

Sweden, November 1938.

Snow crunches under Loth's mechanized armor. Each of his feet stomps the earth with as much might as an elephant. I can barely hear myself think in the cold winter night.

"You could just stay, you know?"

"Lass..."

"Not that you'll make a difference in that hulking thing."

"Lass, do not try to neuter me please. Those are my lands."

"And I'm a good friend. I could just run there and be back by the time you get off that thing."

"Let us just say I'm breaking that thing in. Doing a field test, aye?"

"You could field test your slippers instead. And spend more time with your kid."

"Looks like you won't be touching the Mark VII Siegfried Cannon."

"Carry on, good sir."

"That's what I thought. And besides, we are almost there."

Our steps, oh so slow steps, lead us through the pristine snow and ice-covered pines. A light wind sends plumes of fresh snow, forming a crystalline cloud on our path. I am not wearing the Aurora tonight. The weather is cold enough as it is, and I am not alone this time.

Loth's armored foot sinks deeper into some sort of depression, unbalancing the entire bipedal frame around him. Pistons creak dangerously.

"Damn you and your... lack of weight. How do you even do it? You gotta weigh at least—"

"Tut tut tut you do not want to tread that ground, dear Loth."

"I bet your power even told you there was a frozen brook here. But you didn't warn me. But fine, I can tell I should stop."

"Wise."

"A posteriori."

"Loooooth! Wait. No more jokes. Body ahead."

"A scientist?"

"Too far to tell. Hurry."

Throwing caution and discretion to the northern winds, we race ahead.

"I can feel that the body is small. Unarmed."

"It could be a scientist then. We only lost contact a few days ago."

"I thought you expected an attack?"

"The research conducted there was extremely important so secrecy was of the essence. Their last message sounded like an attack but... it was so messy. They mentioned blood. We will see."

I grumble a bit. I could take care of everything by myself in short order, but Loth has a strange sense of duty and responsibility. I suspect he is also fed up with king duties and wishes to be on the field once more. Our precious research facility might be already lost and we dally because of his principles. I hate it. I hate it even more when we find the body. It is a woman wearing a white laboratory gown over a thick sweater. It is thoroughly unsuitable for those arctic temperatures. I spot bloody tears and spit under her frozen black hair. There are no visible wounds.

"Damn. That's Erika. Recruited her myself."

"I am sorry, Loth."

"She has a son. What happened here?"

"Something must have terrified her to run like that into certain death. And I smell little blood but her essence is... blurred. Disturbed. What little is left of it."

Silence returns to the forest.

"Poison?"

"Airborne, possibly. I have not encountered any death quite like this one. It does not feel magical."

"Dangerous."

"You should not come, Loth. You have a mirror in that thing. We can keep in touch."

"This armor is perfectly insulated and plated like a tank."

"And cannot even get through the main door without wrecking it."

"Tyr dammit. Fine!"

It takes a moment to connect our mirrors, then I am on my way and much faster. The research facility appears a moment later.

No one would have noticed it from the air. It consists of a series of interconnected bunkers dotted with actual trees and only a few easily locked, circular entrances. Its main defense is discretion. Its second main defense is how it is fully buried and always connected to the Skoragg fortress by radio signal. It should never have fallen, and yet it has. Light spills from an opening. One of the only two sentries lies dead a few feet away from it, sitting against a tree trunk. Blood seeps from each of his orifices. The spectacle is quite ghastly. The strange blur has intensified until I feel a sort of disturbance. I stretch my shoulders and frown.

I am being hurt by something. The damage is far too weak to be of consequence, however a mortal would have suffered greatly from it. Especially if, just as Loth, they could not detect it.

I walk inside and find a white tiled corridor. The second guard lies in the bed in the same state as the other.

"Found two guards. Dead. Same method. Some sort of aura is present in this place but I cannot tell what it is."

"Responsible for the deaths?"

"I believe so. It hurts me as well, though nothing too bad yet."

I follow more corridors to barracks, living quarters, a meeting room. All of them lit by the yellow glares of electric light, all of them devoid of signs of combat. Just dead scientists and their congealed blood. I track the source of the aura to a deep lab at the core of the facility. A hand-made poster on the door reads 'demonstration day'.

"I found it," I tell Loth.

Inside of the open case waits a large circular disc of metal as dull as steel. It vibrates in my eye until my vision swims. I detect no magic, still. Strangely, I taste ash on my tongue.

"And what might you be..." I whisper.

"Describe it?"

"Metal disc. Unremarkable."

I shut the case and feel the vibration diminish but not fade away. Damage done, I assume. I look around to learn more. A blackboard occupies the entire far wall. Most of it is covered by a few equations of... it appears to be atoms. I am not quite familiar with this sort of research since it remains in the experimental domain, yet there is something truly mesmerizing about the expanding half-circle of dots under it. I look closer.

