

Another claw raked the shield. It sounded like nails on glass. Another. Constance held a wince at the unsettling sound and the pressure on her mind. She just had to hold a little longer.

“Constance,” Wang said by her side.

“Shut up.”

Quick movements let her recenter the shield; make it smaller. She traced a ring with practiced ease using the tip of her foot while another claw traced its circumference almost sensually. Moor was circling them like a shark while in the background, the eastern mages and Shanghai bled and burned. Another rake weakened the shield so Constance switched symbols. For an instant, the protection flickered but Constance timed it well and her defenses recovered before Moor could react. The lady was watching the enfolding chaos. In the distance, a warehouse went up in a fiery conflagration. More explosions lit up the night.

“Mistress.”

“You are right. We have no time to waste.”

Constance changed her shield frequency to face blades, and not a moment too soon.

Something stabbed towards her. The blade stopped an inch from Wang’s face. Ice covered the dark dagger to the hilt, then the delicate hand holding it. Moor considered the encroaching ice with disdain. A flex of her fingers and it all fell to the ground in fading shards.

“Ice? Cute.”

She stabbed harder.

Constance winced this time, and she could see a strain in Moor’s posture. Moor would kill Wang and, perhaps, take her hostage despite her clear discomfort, yet the attack of a Servant went against her very essence. The foe was struggling as much as she was, so Constance drew her own knife.

“Constance, this is acceptable.”

“No.”

The mage slit her hand and placed the bloody print against the surface of her protection. Moor hissed. Constance could see the cold woman’s dainty nostrils flare from the blasphemous aroma.

Moor recoiled and grabbed her forehead. She almost stumbled.

Constance felt a moment of triumph, but it was short-lived.

“Right. Right. Canny girl. I suppose I am... merely extending your suffering.”

“Ah, shit.”

“By delaying the—”

A crash and Constance fell with a yelp. No matter how fast, no matter how strong, she was still a mortal. And Moor was a lady. The feedback of her broken spell seared her brain with a blinding pain. She smelled blood, her own. There was something wet on her upper lip.

Wang's body smashed against the manor's gate, limbs clad in silvery limbs. An iron grip took Constance's neck, angling her towards the prone form of the eastern mage.

“Don't miss it,” Moor's mocking voice said.

Her cold breath brushed against Constance's ears. She smelled of anise and the iron tinge of her latest meal.

“Vampiresneverlookup!” Constance screamed.

Moor froze. Constance spotted a raised hand with the lady's black dagger in it about to launch at the wounded mage. The hesitation led to a relative silence, the perfect scene for the unfolding drama.

*“What she implies,”* a deceptively calm voice said, *“is that predators are not used to being ambushed so they never bother to search for their foes in every direction.”*

Ariane was calmly sitting by the edge of the manor's main building, boot-clad feet dangling casually over the edge. She still wore her elegant rider outfit with a modest attempt at trousers. The vampire looked rather calm but Constance could feel the unhinged fury bubbling under the surface like lava inside a volcano. Only her agreement with Melusine kept her from attacking, and even then it was a close thing.

*“Kindly...”*

A low growl escaped from a frame too small to form it before Ariane brought herself back under control.

*“Kindly unhand my Servant right this moment, thank you.”*

Moor let Constance leave. Her limbs slipped from the lady's grasp as if she were too hot. Shame and anger warred on her captor's face. Baudouin was a mask of impotent rage. Interestingly, Ariane's aura had remained perfectly under control so that not a whiff of power could be felt in the chaos of battle.

*“How are you already here?”* Moor spat.

The meaning of the Akkad words appeared clear to Constance, as usual. Wang looked lost, however. He was standing back with some difficulty while his gaze swivelled from his savior

to his would-be executioner. Constance hoped he would stay smart and avoid moving too much.

*“Have you forgotten? Flying ship.”*

Ariane pointed up where, in the distance, the shape of the *Dalton’s Fury* stood like the north star on the background of the soot-stained heavens. Searching floodlights cast blue layers on nearby smoke clouds. Constance spotted the shard-like edges of spell arrays, fully deployed. Just in case.

*“But.”*

*“We jumped.”*

Aiane smiled then, baring her fangs.

