

For the first time in my second life, I wake up in absolute panic. I cannot move, I cannot see. The presence of the sun weighs on my mind like a yoke. A deafening silence assails me and deprives me of even a limpet of information. I believe that my time has come. I shall be stuck in limbo for all of eternity, finally punished for the murders and the greed and pursuing naughty activities with Torran.

It takes me far too much time to realize that it is, in fact, a normal and predictable state of affairs. I am underground.

Terror soon gives way to fear. I acted in desperation last night, and crawled underground as soon as I could. In truth, I should have waited until the last moment. That cur Anatole could have felt me cast a spell and come to investigate, thus putting me at his mercy. I may yet be a victim of the skeleton mages as they scour the land in fury. Any time now, a bony knuckle will pierce the soil and grab me like a doll before drawing me up to a fiery demise.

It does not happen. A cursory inspection of my aura reveals that the mark is gone, dispelled, as it were. I am free of any mark. I am still wearing Nashoba's earrings, of course, I just would not bet on them over the power of the Eighth.

My worries dissipate under the smoldering embers of rage.

That mongrel.

That despicable, back-stabbing, oath-breaking son of a flaccid baboon. That lily-livered roach-brained overgrown scullion. That fucking asshole. I will skin him, dress him, then spit-roast him on a red-hot poker. Ugh!

How did he even do this? I distinctly remember taking the oath! It said:

"And finally, do you promise to protect and support your fellow Knights as if they were your own blood?"

Anatole cannot possibly have skipped this step.

I consider the question for a solid twenty minutes and find only one possible explanation. Anatole does not see me as a fellow Knight. This is the kind of risk and loophole one has to work with when forcing oaths upon vampires. It would still mean that he went against the rules by knowingly putting me in danger at the very least. He should be hurting right now. He will hurt much more when I get my talons on his sorry, flea-ridden hide.

Poor Jimena must be worried that I have gone missing. I must be sure to find her soon.

Speaking of which, what should I do? How do I take revenge? Betrayal or not, I am still a Squire of the Order and I have a duty to let my hierarchy handle it. It means joining my team and reporting the crime. Fortunately, more detailed oaths and interrogation can lure out the truth. I also believe that attempted murder on a fellow Knight should be punishable by death. While I would prefer to drain him myself, I cannot deny that there is a certain beauty in having the Order he swore to defend do the deed in my stead.

Bah, what am I even considering? I swore ten years of my life to those glorified thugs. I have to follow the law. To skew a mission to serve my purpose is one thing. Breaking the laws for the sake of vengeance is another, a clear violation if there are any.

Once more, I am struck by the limits of oaths on vampires whose vision of the world differs from... Oh who am I kidding? The limits of oaths on morally ambiguous, backstabbing little pricks like Anatole. Truly, Constantine accomplished a miracle by creating laws both restrictive and specific, so that the manacles remain small yet inflexible.

My mind is wandering.

I find it hard to focus on any single topic, between my unpleasant circumstances, the anger in my heart and the sun above me. What if Anatole obtained the blessing of his hierarchy to 'let an accident happen, should fate choose this path' or some other trite nonsense? What if this is a purge? No, I must focus. I am not some timid fledgling. These doubts serve no purpose. I will wait and I will find my way back, carefully. After that I will present my case.

Yes, this is an acceptable plan.

Now to ignore the moist soil pressing all over me. Since I do not suffocate, the sensation does not lead to panic and a reflexive intake of breath. I just worry that some slimy worm might crawl into my nose by accident. That would be dramatic.

No, everything will be going fine.

I just have to wait.

And wait.

Slowly, late afternoon gives way to early evening, and then, night. I feel its coming and burst with impatience, yet once the last rays of the radiant bane disappear, I do not explode out of the earth like a rabid mole. I allow the spell to carry me to the surface and open my eyes as I lay on the ground. No aura. No strange smell. No suspicious light burning on the horizon. Only the normal scents of the forest grace my nose, though the stench of carrion is prevalent on account of poor Kurshu's remains left to rot under the summer sun. After a few moments, and satisfied that nothing is actively tracking me, I emerge from the crumbling soil and sigh.

I am, of course, filthy.

With a heavy heart, I grab the body by my side and walk to find a path up. If Anatole made up some lie about the prisoner, it could work as proof. I would also like to bury him. He really tried his best in the pursuit of freedom, and it is a struggle I can sympathize with and deserves my respect. I can easily find my way back to the base under the brewery. I merely need to watch my step.

