

The Crew clumped around the Gatling gun like ants around jam fallen from a scone. We could hear vulgar laughs from here, though the general noise remained low. They didn't seem to be in a hurry.

"I bet I could pick off the Gatling servants from up here," Felicia whispered from the side. The two of us had taken the balcony directly facing the horde as the defenders' best marksmen. I considered her offer but declined quickly.

"We want them to commit first. This gun is powerful, but it will not pierce half a meter of sandbag."

"What's a metre?"

"A slightly larger yard."

"You Europeans have the weirdest quirks."

I refrained from defending myself before this grave accusation and focused on the enemies I would actually have to shoot. They were deploying at the edge of the village, well within range of even the most antiquated rifle. I considered using this opportunity to open fire and realised that I had no objective reason not to shoot now.

"They're disrespecting us, let's give them a welcome," I announced, and lined up a man who seemed to be giving orders.

The detonation made a few of the men jump. The officer slumped in his saddle.

A few of the riders did not resist the call of violence. Despite the objection of a few men in charge, a few split from the group and charged us with screeching war cries. Just as Felicia shot another, I pushed her head down and warned everyone.

"Stay in cover!"

The Gatling gun opened on us.

We hunkered down before the incoming storm of lead. Except... it didn't exactly arrive. Bullets dug into wood and the piled furniture behind, starting with our balcony and then to the barricaded windows around. Although it was quite impressive, it represented only three to four bullets per second mostly centered around the same target. The deluge of fire we had faced at the brothel had been far scarier if only because of its unpredictability. Meanwhile, the furious attackers I expected to see mowed down reached the base of the store and opened fire on us as well. It was a frustrating development.

"Nevermind. Felicia my dear, give those amateur artillerists what for!"

I did not have to ask her twice. A single shot took care of the servant moving a lever. His companion dove under cover and we had free reign to engage.

“Fire at will, lads!” I roared.

“And lasses,” Felicia corrected to my dismay. This is not what my father’s tales prepared me to expect. Nevertheless, I peeked over the barrier and gave the riders a taste of my revolver.

Just as before, the thugs were not affected by deadly wounds. They kept shooting and growling with no regard for their leaking lifeblood, to the extent that I started ignoring the dying foes in favour of the livelier ones. It was fortunate that the very elixir that gave them bravery beyond death also diminished their intellect. Many stabbed their guns forward when they shot despite the absurdity of such a movement, ruining their aim. Others even swiped at the air as if fighting invisible enemies. Eventually, my companions’ concentrated fire diminished their numbers just in time for reinforcements to arrive.

The Crew was trickling into town without organization, driven forward in a herd by the most determined specimens. I made good use of a provided rifle, taking them down with great alacrity and passing the empty weapons to Annie. The woman passed me fresh weapons before scurrying back into the room where she and other determined women reloaded them as fast as they could. Our sustained fire finally made a dent in the enemy’s determination. The most sober of them all dismounted and scrambled into houses, seeking cover. The return fire increased. At least the Gatling gun had fallen silent.

The minute I spent shooting left and right felt like an eternity, dear reader. The dull thuds of bullets impacting our defences echoed the buzz of those flying over our heads. More than once, dust and debris flew into my face, but I was well-protected thanks to our preparation.

Others were not so lucky. I heard a cry from one of the windows. I had no time to offer help, however, as we were at risk of being overrun. Already I could hear the bangs of men trying to break in. The tail of the formation had not yet entered the village. I needed a few more seconds.

By my side, Felicia busied herself taking out the most dangerous of foes, those who actually took the time to aim. Her sense of priorities impressed me from a civilian and a woman. It allowed me to stay focused on the easier targets, downing one man after the other. Whenever possible, I even aimed for the head! Such an unwise course would be the very height of stupidity in any other circumstances, yet the urgent situation and abundance of ammunition forced my hand. It appeared that most of the crew had entered the trap when my hand was forced by fate in the form of a great crash coming from downstairs.

“It’s time!” I screamed, and rushed through the window and our stunned reloading assistant on a mad dash downstairs. As I moved down, I took in the alarming sight in front of me in a flash.

