

The sun has set for an hour and I am giving the finishing touches to what will be the most devastating explosive device this world has ever seen. I used the sarcophagus as a base, its isolating protective spells enough to protect it against all but the most determined assaults. Unfortunately, the lid needs to be opened to start the countdown but I deem it a necessary precaution.

For a primer, I have a simple yet sturdy contraption based around a clock and a generous amount of mercury fulminate, linked to enough white phosphorus to melt down a factory. The heat of the primary explosion will be concentrated through a double circle and used to break the orb's containments. All of them. Simultaneously.

Kurshu helped with understanding how the orbs work. There are glyphs inscribed in their base that stabilize them because, as it turns out, life energy compressed to the size of a fist can be quite volatile. How truly surprising. It was a simple matter of manipulation to weaken their containment. Once it is done, the explosive release will create a significant amount of damage if the frozen, panicked smile on the prisoner's face is any indication. He must have asked eleven times if I was quite sure.

I place the last orb in its improvised casing and smile.

This will be glorious, nay, historical. I only regret that I will not be able to see it explode, one way or another. No one can trigger the device and run far enough to escape its blast.

Phineas barges into the secure room I liberated as I perform one last check. He holds in his hands a dark satin undergarment with little white frills on the thighs.

"I have it! I have found it!"

I blink very slowly and my mind leaves the labyrinthine depths of military engineering to recall our past conversation.

"Ah."

"Is this not the garter belt you requested?"

"Well, yes, that is to say, well..."

"Out with it woman, time is precious!"

"About that. I fear that when I listed a garter belt among the necessary supplies, I was speaking in jest."

Phineas' face crumbles, aghast.

"I apologize for the deception. I let my excitement carry me away. The bomb is ready."

"Do you have any idea how difficult it was to find a garter belt around here? Do you think that I went from district to district, knocking on the doors of the most renowned hussies?"

"I can only offer my most heartfelt apologies. It was inappropriate."

I sniff the air, a new aroma now overcoming that of tightly packed phosphorus.

"I see that you were able to offer some incentive to separate the item from its owner."

"If the skeletons do not kill you, I will."

It takes only a moment for me to calm Phineas down as he can see how contrite I am about the whole fiasco. We pack up and make to leave until I realize that we will need some sort of cart if only for the sake of balancing the bomb. Fortunately, it appears that Marlan has taken my proposal seriously for once. Jimena is here, as well as Anatole and his team.

"The leadership recognizes the potential use of your device. We are to provide escort," the blond fake prince intones in a cold voice. I understand his reticence. While he is saddled with the role of guardian, the other teams are fighting on the frontlines. His being the least experienced true Knight team, the leadership must have considered him as non-essential.

I would be more worried about a bomb that would scatter us over the whole of Lesser Poland if it sets off while we are around, but he has always had a terrible sense of priorities.

"We can depart," I tell him with just a bit of condescension, just to needle him a bit. Jimena rolls her eyes for a second then we are off. My sister kindly organized a cart and a lower Nightmare to drive it. I decide not to call on Metis out of respect for Phineas who would remain on foot. The only mounted person will be Kurshu who follows us at a safe distance on a horse he rides with the grace of a sack of potatoes. We leave at a brisk pace through wide-opened double-doors. The pungent smell of fermented hops hits me as soon as I see the sky.

"We are under a brewery. Enchantments keep the stench at bay, until you open the doors at least," Jimena explains in a low voice.

Anatole leads the way without hesitation out of the compound, then out through tilled fields and the golden stalks still to be harvested. The warm summer air still carries the scent of cut wheat and dust, and a few lamps and torches shine on top of locked doors. No one looks through their windows even as wheels growl on packed earth. We hurry.

Thirty minutes through tamed land and we hear distant guns. I express my surprise.

"The mortals are still fighting?"

"They engaged the invaders in the early afternoon. Several detachments of the Austrian army as well as Polish militia units have fought back and forth for hours, to and from the village of Tarnozych, which is currently in the skeletal hands of the opposition. The skeletons

themselves have held back, instead deploying a stupendous amount of soldiers and beasts,” Mannfred replies, clearly impressed.

We continue and find our first bodies soon enough, mostly soldiers fleeing the frontlines who died from their wounds. An aura flares in the distance, a clear beacon to those with any sort of sense. We move forward when I hear a commotion ahead, as well as a mighty roar, one I recognize.

“A Merghol brood mother. They are quite dangerous.”

