

If my vision were not so perfect, the walls of the Last City could be taken for a cliff, so impossibly vast it is. The craggy rocks damaged by unrepaired cracks and ravines share more with a geological feature than a man-made work. I surmise it is the result of some spellwork due to the sheer scale of it and the current state of abandon it finds itself in. It perfectly represents the lichs and their mentality. They feed off the work of others and the dregs of some illustrious past. Infamous too, given the state of their world.

Just like the last city, the wall is decrepit and rotting and just like it, it is still impossibly formidable. It would be enough to repel most armies if our level of technology had not progressed since the portals first opened.

Mundanes, mages, and kin now stand side by side in the metaphorical shield wall and more importantly, the mundanes now wield weapons of war fit to burn down entire cities. Even now, the roar of diesel engines behind me heralds the coming of the old world's wrath, a military might the likes of which history has never seen. Tanks and self-propelled artillery vehicles form a well-spaced line across the portal, the first defensive square already completed. Infantry companies and the crew themselves have climbed out of their positions to dig trenches as fast as they can. The first of many scorn spikes are plunged into the ground to protect the mortals from having their lifeforce reaped with a single gesture. In an hour or so, ammo trucks and ambulances will clog part of the way but for now, earth is spitting as much power as it can to begin the siege. The rattle of small arms fire already sounds from the periphery, where soldiers clear out the odd hounds.

Nirari stands by my side in a relaxed posture near the front of the formation, our back to the reverse side of the portal. Humans move around us while studiously ignoring our armored forms. He does not seem worried at all despite the non-negligible chance that the lichs will wipe us off in an instant with some wonder weapon. Instead, the old monster claps his hand. A moment later, a throne emerges from the gray ashy earth like a submersible from the sea, then a stone platform rises underneath until we can see over the turrets of the nearest tanks. He sits, opening a bag of average size I had not noticed until now. The packed stone flows to accommodate his colossal black armor.

The armored hands disappear in the bag's recess. Larger inside than outside, it seems. I had seen such enchantment in faerie but they were atrociously hard to reproduce.

Shortly after, Nirari removes a javelin from the artifact's depth. First I see the hard grain of dark polished wood, then the head appears and I am forced to avert my eyes. They hurt from merely watching the ivory tip, so sharp it feels. I have an idea what it might be.

"Is it not early to lug out dragon bone weapons?" I ask.

"Oh, little princess, the commander does not stand for the small fry. You shall lead the effort with your knowledge and acumen. I will remain here. It does not do for the strongest warrior to open the hostilities unless there is a duel, you see? Go forth and tickle the skeletons. I will be watching... with great interest."

"So you intend to let me do all the work?"

“Of course not, princess. Only the menial tasks. Ah, and I believe the undead are making their opening move.”

Very far away, the massive gate leading into the city opens. Or rather, one pane opens while the other remains stuck midway. It would be comical if their size was not so daunting. A blue tide rushes out from the maw soon followed by a cloud of a similar color. The hounds might be the most common of mana-starved creatures but they are not the only one. They have scouts as well. Fliers. Brood mothers are notably absent even though they have the best chance of withstanding the punishment the mortals shall inflict upon them.

“Your prediction has come true, little princess. Indeed, the undead beasts always go for the easiest method first.”

Vampires throughout the century have used this to great effect, catching liches off guard before they could deploy their most dangerous weapons. Urchin, especially, has elevated the technique to an artform. I can feel him covering our flank at the edge of my perception between two Hastings masters. We are opening with our best tricksters.

The mortals are not blind to the tide of flesh rushing to them. They stop working, jumping into their half-finished defenses while engineers bring sandbags as fast as they can fill them. The first line of defenses finishes its preparation right in front of us. A bit early, perhaps. It takes several minutes for the distant purple wave to become individual creatures. By the time they are almost in range, the scent of fear thickens the air.

Human soldiers keep coming in. At this stage, I have no idea if time is with or against us.