Walker was here, standing over a dead guard. The very man I beat to a pulp had a gun and a red face still covered in bruises. His malevolent eyes lit up as soon as he saw me, and he turned himself to take me down. I had my revolver in my holster and would not draw in time, so I did the next best thing: I jumped, feet forward.

“Have at ya!”

My boots impacted with the lout's surprised mug and I rolled before he could react, soon jumping onto the detonator. No time! I could hear other foes breaking their way in.

The lever depressed under my weight. I turned on myself and blocked my ears.

Walker stood back up, blood dripping from a cut lip. He snarled as he aimed his revolver at me. I could see the rust on the side of the barrel, dear reader. I could count the hairs on his knuckles. Before he could pull the trigger, the world went upside down.

I was ever so grateful for protecting my ears because even with both indexes firmly rammed in the outer canals, I almost went deaf from the terrible fracas. The series of explosions rocked the very earth, making my chest vibrate and clench painfully. How fragile we all were in front of the wrath of chemistry itself! Fortunately, this mighty force had been harnessed by our side, and the dust settled over a silent ghost town.

Walker stumbled to his feet. I drew my weapon and pulled the trigger, only for the hammer to click on an empty cartridge. Damnation! I had forgotten to reload! Cursing my foolishness, I assessed the situation in an instant and dove through the nearest door and into the room where we had stored all our supplies. A bullet smashed into the far wall, shot by my pursuer. I hid behind a crate just as he bull rushed in after me.

"Come on out, you lily-livered coward!" He bellowed.

I ignored the slight on my honour. I would not forfeit my life for the sake of bravado. Too much hung in the balance. I crawled around the room, between barrels and bags. As for Walker, he moved about the room with nervous energy, screaming as he went.

"Come out and face me!"

I realised that he could probably hear very little, yet sneaking on him was risky because he turned on himself quite often. He seemed both drunk and innervated at the same time, which I understood. There was no need to hurry. Time was on my side in this confrontation.

I patiently reloaded while following the man's progress through the room. When he stumbled, I stood up.

"Haha! Got... got..."

Walker's step back turned into an awkward tumble when his foot slipped on the expanding pool of blood under his feet. He wobbled and fell against the wall. His weapon fell in a clatter.

"You..."

"Pain is not useless," I said, though I doubted he could hear me. "Pain is the body's way of telling us that it has reached its limits. You are not transformed into gods when you quaff the vile mixture, you merely forget that you are still humans."

He finally found the glass shard deeply embedded in his flank, the very same that he displaced with every step. The very same that was killing him now.

Walker collapsed just as Honore walked in.

“Flawless victory, monsieur?”

“Not quite, old fellow, I believe I made a hole in my trousers.”

“I am confident we can mend the situation, monsieur. In the meanwhile, Felicia reports that the enemy captain is attempting to crawl away.”

“Then let us give him a hand.”

Of the devastation outside, I can in truth say very little. A more lyrical soul than my own could have filled pages of notebooks with flowery descriptions and sobering metaphors. Unfortunately, I must admit that words mostly failed me when I came out and the result of my plan appeared through a cloud of dust and soot, lit by the pale morning sun of autumn. I will spare you the more gruesome details, dear readers, but know that in this moment I realized that mankind had bridged the gap between act of god and act of war, and that if this was the result of today's technology, I feared what fruit we would harvest even half a century from now. Those of our foes left whole stared unblinking at the heavens, bloody tears trailing down their cheeks. It was a strange possession that walked through the remains of the cataclysmic event, and it was in silence that we found our fallen enemy. He reacted on the spot.

“You have no idea who you are messing with, you imbeciles! Do you know who I am?”

The man on the ground roared and spat, but even a child could see the terror in his eyes. His mewling threats are the last defiance of a man with more anger than dignity.

“I know you are a member of the family behind the Crew. I care little about you, I want to meet Mr. Winters.”

“Mr Winters? How do you know...”

“I know a great many things. My knowledge is extensive, sir, quite unlike my patience. You will provide me with his location now or I shall have to extract it out of you!”

