

Something stirs in the threads of fate.

I wish I could remove this pompous, overdone sentence from my mind, and yet nothing else can accurately describe the weight on my mind since I returned to my domain. My intuition functions more sharply as long as I remain in my lands and it hints at something important, something that is not even related to my current worries.

The trip to the White Cabal was a pleasant and filling diversion, but the main urgent issue remains. Lord Benoit, Warden of Virginia, attacked me on my domain. Therefore I shall mount his head on a spike. His support was cut with the loss of Loic and the turning of Adrien. Now, it is just a matter of finding him.

And there lies the problem. Benoit has disappeared west, past the frontier, with most of his retinue.

“The prevalence of native populations makes the circulation of information difficult,” Lynn says as she hands me a report.

“Tensions have been high those past years with colonists expanding relentlessly and the encroached nations sending raiders and war parties. There have been thousands of casualties within the last five years, at least. There are also reports that the natives have been using sorcery to increasingly great effect.”

“That would support Constantine’s opinion that magic is growing stronger,” I idly comment.

Lynn nods and reclines on her comfortable couch. We have taken to sitting in front of the hearth in a more casual setting than usual. It is late, after all.

“We have little to no communication with them. Benoit could be carousing around, putting entire Sioux villages to the sword and we would not know it.”

“So there are no military reports about a lost band of settlers?” I ask, perusing the document.

“None that would match him and his followers. He has disappeared.”

“The question remains then. What is he seeking?”

“Could it be gold? There have been gold rushes before.”

I dismiss the possibility almost immediately.

“I doubt it. All the wardens are currently seizing and developing cheap assets at a record speed. We have never been so rich and influential than now. Benoit has seized much sea-side land that should be bringing him dividends. Bah, none of this truly matters. Vampires do not go to war over money. We always have ways to obtain more. No, he must be looking for something different.”

“People? Magic?”

“Perhaps... Unfortunately, there are many different nations over an extremely vast territory. Dakota, Cheyenne, Comanche to name a few, and the frontier is ripe with skirmishes and rumors. We might as well look for a needle in a haystack.”

I shake my head. There is no helping it. Information gathering is best left to existing networks.

“Sephare’s agents are on the move. We will continue to monitor nearby territories but prioritize our new arrangements with Adam in the meanwhile. We have already lost too much momentum in the post-war asset grab.”

“Understood.”

Lynn departs the room, leaving me alone with a mass of documents to verify and sign. The advantage of being on hand is that my associates tend to be more rigorous and our profits mysteriously increase. The downside is, of course, paperwork. I was made to ride through dark forests spear in hand, hissing and hunting to my heart’s content! Year-to-year production of pig meat was never supposed to be part of the deal. Something must have gone terribly wrong at some point. And why do pigs eat so much? I thought they fed on trash. By the Watcher, someone distract me from the boredom.

Just then, I hear knocks on the door and I watch the dark oak pane with some amount of trepidation. Surely, I did not tempt fate with that last remark. I never voiced it. It remained in my head, therefore, it does not count.

“Come in,” I say with calm and confidence.

Urchin comes in looking thoroughly amused.

“We have a visitor, Mistress. He tried to reach you earlier during the day but was... turned down. Given his insistence I found him at nightfall and, after careful consideration, decided that it would be best to grant him his request.”

He looks far too pleased with himself and my suspicion grows. I frown but only receive the most innocent expression that someone who fleeces card sharks for fun can achieve.

“Can I show him in?” he asks, giddy.

“Very well then.”

I feel no powerful aura around, no danger, only a mortal in the corridor with a nervous heartbeat.

“Certainly. Come on in, lad!” He says.

Urchin moves to the side to reveal a remarkable young man showing clear signs of fear under a layer of courage. He has traits that manage to be familiar and strange at the same

time, with a proud, clean-shaven chin and well-styled blond hair. His handsome face and solid build give him the countenance of a young cavalry commander, both dashing and reliable. He wears a mighty scowl that contrasts severely with Urchin's smug expression.