“Squad, forward. Team Willow, Jimena, you will keep moving the package,” Anatole orders and half of the group charges forward. We hear sounds of battle, intense and bloody, and finally a great yowl as we arrive upon a field through a curtain of trees. The great, horrendous shape of a broodmother still twitches on the ground, its (not hers, I refuse) form bleeds from many small wounds and a few devastating gouges that would have cleaved a cow in twain. I recognize my kin’s unsubtle touch.

There are also mortals in the clearing. They are cavalymen in stained uniforms who look exhausted. Two dead horses lie on the ground, with their riders still holding blood-stained sabres in their shaky hands. The vampires discuss their fates in low voices.

“Anatole,” I say, *“you should know that you stand in the presence of the commander of yesternight’s mortal forces.”*

His pale blue gaze travels disparagingly over the gathering of terrified humans. It stops at the short shape of the moustached colonel Reissig, now much less polished and bleeding from a gash in his shoulder. He is the only one who hasn’t taken a step back yet.

“Will he be an issue?”

“I believe that he wishes to return to his lines. I am certain that we can come to an understanding,” I tell him, feeling a natural respect for a man who leads an artillery battalion.

“You have two minutes, barring this, they will only be a few more corpses on a field that already has too many.”

I nod and make my way forward, Phineas and Esmeray covering my back. Colonel Reissig sees us approach with obvious distrust, and yet he does not move. I do not know how I would react if I saw unknown combatants with the sort of abilities that Anatole’s team just displayed.

I allow myself a smile. The good Colonel stares at me with growing suspicion, his memory hazy after such an exhausting battle. His eyebrows finally rise when I stop a few paces away from his anxious mount.

“You... the peasant girl!”

“Guten abendt. I see that you have found our foes.”

“You deceived me! Do you know how many—”

I interrupt his sputtering with a raised hand, Charming him into silence.

“Have you missed the part where we saved your men? We share the same enemies, you were just unaware of the fact.”

“You are witches! Witches and sorcerers!”

“And mages and whatever you wish to call us. It matters not. We are being attacked by devils and their worshippers. I merely showed you the truth before they could collect too many innocents.”

“I do not trust you. I will never believe you or your kind!”

He is livid. Any supernatural attempt at calming him down now would lead to suspicion.

“Do as you wish. We have no need of your approval to carry out our mission, the elimination of those monsters and the closing of the gate from whence they came.”

“A portal to hell?”

“They certainly did not pop out of a fairy circle,” I lightly comment.

The Colonel still glares with his furious eyes, moustache unkempt after a day of fighting. Now that I am close, the cloying smell of horse and human sweat almost overwhelms that of blood and offal.

“I do not trust you, and still I must ask. Where do these things come from?”

I frown.

“You engaged them yesterday. You were within walking distance of their gate.”

“You saw us?”

“We fought by your side, from the shadows, as always. You should have saved your artillery guns.”

“I know! Dammit.”

He takes a deep breath and I use the opportunity to exploit the chip in his self-righteous armor.

“Those creatures are news to you but we have been fighting their kind for decades. You were just blind to it.”

My declaration is welcomed with various reactions from the onlookers, which is much better than overwhelming censure.

“Are the end times upon us then?” the colonel finally asks to himself.

“Not if we can help it. Speaking of which, you should return to your men. We have demons to slay, no?”

“Perhaps they come here because of you, the evil worshippers!” he declares, but his heart is not in it and I merely chuckle.

“If you think we are the only sinners, you have not been paying attention. Auf wiedersehen, herr Reissig. If we both make it through the night. You should be on our way now.”

The man grinds his teeth. Only his sense of duty prevents him from asking more questions, I think. He was already paranoid when we met. How his natural curiosity must war with his distrust now.

“The beast is dead, gentlemen, let us head back. Raus!”

And they are gone.

“Is it wise to let them go?” Phineas asks with a frown.

I shrug.

“Tonight’s events will ruin the reputation of spellcasters anyway. I would rather not deny our allies a capable commander.”

“If you are done, we should leave,” Anatole interrupts with obvious impatience. We are nearly at the beacon.

We leave the road and follow a beast trail through a well-traveled forest. The ground is quite trampled and we do not have to wait long until we find a clearing where a dozen mortal mages finish setting up a circle. They work under the supervision of a dark-skinned lord with close-cropped hair and a long beard, wearing robes of exotic make. He turns to us as we arrive.

“Greetings,” Anatole starts.

“Unfortunately, we do not have the time for pleasantries. Casters, please come and join me. Now.”