The first artillery positions open fire soon after, almost at minimum range. Little red flowers bloom on the enemy charge. Each shell pulps dozens of creatures, yet the tide feels just as large as before. I notice that there are no more hounds coming out of the gates. At the same time, more guns are firing at our back. I feel no breach within my sphere of influence, no mysterious passage or portal opened to deliver beasts within our fortifications, yet the battle already rages all around us.

“The undead scum does not even need a beacon. All the life force we have brought formed a banquet no creature can ignore,” Nirari idly comments. *“Oh, princess, you might want to intervene if you wish for the battle to continue.”*

“I thought you were the leader here,” I hiss at him.

Giving orders sitting on his arse! Ugh!

“Of course. And as your leader, I command you to break the enemy assault. You are welcome.”

It annoys me to see him so smug, yet it scares me to see him so accommodating. I have challenged him several times and he has yet to do anything but deflect with good humor. What is happening here? Surely he does not expect to convert me to his banner?

In front of us, the tanks open fire. More craters and dust pepper the land, thick black smoke rising into the stale air. The scent of powder grows pungent, the song of the guns, deafening. Machine guns soon add their rattles to the din. We have taught the mortals that morale is not a factor to hounds a long time ago. They understand only hunger. Men are trained to kill as soon as they have a shot.

In front of us, the plains are nothing but oily plumes of soot, fire, and a wall of purple flesh. It is only now that I realize that the tide has barely been slowed despite the constant pummeling. The hounds' number is beyond reckoning.

Every gun on the front line now spits lead at the incoming assault. Officers scream their orders, whistle their commands. The men shoot as fast as they can. I can already see the barrel of some of the weapons shining red at the tip. They do not stop. By the *Watcher*, there is not even a need to aim. Every bullet will hit something.

The tide barely even slows down. I feel like I am standing in front of an ocean.

Time to help, I suppose.

"Magna Arqa."

I wish I could save my strength fully but it appears I have no choice. No matter, I can make a difference with minimum use of resources. Instead of doing anything fancy, I form rows of outward facing roots upon which the beasts impale themselves. It takes a bit of time for all of them to fully form but they considerably slow the advance. Some of the soldiers are surprised at first but they are quick to catch on.

For a beautiful moment, it looks like I have brought the beasts to a standstill. The hounds that follow the first are blocked by the squirming mass of the wounded, caught as they are on my spikes. A dike of corpses forms until the mass of flesh becomes too much and rolls over on yet another line of spikes so that yet another group of hounds plant themselves on the next defensive line. The mortals do not let that opportunity go to waste. Mortar fire and a storm of bullets tear into that easy target with abandon until blood floods the trenches in a gory carpet. The human artillery is fully active now. Some enterprising grenadiers lob their 'pineapples' dozens of meters away. It is a carnage. And then, the fliers arrive.

Masked by smoke, their drone swallowed in the deafening din of detonations, thousands of bladed insects fall on the human defenders like so many locusts. Rifles aim up but too late to make much of a difference. The first human screams erupt soon afterward.

Independently, flying drones are not much. A small child would outweigh one. It takes little effort to grab and smash them against the nearest rocks. Unfortunately, they move fast, bite, and there are a lot of them. The first line is overrun in seconds.

"It appears that our campaign is off to a poor start," a mocking voice taunts from behind.

I must act. As much as I hate revealing my tricks, this specific one would be useless against him anyway.

I extend my hands, calling the Aurora's power. Rime appears around me. Nirari's throne grows crystalline decorations of icicles and verglas. The Duke's prize at the center of the armor shines like a winter's sun behind a frozen waterfall. I extend my hand.

The hounds absorb magic. The drones merely resist it. Neither absorb the cold. The Likaeon words ring true. Winter comes to a planet without seasons.

"Polar midnight."

Light fades.