“Uranium two three five plus one neutron is... barium, krypton, three more neutrons, and... no. No, that cannot be right. Over two hundred mega electron volt per reaction? This has to be a mistake. That would mean that one mole of this stuff has...”

The answer waits at the bottom of the blackboard, underlined three times.

“Just under twenty terajoules for two hundred and thirty grams. Just two hundred grams. Such might. This is... the power of the sun.”

My mind swims with possibilities.

“Lass?”

“This might kill us all or grant us salvation. This... is what we needed.”

“For what?”

“To kill the gods of the dead world.”

Back at the fortress, Loth and I read the combined research notes I have recovered from the doomed research facility. It has everything we need. Even the process required to ‘enrich’ the substance they prefer with a certain ‘isotope’. I did not even know that some atoms existed in two versions! Perhaps I should catch up to the more theoretical aspects of physics. I have been lacking in my efforts. Too many other priorities.

Oh, who am I kidding. Just reading the abstracts of those papers makes me feel like a moron. I need a private tutor. Ugh. At least there is some good news.

“We have the tool we need to destroy the Last City.”

“Aye lass, but it won’t be easy.”

“Not anywhere close to easy. The prisoners we have brought are unanimous. The defenses of the last city are many, powerful, and can be turned on invaders just as easily as against other liches. Those old monsters have had centuries to accumulate power. Who knows what horror they have conceived? We cannot even raid the place. There are so many detectors and checkpoints. Even lords would be caught before they reach the center where the ziggurats are.”

“We would need several bombs. Just to be sure.”

“Yeah. And we would only need to trigger one.”

“Surely a single bomb cannot destroy something of that size?”

“If I am reading this right, it would. And the subsequent fallout would poison the air for a small eternity.”

“The liches will not care.”

“The liches need sustenance as much as we do. With all their servants dead, even the stragglers will perish. More importantly, we will destroy their power base. All those artifacts and dangerous spells shall be burnt to ash by the might of fission. This is what we need. Still, the matter of getting them there remains.”

I stop, aware of the immense list of difficulties. All the fights against the liches have so far been brief, more a succession of raids and skirmishes than a real field battle. Any invasion would inevitably lead to a change of paradigm. Where the liches were scattered, they would gather. Where they fought each other as much as us they would unite. Finally, while they have always sought to gather resources and energy, they would spend it all to survive.

We simply lack information. And lack of information kills us as surely as overconfidence. Worse, there is no realistic way to acquire it. I suspect the liches themselves do not know what they are capable of. There have been no large-scale wars in the Last City. Even those amoral, world-reaping twats know better than to blow up the last boat.

“We are going to need chaos on an unprecedented scale to sneak a bomb in their land. I am talking about full-scale invasion, slave revolt, the works.”

“Slave revolt?”

“I have been working towards a little side project. It turns out that the deadworlders are not all fans of their undying overlords.”

“You want to let some escape to our world? Can it even be done?”

“It has been done before.”

Loth and I exchange a glance. Only two beings have used bald servants of short size on an industrial scale.

“We will need all the alliances working together as well. I will talk to Sephare.”

“Can some of the liches be turned?”

“Constantine has worked on it, believe it or not. He has analyzed their social structure from whatever testimony we can get and he believes they cannot conceptualize cooperation. The best we can do is hope they backstab each other enough to make a difference. We cannot count on it, however.”

“And for the invasion?”

“We need the army. And we cannot use skyships. Only mundane fighters and bombers will do.”

“Which of the Great Powers will you use?”

“Why, all of them at once, of course. And there is one last ally we will absolutely need.”

“That’s not a great idea, lass. Not a great idea at all.”

“Let us slay one dragon at a time, yes?”

The room is dark. Sconces no longer provide more than dregs of radiance, their dying embers smoldering quietly in the late night air. Openings to the outside smell of brine, so we may be close to the sea. I hear no waves, however. I have also pulled in my Magna Arqa. It will serve no purpose here.

I walk past a few columns towards the back of the long corridor. There are pillars here, quite a few of them. It must have taken hundreds of hours of work to make it as large as it is for no other purpose than to serve the sense of grandeur of its denizen. It is a cold palace with no people, that serves no nation. The only concession to culture holds an eternal vigil by the door. A lion, or perhaps a dog. It has clearly been crafted with more passion than skill by a mortal hand. I sigh and step forward, then back when a sword flashes out, attempting to take out my head.

A shadow rushes from behind a pillar. I block his sword with my own and step back again. He attacks as expected. My counter takes him in the chest but his armor holds. As expected, I suppose.

I still hear ribs crack. The armor remains too soft.

“Bitch.”

I ignore the insult. A quick exchange of strikes makes me realize my foe’s reputation is not underserved. I am still stronger, much faster... and I have been trained by Cadiz himself. I dodge under a decapitating strike and punch him in the face before locking guard. A twist and I sever his hand at the wrist. He still tries to claw my face off.