To my utter bafflement, the youth grabs an object from a recess of his ironed black suit and tosses it on my desk. I pick it up between two claws, sensing nothing amiss.

Is that... a garlic bulb?

I think my mouth hangs open when he retrieves a bible and what can only be a very sharp stake. He takes a step forward and raises both implements as his powerful baritone fills my office.

"Beware, foul creature, sly demoness, Ariane Delaney! For your curse is at an end. No longer will you drag my family in dangerous ventures. No longer will we bend our backs to fulfill your nefarious purposes! Our secret indenture ends tonight, for I will slay you, or my name is not Alexander Bingle."

Ah.

Ah.

Ah!

I see.

Me, Ariane.

Dragging THEM.

Aha.

HOW FUCKING DARE HE.

Bang.

THE TWIT.

Bang.

THE INSUFFERABLE, AMBULATORY DISASTER.

Bang.

The avatar of collateral damage, the herald of horror. The godling of getting-stabbed-and-shot. The ass in aspiration. How dare he —

Bang.

— call ME...

I come to and realize that I have been smashing my expensive silver candelabra against the hearth's brick lintel, chipping and cracking it. I drop the mangled piece of metal and return to my seat. Urchin stands to my right, and some youth, to my left, paralyzed with fear. He holds a bible which I find endearing.

"Right. Right."

I massage the bridge of my nose.

"Where were we?"

"Please give her a minute Alexander, she is not quite as young as she looks," Urchin says.

Yes.

The unfair accusations.

"So let me summarize. You believe that I have been keeping your family in thrall for three generations, is that it?"

"Ehm."

"And in order to prove it and save yourself, you have crossed the Atlantic Ocean and then several states, finally ending up in a small town in Illinois after at least a month of travel for the express purpose of lifting that tight leash I supposedly have over you. Is that correct?"

"Well..."

"And in order to threaten me, you have armed yourself with a bible, a piece of sharp wood, and... please tell me that I am not dreaming and that I indeed have a half-peeled garlic bulb on my mahogany desk, Urchin?"

"I believe that this is correct, Mistress."

"..."

"The weakness of vampires to garlics was plainly stated in the guide to supernatural creatures by the famous Simon Nead, Mistress," Urchin adds.

"And he mentioned garlic? Preposterous. How could he ever come up with this kooky notion?"

"I cannot possibly imagine, Mistress. Apparently, we are also unable to cross flowing water."

"You!" Alexander spits accusingly at his guide, "so you are one of them!"

“And,” I continue, “your strategy was to just walk in my office and shake those things under my nose and I would be undone.”

He has the grace to look a bit sheepish under all the bluster.

“Urchin, is it me or do they breed them duller with every generation? Will his children manage to walk and breathe at the same time, do you think?”

The latest Bingle sputters in outrage but Urchin — the traitor — comes to his timely rescue.

“I believe that this is Mr. Bingle’s first outing. The blame could partially be placed on the shoulders of inexperience.”

“Well she has a solid back that inexperience, to carry such a burden, aye? Lack of experience indeed. Your first pick was vampire slaying! With a sharpened stake! Why not attack me with a toothpick while you are at it ya worm-brained, donkey-arsed wee bampot!”

“Careful Mistress, Loth’s influence is showing.”

“I will not suffer such abuse!” the insulted greenhorn declares. “My first adventure will also be the last when I pierce your black heart and free us from the curse!”

My mind goes cold. Anger replaces exasperation.

“Oh? It takes quite a bit of effort to shove wood through ribs, I will have you know. I speak from experience. How many hearts have you skewered yet?”

“None and God willing yours will be the only one. He is with me. I know that you cannot approach so long as I hold the holy symbol and my faith is strong!”

“No, indeed not. So let us put your plan to the test. You will be trying to stab me with a rustic tent peg and I will be using this.”