Phineas, the Vestal and I detach from our rank. The archmage points at several circles slaved to the main construct. Compared to what I used to cast, his work is that of a true master, and it took him less than an hour. He also successfully modified the base spell to allow for additional mages to bolster it.

Impressive

"You were the first to deploy the hex?" the man asks as we take our positions.

"To my knowledge, yes."

"Were you the first to cast it here in a combat situation?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then you will start the casting and I will focus on the essence management. Do you understand?"

"I have cast with an archmage before. I know how to proceed. I will direct the spell while you provide the power."

"Very good. I, Ismael, consent to it."

He speaks with the rhythmical intonation of one who repeats a ritual sentence, and so I refrain from pointing out that he was the one to ask. I take my place and sigh in delight. This circle is a masterwork. I can feel the connection of over thirty mages in a circle so wide that it could encompass a small city. Their power thrums through the inscriptions, smooth and pleasant instead of overwhelming thanks to Ismael's careful management. The proper runes have all been inscribed in smooth rock covered with silver powder. Everything is ready, and not a second too soon.

The world bends and pulls inward, its life force draining. The circle reacts instantly as every mage present resists it on the fumes of a previous casting.

"What is this, a tug of war?" I grumble as I reform my link.

"An accurate if childish assessment," Ismael reproaches. *"Now that you are here, we should win easily. You were the first to cast, therefore it is a proprietary spell."*

He must see the incomprehension on my face because he sighs and elaborates.

"The world remembers, and the world remembers you. A spell is always the strongest for the one who made it, with or without help. Enough talk. We do not know what the skeletons are doing and we do not intend to find out. Now, cast."

He is correct. I center myself, take a deep breath. Power rushes through me, the might of dozens of war mages. Normally, I could not manage this much power but Ismael is here to guide it, weave it into the mighty construct. I activate each rune in turn and voice the incantation.

*"Stubborn foot and clenching jaws
Downward boot and closing maws
Blades are drawn, the light is gone"*

Gates are shut, your time is done."

Because of me, the spell is cast with full effect and because of Ismael, the power of our aides is fully employed. Our might breaks the stalemate and tranquility descends like a shroud upon the land. Life essence shivers then settles down. The enemy efforts have been rendered meaningless.

We hear a distant, terrible moan. No human throat could produce this.

"What was that?" Phineas whispers.

I hear a horse panic behind us and Kurshu walks into the clearing under the disapproving glare of Ismael.

"One of the gods grieves," he whispers.

"Their pain is of no import," the old lord grumbles.

He lifts a hand and launches a spell that arches into the air before glowing like a flare. Somewhere in front of us, a great roar echoes throughout the empty night. Soon, the din of battle reaches us through the thick brambles.

"We will proceed forward now. Do you have your explosive device?" Ismael asks.

"Yes," I answer guardedly, but he merely smiles.

"I remember a time when greek fire ruled the seas, little one. I approve of your ingenuity. You will follow with your team and the... prisoner, but you will not engage. We are yet to approach the main hold."

He sprints away and I follow with the rearguard, including the mortal mages. We come across the scene of a ruined village surrounded by blackened, fallow land. Only burnt wrecks remain of the buildings.

To our left, the fields are covered in corpses of hounds and armored servants, while a few lines of white and dun uniforms show where the Austrian and Polish assaults came to a halt. In front of us, the vampire force is shredding through battered and beleaguered enemies, exhausted after a day of fighting. I come in time to see a trio of skeletons fly up unchallenged into the darkness of the night. Only one has remained and it even now emits a terrible keening sound. It is not the Eighth but another one, imposing and clad in golden armor. As I watch, it raises a hand and launches powerful fire lances at the fleet figure of Commenus. The ancient lord dodges them with blinding speed while, beyond, vampires scatter to allow the two ancient horrors free reign. I am surprised to see that the undead mage is on the offensive, destroying everything its staff touches with great explosions. Commenus, however, fights much more defensively. Like Anatole, his soul weapon is a twin set. He wields a Roman Scutum and gladius, which would make him very, very old indeed. His defensive style allows him to dodge most strikes and block what he cannot avoid. As I

watch, the undead sends a great wave of fire his way. When the spell fizzles, the ancient lord stands from behind his shield, unharmed.

It would seem that Rose is not the only soul weapon with special properties, because Commenus should have been torched until only ashes remain. A shield does not stop heat coming from the sides.

The lord charges in turn and pushes the creature back with fast, precise strikes. The skeleton howls again and brings his staff down. The world burns around it, but Commenus is already gone. He stands facing his foe as it rises from the resulting crater.

“Magna Arqa.”