Kurshu's blood still sings in my core. He was... very close to human. It makes me wonder how we can be so similar.

I walk to the top of the incline, keeping my guard up, and stop to take in the new landscape before me. Entire parts of the forest have been torched. Some are still smouldering quietly under the nightly breeze while columns of men bearing torches patrol the valley. An elevation blocks my line of sight so that I cannot see the exact state of the invader camp, yet the sentries wear native, mundane clothes. It appears that our foes were successfully pushed back.

I always knew that explosives were the solution. We just had to use a lot of it.

I shake my head and accelerate. If the humans can so freely tread the plains, then it means that I only have the coming ordeal to fear. I retrace my steps back to the place where the shield stood and see signs of damage in the earth. It appears that our 'superiors' — and I am employing the term reluctantly — brought tools to help with their attempt. Come to think of it, I remember that someone came to interrupt us, just before the last of the mages and my companions left. What did they say? I search my memory for the fugacious moment.

What was it?

Oh yes, something about evacuating and spreading out to limit the casualties. **AFRAID. WEAK.** I was right to ignore them. Now, to find them.

I keep going. I reach the outskirts of the abandoned village to see that it is occupied by the mortal army. I have nothing to tell them and so weave between groups to go on my way. They appear to have buried and burned the dead. I keep my guard up just in case something happens. After the ceaseless crisis of the past three days, I can hardly believe that I walked a few miles without anything actively trying to kill me.

The first excitement of the evening occurs just as I leave the camp and feel a familiar yet troubled aura rush towards me. I have never felt her so panicked. I flare my own in answer, and she swerves violently. A few moments later, Jimena is in sight.

Then she slams into me, and picks me up under my armpits. Kurshu's body falls to the side.

Jimena is a picture of grief and terror. Her normally stoic face is twisted and barely recognizable.

"It is you. Really you," she whispers.

"Yes."

I am pulled into a very, very tight embrace. Since Jimena is on the short side, I end up with my head above and behind her shoulders while she buries hers in my armored bosom. I pat her awkwardly, and she sniffs in a way that makes me feel sorry for being so dusty. When she finally puts me down, I understand. Two red trails drip down her cheeks.

"I thought you were dead. I would have never ever ever forgiven myself. Ever. For sending you here."

She smiles despite her tears and grabs my hand. She guides one of my fingers to her cheek and I pick up a single sanguine droplet.

In my half a century of existence, I do not think that I had ever tasted vampire tears. The droplet lands on my tongue and fades away immediately. It only leaves behind a vague, salty taste.

My heart gives a powerful thump and I lurch forward under the sudden onslaught of sensations. Worry clamps on my chest like glacial claws, soon followed by guilt. I left the one who trusted me alone. Then I grieved because I killed her, I caused her death. The emotions explode in me in a way that I have not felt since Nirari killed me. They are full-bodied emotions that touch my chest, throat, mind, and soul. I gasp as they take and carry me away. Joy and relief replace the negative feelings with a torrent of warmth and pleasure. I fall on a knee.

“Strong stuff, huh?” Jimena sobs, *“I still had to return the favor.”*

It takes me a moment to understand her words, so moved and flustered I am. The foreign emotions linger and I feel flushed and alive. My heart is beating, and I have to breathe to feel whole. A distant part of me acknowledges that this is an illusion, a phantasm of a world lost forever. The rest of me cares not.

I once gave her my tears back in the vampire fortress an eternity ago. The circle is now complete.

It takes a little while for Jimena to finally release me. She sits heavily on a nearby stone and speaks in a low voice. She is still affected.

“After Anatole told us that you two were separated after the explosion, I feared the worst. I fell into slumber against my will knowing that you had most likely perished. I ran here telling myself that I was looking for your ashes, but I was lying to myself. I held onto that last tiny spark of hope that you had survived... and I was right. I imagine that you found a cavern of sorts?”

“No, I use a spell to submerge myself in dirt.”

“Good, excellent. I forgot how resourceful you were.”

She looks up.

“I brought you here thinking I could support you. Instead, I was ordered to pull out when we gave up on the wall. It was my fault to assume that the Order would allow personal feelings to matter. I failed you, Ariane.”

“No, you followed your oath, as I expected. More importantly, Anatole and I were not separated. He tried to kill me.”

Jimena's mouth opens in utter surprise, then she stands up and rushes me yet again.

"Are you... but how? How?"

I relay the events to her, including the detonation of the bomb and Kurshu's death. Jimena's answer is immediate and thunderous.