I open the first drawer on my right and grab a tiny revolver with a pearl handle and a silver body, which I place in front of me.

It would look more appropriate in a salon than on a battlefield.

“This,” I explain, “is a customized Smith & Wesson model one. It can fire seven twenty-two caliber bullets before reload and is more than capable of taking down an adult man if its wielder knows how to aim, and I assure you, I know how to aim. Now please tell me exactly how you intend to take me down. You may even assume that I will not stand from this seat as I see absolutely no need to do so. Do elaborate. I am most curious.”

The latest iteration of the accursed bloodline stares at the gun in front of me with a refreshingly pleasant mix of horror and betrayal.

“But...”

“Yes?”

“If you are fast and strong, why do you need a gun?”

“So I can shoot other fast and strong people as well as the mortals that annoy me. I swear on everything that I hold dear that without my esteem of Cecil Rutherford Bingle, your heroic and kind grandfather, you would be a bleeding mess on the ground right now. I am just figuring out if I should laugh at your dismal intelligence and thorough lack of preparation, or be offended that you would underestimate me so much. You are without a doubt the most inane vampire hunter in the history of the planet by any measure.”

The young man suffers my lashing in silence, skin crimson but eyes fixed on the gun in front of him. So annoying.

But wait.

What if...

What if it were my turn?

After all those years?

I freely let a toothy grin expose my fang and recline in my seat, enjoying the sudden shudder wracking the worst Bingle's body. A plan starts to form. I spread my arms in a gesture of magnanimity.

“You know what? I believe that I may grant you your request. I shall solemnly promise never to contact your family to drag them in dangerous and far-fetched quests if...”

The beginning of hope fades in his eyes as I intone in my most dramatic voice.

“If you prove your valor by completing four tasks.”

“Why would I trust your word, monster?”

“The alternative is that I shoot you in the knee for bothering me and then dunk you in the Mackinaw river with a sack on your head and your hands tied behind your back.”

“I assent.”

“Good. Excellent. To lift the dread curse of Ariane, you will complete a feat of wit, a feat of courage, a feat of intellect, and a final feat of intuition!”

He narrows his eyes with suspicion.

“You are being truthful? You will really do so?”

"We vampires cannot renege on our promise without breaking our souls. This is even more valid for a lady."

"A lady? You are landed nobility?"

"I will send for you tomorrow at sunset to complete your tasks," I finish with a tired voice. Then, I watch with disbelief as he hesitates.

"Why not start now?"

The disformed candelabra lodges itself in the wall by his head, showering him with a rain of splinters.

"OUT! GET OUT! **HSSSSSS!**"

As soon as the door closes, I put my head down and moan.

"He is quite young, mistress. Eighteen at most," Urchin says.

"I do not remember ever being this stupid."

"It was a long time ago for you, Mistress."

I glare.

"Sassing me after subjecting me to this treatment, Urchin?"

"Forgive me, Mistress. I live to please."

"Then you're in charge of the contest of wit."

"... any requirement?"

"Of course! The ordeal must not be dangerous. Instead, we shall achieve the optimal level of annoyance and humiliation. Oh, I have an idea. Do you fancy a bit of poker?"

"Always."

"Then this is how we will proceed."

I open the nicely-dressed, nervous Bingle into the high-stake room of Marquette's premiere gambling den, property of me, myself, and I. Oh, I remember the time where a new town councilor attempted to close all such establishments and would not get the hint, but he unfortunately died from three stabbing wounds in the chest before the decree could be signed. Self-inflicted. A real tragedy. In any case, the high-stake room has been reserved for tonight's event. Only a dealer, a waitress carrying a glass of liquor on a fancy silver platter and Urchin remain. Velvet and walnut offer a dark, intimate setting while the permeating scent of cigar reminds the visitor of past fortunes lost and found. Gas lights shine through warm yellow glass. I bring the newcomer to the small table where his fate will be decided and leave without a word. Alexander Bingle sits awkwardly. His chair rumbles thunderously against the floor when he adjusts it. The waitress serves him and departs immediately, leaving Alexander nose to nose with the wicked smirk of my associate. He has left his bowler hat behind and his hair is impeccably combed back to reveal an intelligent forehead over the face of a lout and the eyes of a schemer. The vampire speaks first.