I hear the words and experience that peculiar feeling of the Watcher seeping through the cracks of reality. Commenus turns into a dark-winged, demonic figure and points his blade forward. At the same time, Ismael unleashes his power.

A mighty ray of dark light links both the archmage and the skeleton across a hundred paces. The skeleton freezes and so does the mage, locked as they are in a mental contest of will. I can feel the power of the mind magic from here. As for the result of the war, we shall never find out, because Commenus charges. The angelic and demonic figure smashes into the skeleton and smashes it to pieces. Ismael reels back from the shock.

By that point, the field is ours. The surviving servants run away, leaving their hounds to be slaughtered. The rearguard moves down into the remains of the village. To the right, I see an altar surrounded by alien sigils.

“What is that?” Phineas asks.

I study the strange structure. A massive stone slab occupies the backyard of some large edifice, now an unrecognizable ruin. I noticed no such a thing the last time we inspected the village so this must be a recent addition. The closer we get and the more detail I discern. The richer life energy in the air shows that we are approaching the epicenter of what the invaders attempted. Even the grass seems more vibrant. The rune work soon appears not just on the ground but in the air as well, where they float with fading light like dying embers. The small vortex of energies disperses from the slab in a gentle, immaterial breeze as refreshing as light rain after a summer drought. On the slab, we find a woman. She is old and wizened, just as bald as Kurshu but clearly feminine. In death, her naked form lacks the puppet quality that some corpses have. A black dagger is lodged in her chest. A complex attire is folded at her feet. She died recently.

“What sort of ritual were they conducting? What can they achieve with one sacrifice that their orbs cannot do?” Phineas asks, surprised. His knowledge of spellcraft is still lacking but in this situation, it would not have helped. We are facing an entire new brand of magic.

Although, I can infer the purpose of the ritual.

“Feel the power in the dagger. They were channeling energy into it, not out. They were pushing life into the woman.”

The elegant man raises a dubious brow.

“Would it not be counterproductive to stab her then?”

“They were creating another undead mage, you daft twit!” I finish.

“Oh. A bit hurried, is it not?”

I shrug. Who knows what goes in the craniums of those strange beings.

“The old man killed the fifteenth,” Kurshu says in a subdued voice as Commenus picks up the mage’s skull. Some of us are collectors and this is an unusual quarry.

“It was the fifteenth?” I repeat. He was significantly weaker than the serpent mage despite being less than ten ranks apart.

“Fifteenth very strong. Eight to first... different. Best gods. But, fifteenth and eighth are not in the same faction.”

“What do you mean?”

“So far, only the Eighth’s cohorts have been here. I was one of his servants. Now, the third’s cohort is here with their Merghol beasts. The eighth must have entered an agreement.”

“This cannot be good,” Phineas mutters, and Esmeray shakes her head.

“You brought the prisoner here?” a rugged voice says behind us. I felt his aura, of course, and did not turn.

“He has valuable insights on the current situation,” I inform Commenus as I face him. He and Ismael are soon joined by Octave and other senior knights while a slightly intimidated Kurshu relays what he observed.

“If we were only attacked by a faction before, then the invaders have a lot more troops to commit to their cause. We must take the gate before they call upon too many reinforcements. Nights are short right now, and so is our window of opportunity,” Marlan remarks.

“This changes nothing,” Commenus grumbles. *“We were on full attack against an unknown number of enemies before and we are doing the same now. Enough talk. We leave.”*

The ancient monster walks forward without waiting for further input, soon joined by the entirety of the Dvor contingent. There is little to do but to follow. We soon reach the woods surrounding the enemy base for the third time in as many nights. Just as before, I stay in the rear to guard our precious cargo.

The vampires fan out before us to cover our approach. Soon, Ismael stops in the middle of the forest path.

"We have no need for another spell."

"Why?" I ask, taking a few steps. Then I feel it. The interdiction area we cast yesterday still holds. The land is quiet and reticent.

"I have never been so glad to be made powerless," the dark-skinned man chuckles. He gestures and the mages fall back. Commenus does not wait.

We soon arrived at the scene of yesterday's battle. An entire section of the forest has been turned into a glass plain of scorched earth. Farther up, we find the battlefield where Reissig's men stopped and fought. It has been picked clean. Only a great mountain of hound carcasses remains, a stinking tower of purple flesh, rancid and vile. Not even the flies have picked at it.

"Not far now," I tell myself.

We move a bit more, then the ground erupts in a great gout of flame, instantly killing a Dvor master.