“I don't know where he lives really! We meet him at the bottom of the mountain and trade the elixir for...”

The man paled, and suspicion filled my heart.

“For what, sir? Answer me I say!”

“Food. Silver. Captives, sometimes.”

“You despicable monster!” Felicia screamed.

“How could you?” Annie whispered, and her horror needled me more than I could ever say.

Honore was also affected, for the man took out his monstrous knife from its sheath and waved it around, ready to bleed the villain like a stuck pig! Taking it upon myself to be the voice of reason, I halted his gesture before he could give our prisoner the Gordian treatment.

“Hold on, dear Honore. You must not! We will not just stab him in the streets like savages, or worse, socialists! We must not allow our anger to rule us or we will have become like those we fight. Justice, not blind vengeance, must guide our actions!”

“Very well said, monsieur! But then... what should we do?”

I picked up another slice of roast and sat down on a nearby rock, watching our foe's body swing in the wind. Hanging certainly brought a certain cachet to public execution, I always said. The man had forfeited the path to Mr Winters' lair, eventually, before accusing me of lying. Apparently, caring little about him would imply that I would forget his crimes. What a peculiar conclusion. I merely meant to say that his demise would not cause me to lose even a wink of sleep! Speaking of sleep, I resolved to talk to my fallen angel before we left. I found her in quiet thought, leaning against a wall in her dusty but nonetheless gorgeous dress.

“My condolences for the guards we lost today.”

“What? Oh, truth be told, I barely knew many of them. I was passing through. I tend to travel a lot.”

“Oh, I see. I assume that you were griev—”

I interrupted myself before I could ruin the mood. My angel appeared wistful and it broke my heart. It was my fault that I had not yet made the world into a place where she could be happy.

“Nevermind that. Then, it is good that you are ready to depart. I am glad that you are used to the rigour of the road.”

“Travelling has its perks. New scenery, new people.”

I was so happy, for I feared that it would be some time before we could settle down anywhere, not least because I could not see my angel engaged in back-breaking labour on a farm. As much as I respect the occupation and Annie herself, I believed that she was not cut for it.

“Your words fill me with joy. Then there is just the matter of Mr Winters and we can leave.”

“Oh, already? And where do you intend to go, Alexander?”

Imagine, dear reader, a pit filled with frozen water. You are heading back home after a hard day’s work, body tired yet soul filled with contentment. Suddenly, icy liquid splashed where the sun caressed. Suddenly, you are drowning. I was not quite drowning yet, dear reader. I was in the air as the gate opened, subjected to no force but gravity, going nowhere but down. I was slipping from the cliff and the ledge still seemed in range of my grasping hand, but it was all a lie, an illusion. I had no hope.

“Me? But. Wait. We? No? You do not intend to stay?”

“I already told you I... oh. Oh no...”

“What do you mean oh no. Annie, please. Annie. You are jesting.”

“I am so sorry Alexander. I forgot that... Oh, I did not mean to play a cruel trick on you. Forgive me if I set the wrong expectation.”

“Wrong expectation? But surely... But why would you leave? I thought we were together? I want to make an honest woman out of you.”

She looked, suddenly afraid but I didn’t want her to be afraid. I wanted her to be happy.

“I am sorry, Alexander. I do not wish to be a honest woman.”

“Annie, Annie if I failed you in any way...”

“You did not. You were a perfect gentleman and I have no cause for complaints.”

“I must have, or you would not leave me, surely? Give me a chance to understand? What have I done?”

“It is not about you, Alexander. What I want in life is what I have now. Freedom, adventure, something new. I am living how I wish to live and I will not allow myself to be bound, even by you. I am sorry.”

“I do not understand...”

My mind refused to accept the evidence. Annie did not wish to be with me. Annie did not love me. For my parents and before, an act of intimacy was the ultimate form of trust, and though I did not begrudge my fallen angel the brevity of our courting, I had assumed that my

feelings were reciprocated. It was not the case. She did not wish to be my wife, my other half. Prompting her more about what I had to do scared her and confused me even more, to the point that I slumped against the nearest wall, utterly defeated. Guttured. Drowning. Swallowed by the dark sea of my unrequited affection. She left me no flaw to fix or proof to deliver. Her heart did not need a key, it simply had no door, or at least not for me.