"Good evening, and welcome to the first contest: the contest of wit! We will be playing cards. Are you familiar with poker hands and their ranking?"

"I am more partial to bridge myself."

"Fascinating. Are you familiar or not?"

"...Yes. Someone introduced the game to me when we crossed the Atlantic."

"Good. In this instance, we will be playing an interesting variation I discovered during my travels around Corpus Christi. I simply call it Texas poker."

Urchin introduces the rules. Rather than having each player draw five cards, his system has two cards given privately to each player, called hole cards, and five cards in common, which are revealed across several rounds of betting. The player who achieves the best hands by any combination of their own private cards and the public ones wins the 'pot', or the sum of all the money bet during the round. I find the fact that everyone can see the common cards smart and inventive, allowing for a wide variety of bluffs made by raising the amount of money one has in the pot and forcing their opponent to either match that amount or give up the round. Luck matters less than statistics and reading the opponents over the course of several rounds.

It puts Alexander at a clear disadvantage.

"We will be starting each game with ten tokens. The first person to take the other player's tokens wins. In order to complete the task, you must win once."

Alexander frowns.

"I do not have that much money."

Urchin shows a pity he has never felt in his entire life and comforts the little twit.

“There is no buy in. You get back your tokens at the end of every game. Each round, one of us will bet one token which is called the small blind while the other bets two, the big blind. We will take turns. Of course, there must be a price to failure.”

Urchin lifts the apparatus I decided to dub the ‘swatter’, essentially a tiny shovel used to move ash around a hearth with a leather glove glued at the end.

“Whoever wins gets to slap the loser. I will obviously not use my true strength or any other vampire ability to win the contest.”

“Wait. Do you mean that I can try as many times as I wish?”

“Yes...” Urchin replies with clear enjoyment, “Of course! Shall we?”

Alexander nods and the dealer gives them two cards each. Urchin checks his with fluid efficiency while Alexander fumbles, glares at an uncaring Urchin, checks his cards then checks them again.

The first round is fast. Urchin bets aggressively, raising several times until Alexander folds on the fourth round. The second round, Urchin raises the stakes and Alexander follows with confidence. Urchin folds immediately. The third round is also the first to end at the card reveal.

“Mr. Urchin wins with three of a kind,” the dealer says laconically.

Alexander growls and mumbles with his two pairs, but his confidence has taken a hit and when Urchin next raises, he is flustered and barely responsive. The next two rounds seal the end of the first game.

“You win,” Alexander admits with his head held high. Said head swivels to the left under the force of the blow.

Ksh.

“Ow!” the man protests, massaging his reddening cheek. The swatter is not exactly light.

“It hurts less than losing twenty bucks. Another?”

The second game takes longer with Alexander no longer rising to the bait. He takes his time and deliberates before folding or calling the raise. The game lasts eleven rounds before Alexander drops his cards and his last token.

“I con— ”

Ksh

Alexander’s other cheek turns rosy while his temper flares.

“Do not be cross. He who correctly anticipates pain suffers twice,” Urchin generously offers.

The deflating youth takes a sip of liquor to bolster his spirits and almost spits it out.

“Moonshine,” Urchin explains pleasantly. “Strong stuff. Another?”

Alexander eyes the swatter with fear but he will not be deterred.

This time, he tries to bluff.

He loses even faster.

Urchin is a master at his craft. I was taught by Dalton and Loth and he can still give me a run for my money despite the ease with which I can read his aura. Of course, vampires playing poker are as unmoving as marble statues so the hints must come from somewhere else. No matter what, Alexander’s attempt at bluff is a doomed folly. Urchin metaphorically eats him alive.