What followed was too fast for Constance to follow. There was a blur, a small spurt of dark blood. Dust puffed where the vampires had fought like blurry after-images. When shapes stopped long enough to be seen, Constance was looking at Moor and Melusine in a face-off. The lady was wounded, though the shallow cut along her left flank had already scabbed. As for Melusine, she was leaning forward, rapier denuded and bloodied. While the lady stood with nobility, Melusine leaned forward like the monster she was. Fury twisted her heart-shaped face. She wore full battle regalia.

*“You followed me all the way here for her?”* Moor scoffed at Ariane. *“For that reject?”*

*“And for the show,”* Ariane mockingly added.

A new exchange, as fast as before but this time there was a wound along Melusine’s cheek. A gash damaged the glyphs of her pauldron. Constance could only follow the fight as a blur of motion at the edge of her vision, the combatants gone before her eyes could flicker. It did not look like it was going very well. Moor was no war lady but she was still a lady, and the gap between the two could not be closed so easily. Even social animals like the old Lancaster viper trained for their survival. Melusine would be fighting an upward battle.

*“I should be flattered that you would cross the oceans to see me, really. I knew I was leaving a strong impression,”* Moor mocked.

*“You were always so good at talking,”* Melusine snarls. *“And scheming. It will not help you now!”*

Another quick exchange followed but this time, an orange glare marked a new phase of the duel. Flames erupted from quick spells. A blast pinged against a nearby wall, eating the plaster. This fight ended with a transparent bolt pinging against Moor’s dagger, which she had placed before her chest. It had been longer too. The lady’s confident facade finally cracked, shattered by the new wounds harrying her. The sleeve of her gown trailed in scorched filaments. Ugly, weeping sores stained her alabaster skin all along the length of her

arm in a constellation of pain. It had to be torture, yet the lady remained disturbingly quiet for a while.

Melusine did not look confident. Her fingers twitched.

*"Of course I expected you to cultivate the only skill your degenerate human bloodline granted you."*

*"Says the bastard daughter of an alcoholic count."*

Moor hisses and reveals her fangs for the first time. Another attack, another flurry of strikes Constance cannot follow. The conflict extends over space. It forced her to move to the gate where Wang and Baudouin waited in an uneasy truce. A circle of fire that just kept going soon bloomed, then trails of crimson light slashed the night in front of her faster than she could see. Vampire magic, designed to take down their only true opponents: themselves. Melusine crashed against a nearby pillar, shattering it, but Moor screamed as she rolled on the ground. Eventually, she launched herself at the courtyard fountain.

The proud lady was a ruin of her former self. A deep gash ran along the edge of her jaw, exposing a few molars, yet the green eyes were as unyielding as before.

Melusine stood up with a wince. A deep gash oozed black blood from her sternum. It showed no sign of closing, and the master moved cautiously.

*"Still with that little flame of yours. Unnatural. You know that no matter how much your struggle, you will only be second fiddle to that blonde bully. I heard about you, little sparrow. You hide in a city in some second-rate state as a third rate city master. A failure. An underling."*

*"Projecting much?"* Melusine retorted with a smirk.

*"And you? Not going to protect your pet slut when I dismember her?"*

*"I respect grudges,"* Ariane replied with a smile and a shrug.

*"Thank the Eye that your bloodline did at least that much. Frankly, I am surprised you are even sane. Or are you?"*

Constance could see some of Moor's wounds closing. Melusine could heal as well, but certainly not that fast. Masters did not win against lords or ladies. At least not without some sort of miracle. It was a fact that Ariane had explained times and times again. Nevertheless, Ariane made no move to assist her ally in her fight to the death. She just watched it with patient interest. Constance could feel the calm undercurrent of the vampire's thoughts and there was a lack of anger there she found curious. She wondered what had really happened between the three women and what sort of offense killing a vassal was that Melusine could not let go almost a hundred years later. Yet Ariane who had been tortured could let go. As for Moor herself, she was an enigma, a tale from Ariane's distant past back when she was not quite so formidable.