I was crushed.

I would have preferred it if she had killed this love before it had bloomed its strangling thorns, before it had turned to poison in my heart.

I was lost.

I left her in a daze. I spent the rest of the evening in a daze. In the morning, I saddled my horse and left with a blank mind, too stunned to even protest Felicia's company. She and Honore trailed me without a word while we followed the path north, where the Crew had come from. We walked in single file over mud trampled by a hundred horses, all carrion now. I thought I might have munched on something for lunch but I could not for the life of me recall what. The land was flat here. It was empty and depressing. There were just plains after plains after plains, until we saw it in the late afternoon.

"Is this what the leader described?" I finally asked. We had stopped our horses, so great was our surprise.

"When he described a mountain, I assumed he was exaggerating monsieur. I expected a small hill.

"Everyone knows the land around here is flat..." Felicia said without much conviction, and for a good reason. In front of us stood an impossibility.

Like an obsidian shard lodged in flesh, a jagged piece of rock emerged from the vast expanse of Kansas almost vertically. The lone mountain pierced the landscape by its presence, and the evening sun dyed the snow at its top a bloody red, nevermind that it had not snowed yet. It must have been perhaps three hundred meters high, which would not have been much in a mountainous region. Here, the elevation made it properly sorcerous.

"I must be dreaming," Felicia whispered.

"Monsieur, I suspect that we face some devilry."

"You are quite correct, Honore. Nevertheless, I knew I would be facing evil the moment I witnessed the effects of that elixir. This changes nothing. We must press on."

We approached the edge of the strange rock in silence. We walked the edge for a while before realizing that there was no clear path up, or at least none that would be practical for our horses. We dismounted with some trepidation then followed a treacherous path that seemed to be carved from the very rock. The stone here was dark and glassy like the corpse

of a long-dead volcano. The weather worsened immediately. The cloud above us, so far only threatening, opened to disgorge their cottonous content. The wind picked up.

“We are not equipped to face bad weather, monsieur.”

“The summit cannot be too far, Honore. We saw it from the bottom.”

“I pray you are right, monsieur, but I do not trust my eyes, and I do not trust this place either.”

The brave Haitian’s concerns were warranted, because our ascent was marred by slippery stone and treacherous fog. More than once, I almost put my foot down only to discover that an entire side of the wall was missing, and that the setting sun reflected on the crystal ice had my sense of perspective fooled. It became so hard that I used the rope I had brought to tie us all together. Alas, it was not enough, for the cold itself became unbearable. My fingers and toes hurt despite the gloves I had. Eventually, a cry from Felicia stopped my progress.

“Felicia?”

“I... am sorry. I can't I can't!”

Her teeth chattered from the cold. her lips were blue, her face flushed. Honore was barely better. I stopped then, and came to a realization. As soon as the chase had started, I had stopped thinking about my lost love. All of my life, all of my focus had been dedicated to climbing that damn rock and seeing our crusade against evil to its fateful end. I had forgotten everything in that pursuit.

But I would not forget my friends.

“You two must go back.”

“Monsieur, this is suicide... This weather, it is like nothing I have ever felt before. It must be some powerful voodoo. “

“I know.”

“You believe me?”

“Magic has been proven to exist by the scientific community and the both of us... sorry, the three of us know damn well that this mountain ought not be here, and yet, despite the adversity, I must forge onward. I shall do so alone.”

“Monsieur...”

“No matter the odds, no matter the costs, a Bingle will not back down in the face of such evil. The time for ruses and stratagems is over. I am facing the unknown with no choice but to carry on, for the enemy is weakened and he might decide to run and start over elsewhere. No, this adversity calls to me. I will continue. I can do it.”



“You appear to be doing fine, sir. Perhaps you have a better constitution. Nevertheless...”

“Trust me, Honore. I was born for this.”

The courageous Haitian appeared worried, his concern made even more heart-warming because we had known each other for a short time and, despite the tumultuous events, developed a deep respect for each other. His unwavering support turned my resolve to steel. I would not allow myself to fail, not with such people as he behind me. This led me to Felicia.