The fourth more balanced approach ends in painful failure. By now, Alexander looks like he insulted an entire debutante ball. And their mothers. Twice.

“Why is it a wit test? The only thing being tried is my patience.”

“Then perhaps you are not using the proper resource?” Urchin casually remarks.

The man’s eyes widen. It took him four slaps before realizing that success would not be achieved through traditional methods. Truly, the younger generations are lost and this entire country is going to the dogs.

For his fifth attempt, Alexander bets aggressively every time and still loses. For the sixth time, he massages his now-purple jaw and smirks, thinking he has finally found the solution.

He does not touch his cards. Every round, the decision is made by coin flips. Urchin smiles in return and trounces him once more.

Ksh!

“Why?” Alexander roars.

“You randomized as many parameters as you could, but you will never be capable of preventing me from calculating the odds with the cards I have. So, what is left then?”

“To get lucky...” Alexander grumbles.

It takes two more rounds for Alexander to finally get his breakthrough, but they last an hour each. I think that Urchin relented a little bit at the end. By that time, it is almost three in the morning and we both have better things to do.

Alexander stands up and grabs the swatter. Urchin leans back with another calm smile. The youth swings as if he held a zweihander. The swatter disappears as it was about to smash my associate in the face, to his unending dismay. The implement now hangs lazily from Urchin's resting hand. He didn't move.

"You... you cheated!"

"False. I rigorously adhered to the rules. I did not move and I did not use this power to win the game. Consider this another valuable lesson. And with your eventual victory, you have completed the contest of wit. Congratulations."

"You only adhered to the letter of the law!"

"And so will most people you interact with in your life. Remember, there will always be fine print and there will always be a hidden cost."

The young man grunts then retreats sullenly. I approach the table where Urchin uses his power to reorder the deck without looking. The dealer has gone as well.

"You let him win towards the end."

"I may have. Contrary to you, Mistress, the big lug and I are not unstoppable Devourers but mere Courtiers. I would rather keep my interactions with the godling to the bare minimum. He was on the verge of despair and I would not want to spend another night slapping him around, no matter how vindicated it makes you feel."

"Understandable."

"Not to worry, mistress. John had something special in mind."

The next night finds me, Alexander and John walking through the semi-deserted muddy streets of Marquette's riverside. Despite the decree confining them to this part of town being discreetly overturned years ago, most of the city's black and dark-skinned population still prefers to stick together and their district is mostly shunned by more affluent white folks, with a lower cost of living overall. I get giddy with anticipation the farther we go because I recognize the destination. Alexander has come loaded for bear to face the 'test of courage' and I can already tell that his brand new revolver will be of no use.

John stops in front of a low, long building with lit windows. We knock on a side door and wait. John turns to face Alexander who squirms under the merciless gaze of the impassible giant. I feel a hint of disapproval from my most faithful follower in the way his nostrils flare, a remnant from his human days. John seldom bothers to judge people at all so his assessment comes as a surprise.

A solid twenty seconds later, a harried, disheveled woman with deep pockets under her eyes opens the door. She winces immediately when a baby shrieks from behind her. The noise is deafening. The air smells of soap and excrement.

“Sorry. Come on in.”

We follow her in a small room lit by a single lantern. Another thick door leads deeper inside, though the noise is mostly muffled as if the two parts were separate. I would know, I designed and installed the discrete sound enchantments.

There are two fascinating facts about orphans I learned rather early in my town management experiment. The first is that, given proper care, they make some of the fiercest, most loyal followers one could hope for. Case in point, John. It must be noted that proper care goes beyond simply food and roof. The second interesting fact is that raising them properly is significantly cheaper in the long run than just letting them fend for themselves with the implied level of crime and violence. I therefore own the three Marquette orphanages with this one being dedicated to the youngest children. Eight cribs adorn a room with a bare floor while storage closets and wardrobes occupy an entire wall. A comfortable chair remains the only concession to comfort and, given the state of the nurse, it has seen little use in the past three hours.