*“Look at you, foaming at the mouth with your petty insults! At least you look like your soul right now,”* Melusine said, pointing at Moor’s ravaged face. *“This is who you truly are! A miserable, lonely wench with delusions of grandeur. You think you’re queen of the castle in this city at the end but you are alone, and you have always been alone. You have no friends. You have sycophants and slaves.”*

*“That would be because I have NO EQUALS HERE! You... you utter lowlives! You mud-guzzling bottom feeders! I was destined for MORE! Not the New-Orleans! Not Shanghai! London, Paris, Madrid, Berlin, Prague! I was the equal of the best long before I became a lady but there are always, always little cockroaches like you to ruin it all for me. You are like an infestation! You! You have ruined everything, and you are doing it again! And I will have you know that my slaves are more than enough for the likes of you.”*

A smirk and Constance feels something heavier in the air, something of a call. Ariane leans forward with interest.

The locus of chaos moves towards Constance. She can feel it come in the same way she can feel the pull of fate around Boone, her old friend and almost lover. The way the world seems to bend to awaken their interest. An instant later, the eastern mage battle spills over the arena and she watches Grandmaster Shu push all opposition aside with a wave of his hand. Blood soils his erstwhile pristine robes. Half of the eastern mages now lie wounded on the ground. A few look dead.

The old master spits a few words and rushes the wounded Melusine. More follow, their aggression somehow centered on the red-hair vampire but not her foe.

*“Tut tut tut,”* Ariane says with disapproval.

A wave of thorny roots bursts from the ground, hiding the eastern practitioners from sight.

*“This is a private event.”*

*“You! A Magna Arqa. So the rumors were true,”* Moor mutters.

*“You are very far from the centers of civilization, Lady Moor. There is much that is true that you have not even heard about. But do not let your lack of enlightenment get in the way of your survival. The duel is far from over.”*

*“Oh it will be soon.”*

Moor and Melusine launch themselves at each other, but this time Moor does not stop speaking. Spells clash against wooden pillars and stone walls, shattering them.

*“I see you still rely on others to take your defense since you cannot do it by yourself. All flames, no substance.”*

Melusine snarls. Constance watches the chaos of battle around her though it never quite reaches the two servants. Even though she cannot track it, something feels different in the

same way an orchestra plays differently to those who cannot discern individual instruments. The field seems wider. The clash of blades are fewer. Spells are now more careful, with a few persistent circles of fire placed at strategic places for purpose unknown. The duel has slowed down into a battle of attrition. Moor may be no war lady but Melusine should be commended for her persistence, Constance thought. Most masters would have been flattened by now.

Nevertheless, as the fight continues, she believes she sees more damage on the redhead's armor, more blood staining her dark outfit.

*"I suppose if you could wipe your own ass then you wouldn't be here avenging imagined slight. You could not accept your own failure so you picked someone else to blame. Typical."*

*"You brought the Order of Gabriel to us! You left with your fledglings! You caused all of this!"*

*"I left you at the head of several Courtiers, a force more than sufficient to fend off an army but what did you do? Lose them all. You are as competent a leader as you are a follower."*

*"Your cowardice caused this! You never really faced the consequences of your actions! You either fled or let someone else take the fall! No more!"*

Constance watched the fight devolve with clear worry. Melusine was making mistakes. Spells grew fewer while clashes of blades left a persistent din in her ears. Melusine had the advantage at range, but she was forfeiting it out of anger. She had never seen the cold and poised master so emotive and so lost. It was strange, like watching a parent cry. She wanted to help but knew she could not. Above, Ariane still did not move. Constance tugged on their connection but Ariane shook her head minutely. She would not intervene.

Down on the ground and within the arena of thorns, Melusine was losing. Her aura pulsed in disarray while Moor was still standing, and the most dire wounds on her healed fast to leave only alabaster skin behind. Despite that, she never let up.

*"You're down here with me," Melusine wheezed, "because you're not better. You just think you are. You got slapped again and again but you don't realize it's not lack of luck. It's not unfair persecution. It's you. It's just you. We're here because of you. What you chose to do."*

*"You can't understand choices, Melusine. You don't have the brain or skills to make meaningful ones. People who make choices need to understand them, like your Vassal Arthur understood he had to die to protect you after you collapsed. That was a choice. You're just operating on instinct and low cunning."*

*"Don't talk about him," Melusine said in a dangerously low voice. Her gear was a mess. Her hair was a mess. Her aura flared uncontrollably. Blood dripped down her temple where a glancing blow had sheared her skin.*