"Oh that little... He told us... Oh the spineless, honorless bastard. I will see him die for this transgression. We must away! I cannot rest while he dishonors the uniform."

I nod in understanding and pick up Kurshu's body again. We move fast now, needled by her mounting anger. I do not think that I have seen Jimena truly furious before, but I do now. Her aura flares dangerously.

We reach the secret base in record time, and find a group of Knights gathered before an armored carriage. They are loading supplies. Both Anatole and my team are there, as well as Marlan who supervises recruitment and training back at Cloud Haven, the fortress. We have come upon the junior group.

I spare a glance at Jimena to ask her how we should proceed. I need not have bothered. She struts down the main path with the fury of all the women ever scorned.

"Anatole, you stand accused of attempted murder on a fellow Knight. Yesterday, you waited until Squire Ariane was exhausted and pushed her off a cliff, breaking her body on the rocks below. You executed the prisoner Kurshu to avoid witnesses. You returned to us and claimed that you had not 'seen' her and that you 'did not know where she went', twisting the truth through technicalities and half-lies. You are a betrayer, a coward, and a disgrace. Marlan, please take this man into custody."

I stand by her side in all my grimy glory. Phineas and Esmeray smile while team Aspen stands shocked, their gaze going from Jimena's angry shape to a silent Anatole and back. Marlan turns to Anatole, voice cold and a look full of distrust.

"Anatole?"

"Squire Ariane is clearly out of sorts. I did not attempt to kill her."

Technically the truth since he left me to die. I hate people like him. I could never say such a thing, because I would be betraying the spirit of the truth.

"You created a situation where she would be helpless under the sun, you motherless cur. Your sophisms will not save you now."

"Marlan, Jimena and Ariane have clearly been under a lot of stress these past few days, and they are known, shall we say, excitable persons. I do not doubt that they believe their own words, yet perhaps Ariane's memories of the events are a bit skewed."

"We are also known to be honorable and Ariane is a Devourer with captured Rosenthal essence. She has a better memory than all of us combined. Pah, why am I arguing with someone who was exiled from America for unethical behavior? Marlan?"

The vampires have gathered around us now, their expressions cold but their auras uncertain. We form a circle with Jimena, Marlan and Anatole at the center. Curiously, I have been swallowed by the circle with Phineas and Esmeray standing by my side and definitely defensive. The other team shows circumspection, however. Their support is not as unquestioning as I would have assumed. In fact, the Vestal even shows signs of hostility.

It occurs to me that Anatole might be a cunt, generally speaking. Not just with me.

Marlan takes his time to reply. When he does, his tone is slow and careful.

"Those are extremely grave accusations made against a Knight in good standing with an excellent track record in Europe. We will head back to base where the situation will be fully elucidated."

"Good. I will fetch the manacles."

"No manacles are necessary. Anatole is not under arrest."

I would be outraged if I were not so surprised and afraid. Jimena's aura is flaring spectacularly and what I see of her face looks consternated.

"Marlan, he could decide to escape? Nevermind that, the protocol is clear. Someone accused of violation will be restrained, Manacles are too kind for him, he should be spiked and sealed in a sarcophagus!"

"Calm down, Jimena, you are making a spectacle of yourself."

"Like hell I am! This is a murder and a betrayal, Marlan! Can you please take this seriously?"

"You overstate yourself. We will look into this troubling matter back at the fortress once emotions have had the time to settle down. Anatole is, as I mention, someone who is in very good standing and has proven himself repeatedly in Europe where our organization has been present for a long time. You bring very serious accusations and we will consider them carefully."

"Marlan, Marlan Marlan, you are not listening. This is murder. Murder!"

"I do not like your tone," the other man says as his eyes narrow.

"I am merely 'asking' you to follow the basic, Knight-recommended, standard protocol when dealing with someone suspected of a grave crime. If it were Ariane in this situation, she would already be in chains at the bottom of some carriage."

"Yes, she would."

Some Dvor Courtiers timidly emerge from the nearby building to see what the fuss is about. As for me, I do not dare speak. Fate stirs.

“Anatole has, I repeat, a record of success as a member of our organization with the exception of the disputable American debacle. You will forgive me if I take the accusations of a Squire with a grudge with a certain amount of caution.”

“No, I will not forgive. Ariane has honor while Anatole was expelled for using the squad for his own purpose. I fought by her side many times and vouched for her. I am vouching for her now. Marlan, follow the damn protocol.”