The ‘special room’ only hosts three guests besides their caretaker tonight, but they certainly make up in volume what they lack in numbers. The first to screech is joined by two others as the bedraggled nurse rushes from crib to crib, checking on her charges. The scream concerto makes conversation difficult.

“We will take care of them tonight,” John tells the woman.

“What?”

In her bloodshot eyes I see disbelief, and then, hope.

“We will take care of them until tomorrow morning. You go have a rest.”

“You will?”

“Yes, you have my word.”

To her credit, the nurse inspects the three of us with a bit of doubt before accepting. Her gaze lingers on Alexander’s fluster face with obvious doubt but when she recognizes me, her eyes widen. I am almost an open secret here. She nods once and stumbles to the door, missing the handle the first time. The second attempt is more successful. Soon, we are alone with the three deafening tiny mortals.

“You will not need your gun here, nor your hat or vest. You will remove them and place them by the door. Those are Christie, Thomas and Jane. They are two, three, and four months old

respectively. They all have colic of the infant. Your task is to look after them and make them comfortable until sunrise. Do so, and you will have completed the test of courage.”

“Is this a jest?”

John’s gaze could have frozen a smelter.

“No.”

“You want me to look after babies? I am no woman!”

John leans forwards until his and Alexander’s gaze are aligned. Alexander is not a small man. It still takes a surprisingly long amount of time.

“Do you give up?”

“What? Never,” the godling huffs. “If you think that this is a test of courage, suit yourself!”

“I see. I will guide you through the steps at first. To begin with, Christie needs to be changed and Jane must be fed.”

“Why does she need to be changed? Jesus Christ, she smells like... Oh.”

“Time to get to work.”

I sit down with reports and cast a quick silence spell to protect myself from the worst of the yelling. Technically, this is a test of perseverance and stamina. Some of the tasks will require the courage to handle a screaming ball of fragile humanity and remove the icky excretions so I suppose that it counts. Those are all details. What matters is that I will see a godling hand-wash a soiled cloth and that is worth more than gold.

Alexander carefully picks up baby Jane according to John’s instructions, following which she promptly throws up on his shirt.

Alexander returns home shortly before sunrise dog-tired and a little foul-smelling. While his firearm stayed shiny, the rest of his outfit shows an interesting mix of body fluids. I have always been surprised by how male toddlers can spray urine in arcs at incredible range. So was Alexander.

I find him the next evening in casual wear and looking significantly more sheepish than before.

“Are you ready for the feat of intellect?”

“I wish I could say yes with confidence,” he grumbles, shoulders slumped, but he is also a Bingle and the fire of poor decision-making revives in his heart.

“Though I will most certainly try!”

“Good attitude. Let us see where it gets you.”

I lead him through the streets of Marquette to a small school. Like the nursery, I own it and provide cheap access to the children of allied families. Minions are considerably more useful when they can read instructions, after all. We walk through a corridor decorated with painted animals to a well-lit classroom. I have Alexander sit at one of the desks, only slightly too small to be comfortable. Papers and pens have been provided. Alexander takes one look at the writings on the blackboard and shakes his head with disbelief.

“Solve for x?”

“Is something the matter?”

“I... you are monsters, I saw your teeth and... here I am, doing algebra. What next, will you ask me to memorize a speech by Cicero in latin?”

I tap my chin in mock consideration, causing him to pale.

“Sorry I do not mean to object. I just expected something more... exciting!”

“Hehehehe.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Since you find harvest yields and compound interests boring, I assume that this will be an easy task for you.”

He pales even more.

“Compound what?”

“You should probably get started.”