"Traps," Ismael growls, *"Let me go first."*

Our progress slows to a crawl. I cannot feel the constructs, though I stand rather far. The heavy cover of the interdiction area allows our presence and little else. We may not cast. I suspect that even Magna Arqas might be subdued here, and yet our foes still manage to work their unholy arts to inflict more death.

Ismael takes no risk. As soon as he spots a trap, he throws a few unidentified stones he removed from a recess of his robe. They trigger and spew their deadly payload into the air. Our advance is marked as clearly as if we carried beacons with us.

"Could they have moved the base?" I wonder.

"No," Anatole says by my side, *"even they depend on supplies. It takes time to move and build a camp to accommodate thousands. They will not move unless we make them."*

He does not look at me. Instead, his blue eyes sweep our flanks, looking for anomalies. I always assumed that he would not give me the time of the day, much less explain things. Perhaps he did make some progress.

His insight soon proves warranted when Ismael gestures and we stop. He throws a stone and it flashes against an invisible wall, sending ripples across its smooth, flat surface.

A shield, of a scale never seen before. The base lies nestled in its dying valley beyond sight and we will have to break it to move forward.

Without magic, the task is nearly impossible. Members of the vanguard with soul weapons bang them helplessly against the colossal defense. It will take hours, hours that we do not have.

Just as I consider my options, the impacts seize and the crowd falls silent. From the skies, the form of a skeleton mage holding an orb descends, majestic. Its robes move in the light wind like pennants and its great ivory snake tail twirls lazily. Six others flank it, three on each side.

“All but the lords, back up. Back up now,” Octave declares, and I hear the concern in his voice. He will not have to repeat himself. We run. Even the Nightmare we use senses the urgency of the situation. I turn around as we flee to take in the Eighth as it lifts a gnarled hand. Its voice is warm and velvety. It does not fit its abominable image. As for the words, they are clipped and guttural and I do not understand their meaning.

What I do understand is that it is casting a spell from within the safety of the shield and that of the air, and we can do nothing to stop it. A white ball gathers between its claws. With one last word, he lets it fly.

The spell explodes in a whitish, powdery veil that expands in a sphere. It covers the lords, even Commenus. It covers our frontlines.

It reaches me.

I feel something poke my essence, then a cloak-like feeling as the spell settles on my aura like ink on paper. I look down to see whitish stars shining on my armor like a mirror of the Milky Way, not harmful but present. And always visible.

“Shit, they marked us,” I say.

“I felt something,” Phineas said as he inspects a glove. Esmeray shivers and scratches herself, clearly ill at ease.

Looking forward, it has become clear that the entire vanguard is marked as well. The only ones exempt are the mortal mages.

The Eighth has figured out that we were different, which we should have expected when they started to resort exclusively to fire. Now, he is targeting us, and he is right. Without us, Krakow and its defenders will fall, then they will have free reign to defile the planet to fuel their disgusting rituals.

I look up with no small amount of fear, convinced that the serpent mage will now release some seeking fire spell of great power against us. I wonder if I can run fast enough or if Rose will help, and yet it does not happen. The creature contemplates us like insects under its hollow gaze and... flies away. The other creatures follow it in a cursed flock.

We are alone.

"What just happened?" Phineas asks, but no one replies. Some of us try to remove the whitish powder from our beings, in vain. I try as well and realize that it clings to us like an oily layer, and is just as impossible to remove. We have to restrain Esmeray who had started to claw at her skin.

"They marked us. Are they going to cast some grand spell?"

"Probably. And if they can locate us, they will not even have to."

"What do you mean?"

"She means," Anatole says, *"that if the creatures have somehow learned of our weakness, they will not even have to expand spells. Our best protection during the day has always been stealth. Now, they can just pick us off if they can find us."*

Kurshu walks to us and sighs.

"Ah, bad! It is the Amkur. Bad servants have this if they open the wrong gate. Take food."

"How long?" I ask, "How long does it last?"

"I do not know. Bad servants always die first."

Well, this is problematic.

We quickly go and relay Kurshu's finding to Octave and Commenus. The two leaders exchange a glance.

"We will have to scatter at least three hours before dawn. How much time do we have left?"

"A bit over two hours if we follow your plan," Ismael says as he joins, hands holding a massive brass watch.

"All shields draw on resources to be maintained and to resist attacks. We could try exhausting it. With that many soul weapons, anything is possible."

"Do you truly believe that we can breach that?" Octave asks, looking behind him. The main group still bangs helplessly on a dome as wide as a town.