“You two take care of each other and await my return. I will be there shortly.”

“Do you want my rifle?” Felicia asked.

“I prefer to have my own, and besides, it is only so accurate because your hands wield it.”

She blushed delicately, which should help with keeping warm. As for Honore, he pulled his massive knife from its sheath and presented it to me handle first.

“This is my family’s heirloom, monsieur. The handle is gold taken from the flanks of Pik Lasel while its iron blade was used to shave the island’s seven most cruel slave holders. I will lend it to you... but I expect you to return it!”

“Shave, you say?” I asked with some confusion.

“He means castrate,” Felicia explained in a darkly amused voice. “Can I have it later?”

Honore and I shared a long glance, a mutual promise that such a terrible tool of justice should never be found in the hand of a woman. Promptly, I detached myself from the rope binding us and moved on while the two trotted back the way we came. The wind seemed to redouble when I kept going, forcing me to shove my gloved hand in my pocket. Strangely, Honore’s knife felt warm and the hand holding it less frigid. With my spirits momentarily high, I rushed onward with determination. I knew in my heart that I was running away from my wounded feelings, but I also realized that stopping Mr. Winters was a valid cause. Suddenly, as the wind against me felt like a physical presence, I crossed a threshold. One last step and I was out of the cloud of snow.

All around me were black rocks surrounded by a sea of dark clouds. The last rays of the day showed me a strange spectacle the likes of which I had never seen before, and I knew for certain that some terrible magic was at work here. In front of me stood a castle of ancient make, all tall spires and needle-like crenelations. Spiked corbels extended from flanged, small towers and from them hang icicles as sharp as daggers. It was all sharp angles and black stone. It was not a keep, it was a maw. And yet, for all its aggressive appearance, the manor lacked any sort of sensible defenses. Castles back homes are honest constructs of solid stones with clear purpose. The edifice in front of me wore its thorns without practicality, like scale mail as a salon dress. The strange impression only accentuated what I perceived as evidence. Just like the mountain, this edifice should never have existed. The architectural style itself was like nothing that could be found on earth, not to mention that it would take a determined team years to build. I was on my guard from the moment I saw it. I moved

forward with determination, however, and reached the door in short order. It was an incongruous set of two gates with a heavy knocker. It took me a measure of self-control not to knock to be polite. I let myself in as quietly as I could, and gasped in surprise when I arrived in the lushest, most welcoming entrance I had ever seen.

The room itself stretched in a long rectangle, generously lit by candles. A bright fire crackled merrily in the hearth and brought a sudden warmth to the previously frigid temperatures. A table laid in the middle charged with victuals, gold and ruby wine in crystal decanters, and silvery spoons glittering under the lights. Athletic statues lounged or stood on seats here and there. They lend the place a classical atmosphere that I did not trust for a single second. Only a liar and a cheat would use classical statues in a barocco room in a fake gothic castle. I did not trust the heat from the fire I felt on my skin, nor the food, nor, even, the statue. When the urge to sit down and relax filled me, I slapped myself awake. When hunger and thirst harried me, I bit my tongue. Finally, I felt somnolence assail me as I made my way to the far doors and stopped.

This was not real.

This was not me.

Anger, yes. Sadness also, but never somnolence. I had been careless in the den of a monster once, and she had taken me under her wing. There was not enough luck in the world for a man to survive twice from this same mistake. I brought Honore's knife to my chin and sliced. There only reason I did not bring it to my glove hand was the warmth I felt. it was wrong, feverish. Illusory. Immediately, the full room came in sharp focus. A strange light glowed from every brightly lit object. The more I looked, and the brighter they became, yet at the same time the edge of my vision turned dark and foreboding. The tables were iceblocks, and the food was frozen bones. The fire was white and blue. I jumped and waved the blade around, still red with my blood. An illusion! A trick of the mind, dear reader. Afraid, I put the tip of the knife against one of the statues, and behold! It chipped, a fragment falling on the ground. Beneath were frozen muscle fibers.