I install myself at the teacher’s desk. I have never done that before! How exciting that I shall still find and enjoy new experiences at my age! An age which is not advanced at all, especially for a vampire. I busy myself with the last of the reports on werewolf activity and the full withdrawal of Roland forces from my land. We are free and well on our way to recovery. Given the circumstances, Constantine has decided to seize Benoit’s assets and guaranteed the lion’s share to me. Truly, power and being friends with the ruler have their benefits. I take a look at Alexander’s sweaty form. He has barely started.

“Hmm, my apologies,” he says, “for orders of operations, is it multiplication first or parentheses first?”

My own pen snaps between my fingers.

“Parentheses! Definitely parentheses. Just a momentary lapse, haha.”

“The proper order should be parentheses, exponents, multiplication and division, addition and subtraction, you ant-brained village dullard. If the acronym PEMDAS is too difficult to remember, consider the phrase ‘please excuse my dear aunt sally’ while I try to excuse the cobwebs between your ears.”

“There is no need for such abuse, vampire. I can work equations. I was merely unprepared.”

“So I have gathered,” I reply drily. He walked right into that one and he knows it.

Alexander blushes once more and returns to his paper. After four hours of effort, I collect the page and inspect it. His hand calculation of the interests are clear and rigorous. Some people forget to account for additional food for the mules when calculating how many mules a convoy needs but he didn’t. All in all, he was rigorous and systematic. I correct one error he made towards the end which I shall attribute to mental exhaustion and reluctantly decide to give him a passing grade.

“Well you would have noticed your mistake if you had waited a day and gone over the calculations once more. It was a fairly minor problem to start with so I shall accept that you successfully completed a feat of intellect.”

“Thank you. Only the last feat is left then?”

“Indeed, we shall complete it tomorrow.”

He sighs heavily before tidying up his desk. There is little left of the foolish youth who threatened me with a piece of wood.

“You are not quite what I expected,” he finally says.

“Lucky you.”

“I know you have been teaching me a lesson and I am grateful.”

Hmmm no I just wanted to have him slapped, peed on, and then subjected to paperwork?

“My father, the esteemed Colonel Bingle, taught me notions of valor and courage by sharing tales of his adventures as a soldier of Her Majesty Queen Victoria in India.”

Ah so this is why I have never met him. He was on the other side of the planet! Good riddance.

"I apologize for my earlier reaction. By placing deeds of valor at the top of my priorities, I have forgotten all the work and support behind every victory, the steel behind every sword and the engineer behind every weapon. Indeed, even the tireless mothers and nurses who raise the next generation of heroes deserve not just our consideration, but our undying support as well."

He nods to himself while I stop my growing horror from affecting my poise.

"The hand that tills, that counts, the one that holds a babe to a breast are just as worthy of support as the one that holds a gun, nay, worthier indeed! For it must be protected. And I shall. You have opened my eyes to my own short-comings, Miss Delaney. Despite your curse, you carry with you the wisdom of the ages."

"Hmm. Yes, of course. How intriguing that you would figure it out so soon."

"I have come to a decision concerning my future, but first, I shall complete your last task."

This is definitely not going to return to bite me in the posterior.

For the last night, I have decided to conduct a simple experiment. I have given Alexander an artifact keyed to vampire essence and dumped him in the middle of the Illinois wilderness with the instruction to cut a path to one of the three vampires present here. John and Urchin do not seem to mind the little outing and so we split apart a couple of miles away from our bright-eyed young aspirant hunter.

The concept of vampire-tracking devices is nothing new. Mask squads used them to hunt me down back in France, using the absence of essence to find my location despite Nashoba's earrings. Constantine is capable of making some but he has been reluctant to distribute them outside of specific missions, citing blatant favoritism and 'sending the wrong message' as reasons to refuse me access. The artefact Alexander now wields is a prototype of my own design. I am rather confident that it should not work properly.