"There is a chance. The skeletons are starved for resources," Ismael agrees, *"they have made liberal use of their orbs over the past few days and lost many of them. It makes little sense for the snake monster to let us go instead of eliminating us in one large conflagration, unless he would prefer to save his strength. The skeletons do not appear to need sleep and they operate during the day without issue. They also fly while the mortals do not."*

The others consider the question. I would remark that the shield might consume more energy than a spell designed to track and destroy us, but the truth is that I have no idea how this branch of magic functions.

"The undead do not create life energy," the Vestal of Anatole's team says.

Oh, of course.

"They cannot replenish their aura naturally like we do. They must take it from somewhere."

"Yes. And with the life energy around their base denied, they might not have had much opportunity to collect more safely."

"None of that matters. If we do not breach the shield, we cannot get into the base."

Hmm.

Can we?

I turn to Kurshu, clearly ill at ease in the middle of so many of us. He is starting to stink a bit as well.

"Is there a way to go though? Key?"

"This..."

He mimics a barrier.

"Shield."

"Understood. This shield... very strong. The gods use it to protect their houses."

"We need to get to the gate."

"Can you not open one?" he asks.

I wince, I do not know the ritual. Opening the gate is a complex, gruelling process that leads to desert and hounds. Until now, I had no particular reason to learn it.

"I do not know the runes," I admit.

"Runes?"

I kneel and draw the dwarven symbols for 'looming disaster' on the ground.

"Runes. I understand. If you want a gate with runes, can you use the first?"

"The first?"

Kurshu nods.

“Before the gods come here, they make a gate to go back, not too far, so if there is a bad thing, they can get back to the Last City. The runes are there. On the ground.”

All the vampires present stare at the man, with the notable exception of my teammates who do not speak German.

“Can the circle even be reactivated?” Commenus asks.

“It depends. We would need to see it to know for certain,” Ismael replies.

“Then I think it best,” the old man speaks between clenched teeth, *“if we focus on the plan at hand.”*

“Hold on, old friend. If the circle can be reactivated, we can send the bomb through.”

“It would not close the gate that concerns us the most.”

“Perhaps it would. Ariane, how powerful is that bomb, exactly?”

My intuition wakes and coils. For the shortest moment, visions of flame and a sound like tinnitus break through the heavy yoke of the interdiction spell.

“All of the Last City will feel its touch. Some more, some less,” I tell him.

“I see. Commenus, Octave, I propose that their team pursues this lead with our mage followers. Meanwhile, we will keep probing that shield. The investment is small and the potential benefits are immense.”

“Mph. I suppose that a handful of masters and neutered magic tossers will hardly make a difference. What do you say, duelist? Those are your minions after all.”

“We prefer the term squire, Commenus,” Octave replies, but the gruff monster ignores him. Octave tilts his head and inspects the wall, still imperiously ignoring the weapons banging on its surface.

“I have no objection, but team Aspen and Jimena will stay.”

“With all due respect, sir, if we successfully open the gates, someone needs to cover Ariane while she triggers the spell,” Anatole says.

Octave considers him in silence.

“Very well. You and your team will go. It should be more than enough.”

And like this, we are dismissed. Jimena squeezes my hand before she joins the assault. Anatole signals and his team starts off behind an eager Kurshu. The free invader struts excitedly, reminding me of a labrador on a stroll. The rest of us are more subdued. We share a general unease that proves warranted when Esmeray changes into a wolf and starts pawing at her face. Her claws dig bloody furrows on her muzzle.

"She is not doing well," Phineas says.

An understatement. We are left with no choice but to restrain her or risk her skinning herself alive. Mannfred and the other fighter carry her limp form back to camp while the rest of us keep going. We cannot spare a caster and Phineas understands it though he is unhappy about leaving the tiny Vanheim behind. We are off to an inauspicious start. A little bit later, we are forced to leave the cart behind as the forest grows too dense to navigate. I end up carrying the crate with Anatole while the human mages follow us in a loose column.

Kurshu gets lost once.

"So much green!" he explains to our unamused group.

"Your dog is starting to outlive his usefulness," Phineas remarks.

"Enough."

It takes us almost half an hour to reach the second site between the detour and the time it takes the mages to climb the slope to our destination. We end up on top of a flat hillock populated by scrawny pines. Three of the four sides lead to sheer cliff, with only the path we took being somewhat practicable. The undead mages chose well.

More importantly, we are outside of the interdiction circle.

Kurshu excitedly points at the center of the elevation, though only a blind man could have missed the giant circle covering most of the free space. Runes have been engraved in the rock, and the air still smells of pine sap where trees were ripped apart and thrown away. Needles crack under the feet of the trudging mortals as they spread around the circle. I kneel to study the construct.