“You have no right to demand, Jimena,” Marlan spits back. “Since she arrived, your Squire has been a constant disruption, going against tradition every time she could. Giving her wild accusations consideration is already more than I feel is warranted.”

Jimena takes a deep breath. She feels ready to explode.

“This is not your call to make. We are Knights. We have rules and a code and one of those is that the accused must be restrained. You are the Knight hierarchy here, Marlan. Your action now will show what we really stand for. Will you let your personal feelings get in the way of proper protocol or will you do your fucking job?”

They are barely spitting in each other’s face.

“You are out of line, Jimena. You will obey the orders of the hierarchy you claim to respect or I will have you disciplined.”

My sister takes a few step backs. Her expression is a glacial mask of distress and barely restrained anger.

“Do not do this, Marlan. Do not betray what we all stand for.”

“I gave you a warning that you chose to disregard, Jimena. You will surrender your armor and enter the carriage where you will stay confined until we return to the fortress for judgement.”

“You are making a mistake.”

“Will you comply?”

“You are making a big mistake.”

Marlan takes a step forward, then another back.

Jimena has materialized her soul sword, Justice. It now hangs in her hand, blade aimed low.

“I did not join the Knights because I wanted to police the world. I joined because the Order embodied the values I thought should rule our society. Integrity. Honor. Justice. It has been a

rough ride, and yet I have always been proud to count myself one of your numbers. It has changed in the past thirty years.”

“Jimena, you are mad. Drop your weapon. Now.”

“You and a few others have allowed squad leaders to act according to their personal beliefs instead of according to the law. The moment you do so, you are no longer an impartial group fit to administer justice. You are merely one more piece on an overcrowded chessboard. So I am going to ask you one last time, Marlan. Shelve your prejudice and your arrogance, and follow the rules you enforce yourself, or we will reach a tipping point. There will be no going back from this. Do your fucking job, or I swear on everything I hold dear, that I will do it for you.”

We all take a step back and I consider drawing my blade, but we still stand on the edge and there is still a chance. Which Marlan immediately throws to the wolves.

“I gave you a chance and still you defy me and the Order. I will teach you discipline one heart at the time if I have to, Jimena. I will give you one last chance to regain your sanity. This is not insubordination. This is treachery!”

Oh, the fool. The fool! Jimena swore already. It is done. Over. My sister still has not moved, however, and Marlan does not dare act first. How did it come to this?

“We all must decide what we stand for, Marlan. I saw a world of favors and nepotism. I saw a country destroyed by corruption and the banditry it led to. I saw the collapse of Society because men and women placed their own selfish interest above that of the common good. Because they committed crimes that hurt a hundred for the profit of one. I will not stand for it. True justice is impartial. There is only one path to peace and it follows this simple rule. Fiat Justitia, Ruat Caelum. Let Justice be done, though the heavens fall. The Knights have failed to uphold their own rules. I repudiate you. I declare you in failure of your oath. Marlan, you sacrificed justice for peace. You will get neither.

MAGNA.

ARQA.”

Jimena’s aura explodes. its cataclysmic flare increases in power in mere instants. It doubles, triples. It keeps growing. We are all forced back under the incredible onslaught of unleashed power. The arrogant lord is pushed back and draws his own soul sword to face the world’s newest battle lady.

Jimena’s eyes blaze purple. She points her sword at Marlan and speaks with a voice like an angry chorus.

“YOU ARE JUDGED GUILTY.”

A link forms between the two just as Jimena's blade twists, taking a serpentine shape. One moment they are away, the next, Jimena's blade is embedded deep inside Marlan's shoulder. Transparent wings spread from her shoulders.

"Magna Arqa!" he gasps. His body disappears and reappears a few feet away, wound not so much closed as denied. Jimena does not care. She lays into him and smashes him against a nearby wall, scoring another wound. We are left behind. We are now spread across the factory's front yard. The Dvor Courtiers have decided to make themselves scarce.

Anatole is taking a few steps back. No one else has reacted yet.

I feel shame at hesitating. Of course, I know what I must do. It is the most natural thing in the world.

"I survived an attempt on my life by a fellow Knight, only for his superior to dismiss my claim. I declare the Order to be oath breakers. I renounce being a Knight and spit on their poor excuse of an honor."

I draw Rose and take a step forward. I will fight by my sister's side against an army if I have to. I almost expect pain, yet the oath dissolves in my mind.

I am no longer a Knight. They have failed me for the last damn time, I will never allow someone else that much power over me as long as I live.

"I have witnessed Knights betray the spirit of their oath, and will not associate with betrayers. I renounce the Knights."