I was beset by frozen corpses.

Alarmed, I rushed to the next door, only to be pushed away. The heavy oak panels — or were they? — almost ended up catching me in the cheek when a man barged in with the most vicious expression I had seen. He was a pale and wan, tall fellow with a stoop and a handsome if angular face, but his eyes were the crystalline blue of the frozen lake. He wore an elaborate doublet in shades of black and blue while a fur cap hid his hair. Indeed, it appeared that my host had picked a theme for his appearance.

"Mr Winters, I presume?" I asked, hands creeping to my holster.

"You come in, you do not partake, and now you damage my collection? How rude you mortals can be. Very rude. Although... you are different."

He whispered a few words in a strange tongue that tickled my ear with the edge of understanding, as if the words were just slightly beyond me, and yet they carried a powerful

meaning. I heard his interest before a peculiarity, but it was a cold and merciless approach. He was not the caretaker of a rare flower but one who pins butterflies to a board. I had enough.

“Are you Mr Winters?”

“Yes, yes, I am known by that name.”

Confirmation made, I shot him in the face.

Now I know, dear reader, that you might find this a bit unsportsmanlike, but do please keep in mind that I stood alone in a gallery of cadavers facing a man who made mountains appear out of thin air. It was better to err on the side of caution. Unfortunately, my quick attempt was thwarted when his image seemed to fracture before me, then immediately reform. A statue shattered in the hall. Sorcery!

Winters' eyes stayed blue but the white turned black. He smiled. His teeth were a forest of dark needles tipped with brownish flakes of dried blood. He removed a dagger from his still-impeccable doublet and dove under my next shot. He moved right with inhuman dexterity, dodging another shot under the table. I moved back.

“You are other but you smell local. How curious”

He asked another question, again in that unnerving language. I heard a question and the notion of origin but I cared not.

“If you are going to hide then I will go after your precious prizes,” I claimed, and shot the nearest statue. It cracked and broke down and I aimed at the next one but my time ran out. Winters snarled and launched himself at me. I got him between the eye but another statue was destroyed in his stead. A second shot brought the same result, except that it was at point blank range and, somehow, the cloud of smoke blinded him. He dove back under the table.

“You will run out of bullets soon enough, curious thing. I know how that contraption works...”

“Then you should also know that I have two of them.”

I emptied my last bullet at another grisly trophy before taking my rifle out. I calculated that I had seven bullets and there were only four targets left plus winter himself. Somehow, I doubted that I would be given the time to reload, especially if I had to do it with gloves. I had to make them count.

“Let's see you shooting a cube of ice,” a sinister voice uttered from the shadows.

Quickly, I pulled the trigger of my quickly cooling weapon and another bullet came out. Then another.

“Did you hope for something, abomination?”

“Damn you!”

He rushed me again, and against all odds, I missed. Or rather, the bullet clanged uselessly against the silver blade of the man’s knife. Out of despair, I dropped my rifle and raised the knife I had been holding with two fingers. The monster gave another ghastly smile. I could see every sharpened fang in clear detail when he lurched. Somehow, I managed to dive to the side, but I felt a sharp pain in my flank. The beast had cut me!

“I will enjoy bleeding you dry, strange little thing. I think I will find your flesh delectable.”

Another charge. I had to get a hold of myself! Out of options, I yelled in return and charged him back.

“Have at you!”

We crossed blades, and for one moment I was pushed back by an incredible strength. It was like standing before a moving ship and trying to stop it with one’s bare hand. I did not stand a chance.

And then the feeling shattered. The dagger stopped against my knife and his face turned to disbelief.

“You dare bring iron? In MY HOME?”

He grabbed me by the collar before I could react and threw me aside. I expected the cold impact of stone, and yet I went through the castle boundaries with a crash, rotten wood splintering under my weight. I crashed out into the howling storm of winter’s heart. The winds instantly froze me to my heart. I could barely see a couple of meters in front of me. I was also disarmed.

The monster stepped out from the wall, backlit by a blue radiance. His mouth extended all the way to his ears now. He was tall and still stooped. Fingers extended like claws to unnatural length from his malformed hand so that any resemblance to a human was obscured by the horrifying shape he had finally revealed.