"They haven't changed anything," I realize as I trace the western standard rune for location.

"The captives they took in Krakow knew the proper way to set up a circle. Perhaps the skeletons saw no merit in altering a working construct. I would imagine that dimensional magic is a daunting prospect, especially when the cost of failures is unknown and one clings to its own existence with a dead grip," Anatole says. *"The question is, then, can you activate it?"*

I check the different segments of the spell. I have seen it many times and mostly dismissed it as too complicated to bother, but now necessity needles me and I cannot help but discern the different components. Built on a base as old and solid as history itself, the spell then expands outward to reach more exotic and subtle parts, acquiring its true function. One

segment speaks to me of a shard, a stinger, a needle that would jab and leave behind cleanly sliced flesh where blood would pearl. Another speaks of a diapason oscillating between two frequencies. Subtle elegance has joined surgical brutality in a marriage that led to disaster and the death of hundreds, and we are going to activate it. Only a few key elements could bear modification in that delicate framework. I will have to attempt it.

"We need to clear more space. I must alter the circle."

"Why?" Anatole asks with suspicion.

"Because," I tell him as I clear growth with my own hands, *"there are many more of us and we have much less time. I need to allow the spell to feed from more members while decreasing the casting time, unless you believe that we can stay until late afternoon on the next day."*

Anatole does not comment and directs the mortal mages to work instead. They are Dvor servants, distrustful yet disciplined. They clear the vegetation as fast as I can carve new elements with Rose. I feel my intuition pushing me forward now and I know why. My death is imminent. Perhaps the Dvor have access to defensible facilities but I will not. I will be one of the easiest fighters to pick off with the other low-ranking Knights. That, or the world guides me once again.

With a sure hand, I inscribed the last circle to allow mortals to slave their power to me. We will need all the help we can get in this great endeavor. Failure is not an option. The bomb must go off. I am absorbed in my task until the spell takes on an organic, living quality. The components appear in sharp relief like superimposed figures instead of grooves in the rock beneath us. The circle lives and grows with me, stroke after stroke, until finally the last piece clicks and the spell hums. It is ready. I am ready. The time is now.

A few steps and I am in position, near the center. The mortals take their places without prompting, with Phineas and the Vestal by my side. We raise our hands, and I begin.

I speak of our world, of its music and its taste. Of the sun and the moon and the ground under my feet. The spell anchors itself with a low thrum which only grows in intensity as we go on, a heartbeat of a thing without blood, and yet, alive. The leitmotif comforts me, although it is not truly mine. No, mine is deeper.

I spare a glance to the eternal presence of the Watcher. I had forgotten its beauty those past few nights. It gazes on, more subdued than usual. It does not wish to disturb. I shiver when a strange cheer bolsters my concentration.

The first part is done, now for the second.

Slowly at first, the diapason twists the world around us and the thrum changes to a different melody. This one speaks of great trees, a golden age, then gouging pain and, finally, death. That song is a dirge and those who first cast the spell should have known that they were fools.

One hour passes. Another. At some point, someone comes but I ignore him. We must go on. To change the music and fix it is an exhausting attrition battle against our surroundings. Several times, I fear that I might be too fast until a rush of power sets us back on course.

Three of the mages fall unconscious and are carried away. Thankfully, the construct takes this possibility into account.

Another hour passes.

We are done.

The second part of the casting is finished and three more mages stumble out of the formation. The third and final part begins now. We have our destination. Now we must breach the veil.

The diapason quiets and the shard awakens under our push. This is the last stretch. Do or die. I push power and speak more words, I speak of piercing a fabric that none can sense. The abstract and unfamiliar meaning almost makes me falter, but intuition guides me through the most delicate steps. The fabric of reality might be thick and syrupy here, unwilling to be seized and much less manipulated, yet the spell has clamped on a minuscule expanse of it, and we will pierce it. The shard looms, a dark sword, or a shark. Something bleak and edged. It hovers near the vulnerable spot like a guillotine blade, but I do not let it fall. It needs to be keener and heavier before we can even make a dent. More mages fall one by one, and with every person leaving us with bloodshot eyes, the burden increases for the rest. Stamina and strength are no longer enough. Now, only willpower can save us.

Half an hour passes. Only thirteen remain.

Another fifteen minutes. We are five now. The pain is excruciating.

Phineas chokes and collapses to the side. Dark blood drips from his mouth as he crawls away.

