive. They were terrified. Her nostrils flared and brought back the stench of shit.

The vampire stood above a mound of corpses. She held a mage's neck in one hand, his arm in the other. At first, Hazel thought that the vampire was nuzzling him but of course that was not the case. She was drinking his blood.

The vampire tossed the cadaver aside when she was done. Hazel had not dared interrupt. The issue was, however, that they were stuck in a rank basement with bodies and a vampire.

"What now?" she asked no one in particular.

"Well I suspect that they know I am awake," the vampire said, "so we will stay put until nightfall."

"That works for me, miss vampire."

"Not to worry, I look after my allies. And please, call me Ariane."

Hazel watched Ariane gently throw the bodies outside of the door 'to help with the smell' and decided that the world was quite peculiar and that she was quite happy to still be alive to appreciate it, but now she really, really needed a glass of whiskey.