His blade reappears in the off hand. I deftly parry a series of blows, landing a few counters on his armored chest. There appears to be a limit to how much damage I can inflict via the true and tested blunt force trauma approach. My foe smiles with the barest hint of a smirk. Barely a quiver of the lip, yet it is an ugly thing. He knows little more than cruelty. Our sire has stripped the rest as superfluous. In answer, I duck under a powerful lunge that lodges itself into a pillar. My counter cleaves through his arm lengthwise. Black blood lands on my cheek. I disengage and lick it.

“I would say our roles are reversed since the last time, Malakim, but you failed to draw blood.”

“Talk talk talk like the others. Always so haughty like you’re ANY FUCKING BETTER.”

“What happened to you is unfair,” I admit.

The furious devourer lashes out with unbridled rage. We grow so jaded when we are older, and we carry with us decades of self-control. Seeing such pure emotion on one so old shocks me. Malakim is so raw after all those centuries. Magnificent. How can he not be completely insane?

"It should have been me. ME! You and all the others..."

"Have it comparably easy, yes."

My affected sympathy only angers him further. I should not push him so far.

"You know," he says with a sinister smile, *"he tried to make more of you."*

I feel myself tilting my head with a calm expression though inside, I am shocked. I cannot tell if Malakim perceived it or not. It matters little. He will attack no matter what. This is all he understands.

"We had quite a few recruits. Young, attractive, ambitious. From good families but not too good. He broke them one by one. I watched him pick the pieces of their psyche while they begged for the attention he has never been capable of providing. They were like you, in a way. The same mix of hatred and love. They were so afraid. They tried so hard to satisfy him. They tried everything. You know how he is. Sex is only a tool of domination to him. Same as conversations. Everything, really. He didn't know what he was looking for and they didn't know how to please, so eventually, he would run out of patience. I got to play with a few. I closed my eyes and thought about you when I gutted them like fishes."

"Color me amazed," I reply with calm. *"This is the closest you two ever came to a compliment."*

"Oh we are both quite interested in what makes you tick."

"I wish I could return the compliment. Unfortunately, you do not live in my mind as I seem to live in yours. As for the other candidates, you should know well what the issue was."

"You are unique and so very special?"

"Of course not, simpleton. The issue was that you should have let them go. You cannot succeed in building a rival because the one attempting it is you two morons. Breaking is all you understand. Breaking and taking. If you touch it, it gets worse. Every time."

"Shut up."

"But you know everything about being broken, do you not?"

Claws whip at my hair. I lean back and kick at the same time. My armored boot catches his chin, then the followup up smashes him against the nearest pillar. I pin his leg with Rose before he can react, then I step aside.

"You... you insufferable... I changed my mind. When our sire ascends, I will not die. I will kill you first, then I will go after everything you ever held dear."

"I think you overestimate how valuable that hatred of you is to our dear sire. I have built quite the empire. He would not share."

"You two owe me."

"I will find a way to repay you, have no fear..."

I stare in those eyes filled with hatred. The lust for death rises in the wake of our little banter. He is just there, arms mangled. Pinned. Helpless.

I should kill him.

I would be well in my right to kill him. Unfortunately, my instincts scream danger. Something is wrong. I know I can attack him but I will not be able to kill him. I remember that Nirari knew exactly when Malakim's life was in danger, that he was there in an instant.

But he looks so weak here. I could decapitate him then shove my sword down the throat and to the heart.

No. This is a distraction. Malakim is inconsequential compared to the liches, or Nirari himself. I cannot risk the entire game to take a bishop, if that.

"Enough delay," a voice says from everywhere and nowhere at once. *"You know where to find me."*

"I do."

"Then come and speak your piece while I am feeling merciful little princess of the blood."

Aki's bloodline gives me a general direction for where my sire might be. It is a diffuse feeling I have to really focus on to succeed, but combined with a fast airship, it has allowed me to find a man whose mobility only relies on his mother's warren of space-violating corridors. We are currently deep within the mountain range of Haiti.

I cross the last gate and find a cavern of biblical proportion.

In a natural cave, bald men and women work tirelessly in a series of workshops under the glare of oil lamp. The stench of unwashed bodies, sweat, and trash almost overwhelms me. While I have always promoted a strict organization in all my endeavors, Nirari does not care, and his minions have expanded their domain by sticking the next project at the end of the previous one. This has led to an organically grown network of workshops strung organically across the stalagmites like a cancer. I hear the clang of hammers and the whistle of bellows. Weapons are stored on racks, rifles of poor qualities and swords. This means he has access to steel.