Another fifteen minutes. The last mortals fall in turn. The Vestal leaves. Only I remain in a sea of power and agony. Whispers drill into my ears. Thunderous magic cracks at my fingertips. I close my eyes. The blood covers them anyway.

It hurts.

Almost as badly as going rogue.

Need just a bit more. The needle hangs over the chasm. Almost ready. And then, it happens. The first hint of the coming dawn caresses my mind. I am out of power. The last dribble of energy leaves me.

So **THIRSTY**.

Losing control. No, no! I will not fall here. I roar, and pull. In the urgency, something explodes within me. Weak black roots surge from the earth with the last of my reserves. Another loss of control, but this one proved useful after all.

The clearing is empty. Almost everyone has evacuated. The final surge pours into the spell and something clicks.

“PIERCE THE VEIL!”

The spell is a needle going through meat if the needle were the size of a ship of the line.

I open my eyes and clear away the blood as the last of my aura leaves me. Before us, a luminous circle expands in the darkness that comes before the aurora, an aperture into a world of empty, cold daylight that fails to burn. Mesmerized, I walk forward and look through. We stand on a stone platform hanging over a void, and around us, our goal expands as far as I can see.

The Last City.

A maze-like, impossible structure that dives into the abyss below and climbs to a sky of perpetual ash. Hive-like, bulbous blocks of sickly yellow extend in colossal fingers, their surface covered in windows like necrotic sores. The stench of unwashed humanity permeates the air despite a chill wind while the landscape weeps artificial misery and generational despair. The platform we stand on is empty and bare. A corner reeks of urine.

Somewhere far above us, a child screams in agony.

“Last City servants' houses up there,” Kurshu says in a subdued voice. Only he and Anatole have stayed until the end. The vampire is dragging our bomb to the empty space.

“House of the Eighth is to the right,” he adds.

We three go through. It is day on the dead planet. Kurshu currently points at the man-made mountain adjacent to the platform. While the others remind me of sick, bloated trees infested to their cores, this one stabs up in a dizzying display of obsidian designs and chthonic architecture. There are no windows here, only smooth, glassy surfaces punctuated by sharp angles.

“Will the bomb even breach that fortress?” Anatole whispers. I can barely hear him. I am so weak.

“Yes.”

“Then start it now. We have little time.”

I lurch to the sarcophagus and slide the lid with some difficulty. Kurshu helps while Anatole keeps vigil. I push a button and hear the ping of the active mechanism. It rings like a death knell in the unnatural silence. We move back and through the aperture with haste.

"How do we close that thing?" Anatole asks, and I realize that I cannot do it. I am too exhausted.

And we are running out of time.

"Put some blood on your hand then place it here and say close."

"Here?"

"Yes, hurry!"

Tick tick tick. Kurshu steps away from the circle with terror in his eyes. The aperture closes. Slowly.

Too slowly.

"Get on the other side," I wheeze. We move around. From the back, the portal just looks like distorted air.

The bomb detonates.

I assume that the bomb detonates. For the barest of instants, impossible heat touches my skin with the promise of oblivion. My vision goes white, and, when I open my eyes again, the portal is closed. Far in the distance, we hear a rumble and see a great fire. The night comes alive with the tweets of distant birds.

In front of us, something has seared a cone into the landscape. It starts thin, but then expands until I see burning vegetation on a faraway hill. Within the cone, all is dark and smoldering.

"By the Eye," Anatole says.

"So strong," Kurshu whispers. His dark eyes are full of worship. We have no time to rejoice. We have no time for anything except hiding.

"We cannot dally. The sun will rise soon. Anatole, I used my essence. I will need some help to return. I am too weak."

"Oh, I know," he replies.

A shove.

I am flying through the air, then awkwardly down the cliff. By some ancient instinct, I curl into a ball and protect my head.

A crack. Pain. My pelvis is shattered. I gasp.

But... how?

He..threw me?

Impossible? Impossible! Would that not break the oath? Is he using a loophole?

Kurshu lands next to me, spine broken. His honest face twists in pain and disbelief. He is dying.

The sun is almost up.

With a muffled cry, I roll on myself and crawl. I am too weakened. I cannot heal. I have one chance, only one chance.

"I am sorry," I tell him, and bite down. His essence is rich with the power of fate. I kill his pain as soon as I regain a smidgen of power.

"I am sorry," I say again.

He smiles and breathes one last time. I taste the sweet savor of apple on my tongue.

Dawn is almost here. I must hide now, but tomorrow, Anatole dies.

"Entomb."

The earth takes me.