*"Sore spot? You speak a lot about failure for someone who can't accept her own. Face it. He would have lived longer without you."*

*"FUCK YOU!"*

*"Best thing you could have done, really, was to get out of his life."*

*"Stop!"*

*"To think he died defending you. How hard can you fail as a vampire, I wonder?"*

*"You left us! You torched all my hopes as we were finally, finally getting better! I'll burn you to cinders!"*

*"Will you now?"*

The battle reached its paroxysm with a quick and unceasing exchange of blows. After-images piled on each other until Constance's brain strained under the onslaught of information. Spells crashed in a fiery onslaught. The exposed parts of the manor were barely more than ruins. Two forms crystallized in the middle of the devastation, struggling for supremacy. Moor held Melusine from the back, her dagger aimed down at an armored chest. Each held the arm of the other in a contest that Moor was easily winning, but no matter how many nicks the soul weapon added, none of them came close to a real wound.

*"Come on,"* Moor whispered in Melusine's ear.

Her voice was so clear over the terrible rumble of battle, yet so intimate.

*"Do it."*

Melusine screamed incoherently... the she exploded. Her aura detonated in a torrent of fire, pushing Moor back. The lady bit a scream for the first time then used her dagger to sever her own left arm which was on fire. Meanwhile, Melusine fell to the ground as a screaming torch. Constance just watched the flames devour Melusine's form as the woman screeched with boundless fury. Embers licked her very fingers.

Moor casually walked to Ariane, a diva in the middle of her opera finale despite the sorry state she was in. Nothing seemed to mar her confidence.

*"So,"* she claimed on a background of screams. *"you are next then?"*

Ariane smiled, calm as ever. This one showed all eight fangs.

*"Tut tut tut. I believe your claim to victory might be... a little premature."*

Constance understood now what the issue was. Melusine had not stopped screaming. Vampires burnt quickly but she had not, and she was still... whole, somehow. The exploding aura... that could only mean one thing.

The living torch stood back up, scorched armor clinging to limbs of orange fury. Hair like a great blaze formed a corona around a pair of slit, purple eyes. She moved up, spitting embers as she came.

*“MAGNA ARQA.”*

*“No, no, that’s impossible.”*

The avatar of flame jumped on Lady Moor and grabbed her in a deathly embrace. They both screamed, one dying, the other taking revenge. It was only when her victim was but an indistinct pile of ash that Melusine stopped. Her fiery form tilted backward and laughed like a madwoman.

*“AT LAST! AT LONG LAST, I AM ASCENDED. ALL WILL KNOW THE POWER OF MELUSINE OF THE LANCASTERS. I SHALL BATHE THE WORDS IN FLAMES! MY REIGN—”*

Ariane blew air. A freezing gust slowed the inferno. All of the free fires in a cone disappeared before the arctic onslaught. Melusine flickered, her corona settling. Soon, the fire was out.

*“Eh.”*

*“Heady, is it not?”* Ariane asked cordially.

*“I... can feel my aura out in the world. I can gather it. Ignite it. I am so... alive. Is this how it feels?”*

*“Yes. Let me be the first to congratulate you on your ascension, Lady Melusine of the Lancaster.”*

*“I really did it...”* Melusine said dreamily.

She stumbled a little and then Ariane was there, keeping her upright.

*“You have been promoted from America’s strongest master to its weakest lady. Well done.”*

Her rival — or was it friend?— huffed with a hint of annoyance.

*“And your first act was to embrace someone immune to disease and leave them with a burning sensation. I am not surprised, just disappointed.”*

If glares could kill, Ariane would be a pile of ash right now. Melusine gave her a last venomous, annoyed hiss before closing her eyes. Her body went limp.

*“Will she be alright?”* Constance asked with some concern.



“Yes, do not be distraught. Killing rivals can be exhausting work. She will return to her normal bitchy self tomorrow. Ah, but vengeful people are so verbose. Hmm.. Was I that talkative? I cannot remember.”

“Yes, you always are,” Constance grumbled.

“Huh. Well. Let us go then.”

The roots disappeared. Now, Constance could finally take in her surroundings.