I want to see what happens when shoddy workmanship confronts godling's luck. What will come out on top? Will he stumble upon one of us or upon some sort of treasure instead? I am confident that he will not simply err over the plains for hours, smashing his big toe against errant roots. Some part of me remembers the warning that cruel fates await those who attempt to experiment on godlings. I simply assume that those would be 'brand runes on their chest with a hot iron' sorts of experiments, not the 'three parts practical joke' experiments. Besides, my intuition is telling me to proceed with some strange insistence and I have yet to be disappointed.

I have chosen a spot I sometimes visit, a bend in a nearby water reservoir with a lone rock covered with moss. When the wind blows, the entire pond ripples and the reflection of the

trees above grows twisted and menacing. I close my eyes and meditate for the first time in a month.

Fifteen minutes later, I jump to my feet and whistle to call Metis. Something is wrong. My intuition screams at something in the direction where Urchin left. I ride out immediately. A moment later, a red flare climbs through the fall air, warning the plains of an imminent danger. Metis gallops like the wind and it takes barely a minute for us to arrive. I immediately hear the sounds of battle.

In a valley below, Urchin and an unknown man fight while a wounded Alexander finishes climbing the clearing's lone tree. A few blood stains and handprints decorate the bark. The scent is quite enticing, as Urchin's opponent has realized. As I jump from Metis unhurriedly, I note prominent, wide cheekbones, long braided brown hair and a wide tunic that has clearly seen better days. He still has a simple knife attached to his belt, though he either forgot he had it or decided that his claws would serve him best. I suspect the former. The curious fighter smells of young Courtier with the acidic aftertaste of a rogue. More importantly, his aura is quite peculiar.

"Should I kill him, Mistress?" Urchin asks without removing his eyes from his foe. They circle each other with the rogue casting eager glances at Alexander.

"Disable him. Have fun."

"Oh, I will."

The rogue has seen me but since I do not move, he decides to attack Urchin instead. However, the wily Vanheim had merely been delaying and now shows the full extent of his capabilities. With every throw, knives bloom over the rogue's arms as he protects his vitals. Urchin dances around him, exploiting his superior range to cut sinews and sever bones. In desperation, the rogue turns to Alexander and charges, only to receive a knife in the back. It misses the heart by a finger.

Sensing danger, the foe twists on himself and jumps. With a high-pitched cry, he kicks Urchin with both legs, sending the Courtier back with a grunt. I think I heard a rib crack. Despite the apparent setback, Urchin smirks.

His opponent falls gracefully on his feet, then immediately stumbles. Urchin hamstring him. On both knees. The Vanheim rises and strikes at the same time. His heaviest knife buries itself in the rogue's heart.

I give the victor a single nod.

"Excellent performance, Urchin. Nearly flawless."

"Thank you, Mistress."

"Now let us see what this is all about."

I seize the prone rogue by the throat and prepare to drink. His essence is so peculiar that for a moment, I believe that he is another Vanheim.

I bite deep.

The plains. Life used to be good, or so I was told. When I was three, a plague came that made people's skin become like pebbles. When I was four, another plague hit, one that had people empty their bowels until they fell. The white hunters made towering piles of skulls out of bisons and left the meat to rot. I was left alone.

Ako told us that we could bend or take from those who had much. We left on horseback with other Nokoni to raid and find food, weapons, and slaves.

We rode deep. The white men were at war with each other but the farther we went and the more we saw. The white men are everywhere and there are so many of them, many more than all of us, the Kiowas and Apaches together. Ako left this night to reflect and came back with a revelation. He found a way to make us strong. So strong. We will be one tribe and we will know where to find each other. We will be victorious. And so... very... thirsty.

I pull back and lick my lips, enjoying the pleasant sourness of rogue essence. I know why Benoit rode west with such abandon. I know why he would risk it all. And I know why we have no choice but to follow. I notice that John arrived and that Alexander has since climbed down from his tree.

"Gentlemen, we have a trip ahead of us. Our kind has a new progenitor."