Nirari has found a way to build an army, if not an empire. Either he no longer fears his mother's interference, or perhaps she is too busy with the final preparations for her ascension. She has better things to do, I suppose. As for my sire, finding him will not be difficult. A throne of black stone sits in the middle of that vast domain. All passages and carved stairs lead to it so all may bow their heads to the one sitting above, on his pedestal,

the weight of chthonian architecture weighing over them in all its alien glory. It is perhaps the only part of the cavern designed with form and function in mind. It really is just like him. No care for his underlings, no care for such pedestrian things as a proper industry. Or organization. The only thing he has ever cared for is domination.

Dark eyes follow me as I make my way down. Those servants I come across bow and scrape the floor with their foreheads. More of them leave their work to see what is happening. By the time I reach the pedestal, the cave has grown silent but for thundering heartbeats pushing boring, submissive blood around.

“Approach.”

I lightly jump on the platform, and notice that its mirror surface hides another step. Even placed above the squirming mass of mortals, I am still below Nirari, even as he sits. Very symbolic of him. Bravo.

“Speak your request.”

“I suggest a hunt.”

“And what prey would you have me slay with you?”

“The gods of the dead world.”

Nirari wears his black plate armor. I remember him materializing one from thin air in a dream once, but this one feels permanent. I hold back a smirk when I realize that for all his ancient knowledge, the protection it offers feels second rate, especially compared to the Aurora.

No, I should not let my guard down. I do not believe I have even seen him bleed yet.

“I do not run around deserts chasing prey, little one. It is a job best given to those who serve. I see no interest in wasting time while a much grander endeavor awaits. You will be glad to know that a certain game of hide and seek is reaching its end, dear one. Perhaps you can bear witness to the inevitable finale.”

“I am not calling you for a desert trek. I am calling you for a siege.”

My outrageous proposal seems to awaken his interest.

“Oh? You have a plan to take on that death trap?”

“I do, but we will need people who can face the liches head on and live.”

“And win, you mean?”

“Winning is not required—”

A powerful wave of aura physically pushes me back a step. So concentrated. So focused and so deep. He is... even with the dragon, I cannot compete. Nirari tastes ancient. Inky black energy comes to life at his back as if the weight of his presence clawed at the fabric of our world.

"I fight to win. So should you."

"Will you, then?" I force between clenched teeth. "Fight. Will you fight?"

"And what will you offer me to join your banner, Princess of the Blood?"

Nirari's expression is politely curious. I tread on thin ice. We are in a state of truce so long as I act as an envoy, but giving him the excuse of an insult is the only thing he would need to kill me now without breaking his code of honor. The problem is that there is nothing I can reasonably offer that will pay for the services of an arrogant demigod during an entire campaign. Just the use of pathways cost Mask the free employ of their top fighters for the duration of a battle. I cannot possibly compete, especially since money and influence hold no interest to him. This will be difficult.

"You will not join my banner. I will join yours," I tell him.

"Oh? You would place yourself under my command?"

"If you hold the line against the liches, I will stand at your right if you will have me. I will even bear your colors. I propose this alliance in good faith to rid the world of its invaders."

"And so we can fight for it in peace and without foreign interference. I could do this, however, they are in no position to take over the world, yes? I believe I shall purge the spheres of their presence to mark my ascension."

"You will miss it then, because I will fight. With, or without you. One of us must be the defender of this sphere, but if you forfeit this hunt..."

I shrug.

My words bear no insults. The implication, however, is aggressive. Now to see if he takes the bait.

"You would stand alone?"

"I never stand alone. The question is, do you? Or do you lead from the front?"

"Do not think I am blind to your games, GIRL."

The last words echo through the cave with all the meaning it carries. Nirari has lived for three thousand years. I am a mayfly to him.

"If," I calmly say, *"if you want the world to know you as the conqueror you aim to be, you will have to start somewhere. Out in the open."*

And not here hidden in this cave.

"Do you truly wish for me to come out in the open, daughter of mine? To lead the combined strengths of humanity, magery, and us to victory? Do you wish the world to know of me?"

"I do."

“Then I will lead as you desire, little princess. May it be everything you wished for.”

He smiles, and I know I have been told to leave. As I retrace my steps outside, I cannot help but believe his words sounded awfully familiar. More importantly, he agreed too easily. As if he expected me to come, perhaps. Strange.

A trill from my mirror makes me turn abruptly. I inspect the magical communication device, surprise gripping my chest. It should be impossible.

The mirror trills again. I approach it, suddenly wary of a construct I designed and built myself.

I do not recognize the sigil over the frame, although only those I personally entered may contact me.

We are currently flying over the Atlantic and not even Constantine should be in range.

Regardless, the mirror rings a third time.

“Yes?”

A blurry image refines itself into the form of a gorgeous woman with wavy black hair dressed in a form-fitting toga that leaves little to the imagination. Lush lips curl into a vicious grin.

“Hello dear. I have a proposal.”

“I am all ears, Semiramis.”