Phineas winces in pain, yet he takes a resolute step forward. He pulls his thin sword from his sheath, waiting to see who will take sides. Esmeray also speaks.

"Knights are no better than the others. I spit on their treachery and reclaim my freedom."

Anatole manifests his sword and dagger and faces me.

"Squad, we shall subdue the traitors!"

There is no ovation.

"Both sides are at fault and you most of all, Anatole. I withdraw myself from the conflict," his Vestal says. She leaves uninterrupted. The axe wielding swordsman whose name I never bothered to learn takes his side, but Mannfred does not. The progress-obsessed fighter picks his shield from his back and addresses his fallen leader.

"Can you realistically swear an oath that you did not allow Ariane to die?"

Anatole freezes, eyes calculating. Mannfred merely draws his own blade.

"I have my answer. I declare the Knights in violation of their oath and renounce them until they render justice. I have spoken."

"Traitor!" Anatole hisses.

"Honorless murderer," Mannfred roars back, now all pretense at politeness forgotten.

The pendulum of destiny swings silently and we throw ourselves at each other.

Mannfred faces the axe warrior in a careful dance that shows how familiar they are with each other. I rush Anatole.

Fifty years ago, I was a small young thing and watched him and Suarez perform the dance of death. They had amazed me with their deadly precision. Since then, I have learned its steps too. Twenty years ago I may have struggled.

I wound him on the third exchange, easily reading through his feint and catching him in the stomach.

"You had to go too far."

I point my gauntlet without looking and unleash a binding spell at the sword wielder's back. I hear a snarl and a scream, abruptly cut. I parry his next attack, smash the dagger aside and rip part of his throat open in the same backswing. He glares. I smile.

"Just like last time."

I drive him back, scoring wounds on his legs by using my superior range. Anatole and I have never sparred, but I have faced many swordsmen before. He has never faced someone like me.

"Nashoba was right, you are a false prince."

I sever a foot and shove Rose in his shoulder.

"All looks, no substance."

He still fights when I pin him down on the ground, when I push his arms away. He only stops when my fangs latch on his ruined throat.

Anatole tastes like mediocrity and a debt long-overdue. He falls to ash. Nashoba is avenged. The architect of my suffering is dead.

I feel strange. I would have expected revenge to taste sweeter, yet this time Jimena unexpectedly stole the spotlight. She is still laying into a massively outclassed Marlan, who has only lasted so long because he periodically blinks away with one less wound. The fight on our side is over with the two masters disabled. We gather and watch Jimena finish the job. At some point, Marlan tries to escape. The light binding them shortens then, and Jimena

delivers the coup de grace. Her sword skewers the man's heart and the follow up sends his head flying. Soon, only ash remains.

So.

Yes.

As the sounds of combat die down and Jimena's power dwindles, I am assailed by the realization that we just killed two members of one of the most dangerous organizations in the world in cold blood.

This might be... suboptimal.

"Did you really have to kill them?" Mannfred asks, nonplussed. To be fair, it did not even occur to me to leave Anatole alive.

"He tried to kill me three times over a period of fifty years with minimum interactions in between. Why would I ever let him have another chance?"

Mannfred nods grudgingly while Jimena stumbles back to me. She looks exhausted, much more so than any other lords I have seen deploying their Magna Arqa. I suspect that the first trigger might be special. That would explain why she merrily trounced an experienced warrior.

"I may have been hasty," she finally declares as the reality of our action settles in her mind. Why yes, we could have followed the proper chain of command and simply complained to Octave, however we ran the risk of being discredited, have more attempts on our life or Anatole simply fleeing, which would have perhaps hurt his essence but not killed him.

"It is done now. Where are Octave and the others?"

"In Krakow proper, participating in a celebratory banquets. Experiencing the local flavor, so to speak."

There are Dvor Courtiers gaping at us. I do not doubt that a messenger is already on its way.

"We must run as fast as we can. The Knights will kill us without doubt for slaying. I will get the rest of my gear from my quarters. I suggest that you do the same."

"I will not join," Esmeray says. *"You are too human. I will return to what I trust."*

"Then good luck to you," I tell her with no resentment. She was here when it mattered. Her fate is her own.

Esmeray nods and turns into a wolf. She is gone in moments while we rush in and recover whatever we can. I have one powder charge remaining. It might prove useful.

My Dvergur armor is lost to me now. I will never recover it from the Cloud Haven Fortress.

We reconvene at the entrance and I ask the others to follow me.