Wang stood by her side, unharmed yet silent. A vampire she had never seen before waited behind them though he did not seem hostile. He was a bearded man with gray temples and a commanding air, the impression reinforced by an impeccable gray suit. Ariane did not move so it did not feel important at the moment. The last person was a corpse. Baudouin, his face frozen in a mask of anguish.

Beyond the devastated half of the courtyard and burning ruin of the nearby manor section, the eastern mages were backing up from each other with the face of men and women waking up with a hangover. Most were wounded but it was the dead who got most of the attention. A mix of horror and disbelief painted their face in the flickering light of fires. Far behind, the battle for Shanghai raged unimpeded. That one merely needed a spark to get on, and it was by now self-sustaining.

“I need to go to them. Talk to them. Tell them the foe is dead,” Wang said softly.

“Yes. Most likely.”

“They will be glad that the foe is dead... although I fear that it will still be a bitter medicine. I... I believe that I may make a difference.”

“You mean that you are staying. And we should go.”

“Yes. That is my duty. For the future of all we stand for.”

Constance nodded. She understood. Wang had dedicated his life to this cause and she would not expect him to change course now. The way he said it, however, now that hinted at something. Something she'd suspected for a while.

“If... if we ever open an embassy in your land, would you consider... meeting again?”

Constance pulled Wang by the collar and kissed him. He was unyielding under the western suit with muscles like steel wires. He was quite warm. And tasted nice too.

She pushed him back as his hands reached for her waist. Her friends back home would have much to say about cavorting with men of another race, but they were not here and she did not really care anyway. Ariane had politely averted her eyes.

"You can take this as a maybe," Constance allowed. "Not a definitive yes, we have not known each other for very long after all."

"What? But... Then..."

Wang caressed his lips with a scarred hand. He smiled in a rather lost way.

"Ah, you western women are quite strange. I will endeavor to travel then. Please do write!"

"I find your proposal agreeable. Now go, save your community. Oh, you can keep the ash!"

"That is not for you to decide!" Ariane exclaimed from behind where she was talking with the newly come vampire."

"Please," Constance said.

"Oh, very well."

The eastern mage walked back to his brethren as they looked on, eyes filled with suspicion and grief. He had his work cut out for him. Constance used this opportunity to come closer to Ariane and the male vampire. She thought he might be a newly ascended master from his aura.

"Constance, meet Irvine of the Lancaster. He was the one Moor kidnapped and turned, thus causing the White Cabal to come for revenge. I was bringing him up to speed with the history of his lost faction."

"Reliable news was hard to come by here," Irvine explained with a gravelly voice. "And being Lady Moor's spawn has... complicated matters."

Constance was not sure she understood. Ariane must have guessed she was lost because she provided an explanation.

"Courtiers fall under the influence of their sires when it comes to sympathies and allegiance. Irvine here was the previous black dog, the military leader of the cabal."

"Oh!"

Poor Irvine may have felt ambivalent about his previous friends while under the yoke of their enemy. Constance seemed to remember that Melusine was the same. Ariane had let out fragments of knowledge across conversations hinting she had been turned from a family that actively fought vampires. It did not seem like an enviable position.

Constance thought about being forced to kill her friends and shivered.

"Enough talks," Ariane said. "We need to retrieve Melusine's vassal and evacuate the city. I believe we have overstayed our welcome."

“Let’s get the Fury on the river then. We can board and—”

“That would take too much time and make it vulnerable. The Fury will land near the Bund, where the Vassal is anyway. We will be taking a car there for the sake of speed.”

Without waiting for an answer, Ariane strode forward with Irvine in tow, Melusine carried over a shoulder.

Constance frowned. That didn’t sound logical. Not with so many likely barricades over the city. Surely, the skies were safer? Even with Ariane herself around? Heedless of her concern, the shape of the Fury turned around to follow the river and they found a car on the road. It had been delivered on a palette with a large parachute that, by any laws of nature, should not have had the time to open. Nevertheless, here it was, black and shiny like a giant beetle.

It looked more like an armored vehicle than a taxi. There was even a turret at the top. A triangular steel plate at the front would clear most of the obstacles a mob could throw at them. Not that it was needed with the Hand of the Accords inside. Constance quickly climbed in after a fast Ariane. Melusine and Irvine were securely strapped while her bottom still had not landed on the front seat.