“You were an amusing diversion, little thing. It was smart of you to weaken my hold by slaying my pawns, but it will not suffice. I will move on. I will find other pawns to feed my blood to. They will bring me all the power I need. Despair now, tasty treat, because this is the end of your story.”

“Yes it is,” I replied with a grim smile, “because night has fallen. And you are outside.”

She fell on him.

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My claws pierce the fae's shoulders and an interesting bit of magic happens. A complex fae magic construct transfers meaning between the one before me and a reserve behind, somewhere inside of the house. He shifts out and reassembles a few feet away no worse for wear. Complex and resource-intensive, however. I believe the range might be short as well.

"Who are you?" he asks in English.

"Can you tell?" I reply in child Likaeen.

"Or what, indeed. Truly, this world is more filled with tasty things than I first assumed. The weave is not quite as rigid as I thought. Although, you are claimed. I can smell the stench of summer on you. Keyholes as well. An intriguing mix."

"The desire for freedom makes the strangest alliances don't you think?"

"Those are the tools of weaklings. True power tolerates no partage."

"Oh, you do not wish to escape?"

The fae gives me an impressive smile. I am almost inclined to harvest a tooth just to inspect it later. Fascinating.

"Why escape when I can bring winter here instead? So many mortals sacrifice their independence for the truth I offer. The blood on the snow, the hunt, hunger that needs to be quenched. They speak to the local things on a level they understand. I will just have to find more to replace the ones you broke. When enough of them believe it, then winter will come as it always does."

"Amusing, but there is room for only one cold-loving apex predator in this world."

"Agreed."

He jumps on me.

Slow.

He is barely more free than Sinead and with his men dead, his house breached, and his plans in shambles, this is merely the end of a rather short hunt. I slap his pathetic attempt aside.

"I believe this was your last statue."

I love the loss of confidence and the sudden fear. I love the smell of his panic, but they are cut too short when a blue shield surrounds him. It fills with ice. He still speaks through the quickly forming frost coffin as if it were not here.

"Your thing mentioned night, so I will see you during the day. Soon."

“Amusing.”

I take out the thorn with the absolute certainty that I will grind his defenses in only a minute. I need not have bothered. A sound like breaking glass pierces through the gale. We both look down to see the fae’s own silvery blade digging deep into his shield. I hear Bingle cry in triumph. He threw the weapon. The fae’s protection cracks under the weight of his own magic turned against him.

My prey’s expression of disbelief is quite delicious.

His protection fall to pieces and I bite down before he summons any more cheap tricks.

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Cold.

Ice.

Night.

A polar winter in shades of blue, black, and green. Scattered bones, remnants from a feast long since reduced to gnawed shards and frozen tufts of hair. Aurorae shimmer in the distance. There is no wind here, only the immobility of a polar midnight. To breathe is to invite death in one’s own lungs. It is to surrender the warmth in one’s breast to the eternal, unending expanse of the end. There will never be a spring here. In some places, summer will return and the cycle will continue, but one day, the light will dim. One day, winter will remain. It will bury everything under its frozen embrace until the world reverts to one vast dead rock, until everything stops one piece at a time. It is inevitable. Cold is not spells or feelings. It is the absence of movement. One day, all of creation will return to it. Forever.

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I surface and pull the cold inside of me. The concept crystallizes in my veins and my psyche. A crack appears on my forearm, but it disappears soon enough when I digest the idea further. Behind us, the illusory castle collapses in a pile of planks. The fog disperses. We are at ground level with grass under our feet. The blonde prostitute and the black man stare with amazement. I suppose they are his acolytes now. Bingles seem to have a propensity to meet the most curious personalities. Not me, of course. Loth.

I pick up the dagger from the dead fae, all his teeth now returned to normal. I present the captured weapon to the winner of the fight.

“Ah, thank you. I will be keeping that and returning his knife to brave Honore. It has saved my life. Will you stay with us?”

“No. The mystery is resolved. You can rest for a while before resuming your adventures, young Bingle. As for me, I have my own path to follow.”