"We are heading south west. Quickly."

And we are off. Jimena clearly suffers from some mental exhaustion, yet she is still the fastest on account of her newly found power. I wish we could celebrate her ascension.

We leave the city behind and ride the wilderness at full speed. Once we are far enough away, I call Metis and Jimena calls her Nightmare. The proud creatures allow us another rider although I can tell Metis does not like it one bit. Fallow fields soon give way to more fields, then to lost villages and forested areas. We never slow down.

I take a few moments of introspection to accept in my heart that we are most likely done for. We are days away from the nearest port. Soon, we will be pariahs in every court of the continent. The situation is disastrous.

"I am sorry," Jimena says, eyes clouded, *"I think I killed us all. Now they will try to make an example out of us."*

"You acted with conviction, Jimena. Sometimes, you have to accept bleak odds if it means reminding the other side that they cannot act with impunity. In a way, I feel better now than yesterday," I reply truthfully.

"I forced your hand."

"You did not. I could have let Anatole run."

"I agree with Ariane. You only know if you are a person of principles when holding them proves inconvenient," Manfred says.

"Out of all the causes to die for, Justice is a worthy one," Phineas adds.

Jimena takes a moment to digest our words, then she gives us one deep nod.

"Thank you."

After that, we no longer speak. The Nightmares are fast but the additional weight seems to tire them despite their immense strength. Manfred finally decides to drop from Jimena's saddle and run by her side.

"Better for the two more dangerous fighters to keep their strength."

Phineas soon mirrors him and we pick up speed again. This will exhaust their essence and make them thirsty, yet I do not object. We must create as much distance between the rest of the Knights and us as we can.

The race continues for an hour or two. At first, I think that we have succeeded but I realize that I am mistaken when my instincts scream. I flash Rose and deflect a thrown knife coming right at Metis. A shape flickers in a nearby thicket.

"What was that?" Phineas asks.

"That was Laestra," Jimena groans, *"the Shade expert."*

Ah yes, the trainer. They are already on our trail. Jimena takes out her blade and artfully deflects another knife.

"She is trying to delay us. Keep going," I say.

I know that Laestra has access to a lot of interesting tools. We are lucky that she had to come at us unprepared. I still almost scream when the light wind produces the slightest whistle in front of us and I cut a wire before Metis can hit it. I deflect another knife immediately after and destroy it. Laestra runs and hides at the edge of our field of vision. She is taunting us. Sometimes, I catch a dark, furious glint in her dark eyes. It comes with a sneer when I hear the first sounds of pursuit, a low drum of hooves on packed earth. We are hunted.

"They will dismount and accelerate when they get close enough," Jimena says.

"How can they be so fast?" Phineas moans. He is still running at full speed.

"Nightmares go faster the more of them there are," I reply, remembering the charge at Black Harbor. We will not lose them.

I feel the tug of fate. My intuition is pushed on overdrive since death hounds our steps, and I know we have a way to create distance. It is simple really, and has the added benefit of teasing Jimena. I keep my nose to the wind and lead us onto a road as soon as we come across one.

"What are you doing?" Jimena hisses.

"Finding us a diversion."

She grunts in assent, then her expression turns to worry, then naked terror when she catches the scent I have been searching for.

"Ariane, no."

"Ariane yes."

"It will not go well!"

"It will go exactly the way you think it will."

We rush into a sleepy village, finding large wooden barns near the main road. I dismount and grab a pair of lanterns from the local tavern's front door.

"What are we doing?" Phineas asks with terror.

"You are running, and I will give you the opportunity to do so. Go. Now!"

Jimena is the first to run away. I turn and see a great mass of Knights entering the road behind me. I do not hesitate and throw the lanterns at the feet of several of the barns, setting them ablaze. I launch my powder charge as well.

Yes.

This will be... glorious!

The group of Knights slows down. I see Octave who looks unusually cold, Laestra, and the full squads. He brought everyone. They stop as I raise my hands to the sky.

"Squire Ariane, you—"

"ENTROPY CANNOT BE STOPPED!"

Everything happens at once. The powder charge explodes, sending burning planks and embers fling through the air. Humans scream in terror, while behind me, a hundred terrified squeals of agony turn the village into a particularly heinous circle of hell. Incendiary swines crash through doors, walls, and people while the vampires try and fail to keep their mounts in control. A master is impacted by an inexplicably airborne specimen and is sent careening into his companions. Chaos spreads unfettered. I laugh maniacally and disappear into the darkness.