Constance sat down and frowned.

Something wasn’t right.

She turned to her left to see Ariane in her trousers smiling an ominous smile, clawed hands clamped on the wheel.

On the wheel.

Ariane was the pilot.

Her neuros fired an alarm but it was too late. The trap had closed around her with steel jaws a team of hunters could not pry open.

“No,” she still said, “nonononono.”

“Yes.”

“Ariane, please, no.”

“Ariane definitely yes. Fasten your harness please! We are about to depart.”

Constance knew when the battle was lost. She strapped herself in with feverish hands. A moment later, the armored car was off with a roar of its powerful engines.

She wondered if it was a good time to convert to religion.

“Did you just come here so you could drive while wearing trousers?”

“No!” Ariane replied far too quickly. “Not at all.”

Constance’s next words were lost inside of her seat where the sudden acceleration sent her. Ariane whistled, driving the armored car down the narrow road at breakneck speed. No human would have driven so recklessly, though no humans had a full range of perception and the reflexes of a vampire to back them up. Constance still gripped her leather seat with all her strength as mud and fields turned to squalid slums then two the edge of town. A barricade blocked access to Shanghai proper, manned by opiate addicts wielding cleavers and other implements.

“You call THIS a barricade you wankers?” Ariane screamed.

Constance realized there was a horn of sort relayed to a sound enchantment so everyone, and really everyone for the sound was enhanced, could hear her ‘master’ scream vulgarities at the top of her unliving lungs.

It was a little embarrassing, even more so when the tank rammed the improvised roadblock in a terrifying din of broken crates and mangled bodies. Ariane didn’t slow down. In fact, with the streets flatter, she increased the speed.

“Is this normal?” Irvine muttered to himself.

Sadly, it was. Constance grit her teeth through sandbag blocks, screaming soldiers, mobsters, rioters, arsonists, and a chicken once. Ariane was a terror and the more the destruction spread unchecked and the more ‘heated up’ the girl was growing.

“Really? I was hoping for a challenge. My departed grandmother’s faster than you, you CUNT!”

“By the Eye,” Irvine muttered.

“Ariane please.”

“Look at that idiot, Where did you get your license huh? Bingo night? Kiss my ass! Constance did you see that rust bucket? And they thought they could catch up, haha!”

“That was a kuomintang armored car.”

“More like kuomin *can’t*. Yoohoo! FASTER.”

“Ariane please,”

“Oh don’t be such a cold pisser, we’re almost there.”

“Mmgfrf,” Melusine said from the backseat. “What... what is happening?”

“Ariane is driving!” Constance bemoaned.

“Hahahaha look at them run. Anybody wants to get the roof machine gun? Fifty caliber. Shoots like a breeze.”

“How does one wield that contraption?” Irvine said, suddenly interested.

“Aim the barrel towards the foe and press the trigger. Release the trigger once the foe is gone.”

“I will attempt.”

“I am going back to sleep,” Melusine declared, and apparently did so by sheer force of will.

Constance felt terribly betrayed and left alone.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the compartment.

“Hah, you missed! I knew you would!” Ariane roared.

Constance looked through the slit of the passenger side. Straight ahead, the shape of the Bund’s western building could be seen jutting over the nearby architecture, but in the front there was a fully fortified checkpoint and at the center of that checkpoint, there was a tank.

Not an armored ad-hoc vehicle. An actual tank.

“Ariane could you just use — “

“Look at that piece of junk that they think can stop me! I am deeply insulted. Forwaaaaaard!”

Constance was yanked backward yet again, then she bumped against the armored door when a convenient rut helped the car roll on one wheel. Above, Irvine was letting out a torrent of bullet on fleeing defenders. The armored card slithered between two concrete blocks while the tank’s turret turned at a snail pace, too slow to zero on the fast-moving vehicle. As soon as they were through, Ariane screamed at her newest recruit.

“Irvine! Shoot the damn back where the gas is.”

Constance had no idea how Irvine knew where to aim but the magically enhanced bullets slammed into the enemy vehicle which burst into a flameball. As for their car, it was already accelerating away.

“I thought you said no diplomatic incidents?” Constance screamed.

“There are no incidents if there are no witnesses!”

The Accords foreign politics had bright nights ahead of it.