Like a giant maw closing on its prey, an arctic wind blows through the tight ranks of the drones in an extending cone. Most of those caught freeze solid mid-air while the others escape the death corridor sluggishly. Meanwhile, the mortals are not idle. Flak cannons add their staccato to the sounds of battle. The tanks never stopped shooting, their servants protected by solid steel. More soldiers charge forward, shooting, fighting to throw the creatures off their beleaguered companions. The wounded move back, replaced by fresh men with full ammunition belts.

I keep feeding power to the spell until it collapses by itself. If I had not fed on a dragon, this would have been exhausting. On the other hand, if I had not fed on the dragon, I would have never made this plan to begin with.

With most of the fliers dead, the hounds are the only threat remaining but they have used the lull in gunfire to its full effect. They are almost within stabbing distance now. Meanwhile, more soldiers join the fray.

I watch the carnage unfold with fascination. The humans have forfeited their usual tactics to form thick firing lines. Standing men shoot over kneeling men who, in turn, shoot over leaning men. Machine gunners rush in with their weapons held at the hip like some cowboys and with good effect for no one can miss at this range. Here and there, the tide breaks through, entire squads savaged in instants. Tanks get covered in tight masses of clawing hounds before the flak cannons 'delouse' them with extreme prejudice. It is an orchestra of destruction, a symphony of entrails without pause while blood red and purple dyes the ground. I have seen war before but this? This is madness.

And yet, we must win.

Many masters have decided to join, several fighting a roaming battle, closing gaps and delaying advances where they can. A blue flash far to my side reveals that someone underestimated their foe. Gah, it is too soon to lose kin. This is just the appetizer.

For a few minutes, balance is achieved between the waning wave and the constant rush of human reinforcements. A few tanks are destroyed when determined hounds finally manage to tear off the turrets, though it costs them much. At some point, the last of the hounds in close quarter combat dies and the soldiers manage to kill the rest before they can even reach the human lines. Explosions fade to low a drum while the men wipe the sweat off their

brows and reload their overheating guns. I see disbelief and the distant gaze of those lost in a waking nightmare in the front squads, those that survived the assault anyway. The world in front of them is a charnel pit of charred earth and offal. It is not that I could walk on corpses for a mile without having to touch the ground. For that mile, I could not find an unsullied rock, a dry patch of soil to save my life. The stench of burnt hound meat suffices to make me scrunch my nose.

It is done. At great cost, we have withstood the first attack.

"This is Cadiz," a voice says in my ear. "Is that accursed piece of technology working?"

I tap the enchanted ear link I hid inside of my helmet.

"I can hear you."

"Oh. Incredible."

"You have used radios before, Progenitor. What is it?"

"None so small. We have used the hound tide to slip out. The lunatic has disappeared somewhere, alone. Malakim went the opposite direction. I hope you know what you are doing."

"I am doing my best with what I know."

"We will enter the city access tunnels soon. From then on we will remain quiet, just in case."

"Good. I will focus on the battle. They started with a hound tide."

"Just like you predicted. And Ariane, be careful. The Dvor escort around Malakim was too familiar with him. I suspect he has arrangements with them."

We already knew he had people on his side, especially those Mask leaders who aligned with him.

"So long as they complete their mission, I have more urgent concerns. Be careful, mentor. We do not know what safety measures they have in place."

"I am always careful, young one. See you on the other side."

The communication ends. Below us, the mortals have recovered. The battle lines have reformed with fresh squad while the dead and dying are evacuated on stretchers by nurses. There are hospitals ready on the other side to take care of them.

By now, over fifteen thousand men spread out in an ever-expanding wedge. The influx has slowed to a trickle now that ammunition is required to keep them fighting. As ever, logistics will be the bane of us.

It is in the lull of force gathering that I notice something is wrong. A sentry to the far side suddenly shakes, then falls, moved to convulsion. Another soldier joins to help only to succumb to the same fate. Then another, always at the edge of the formation.

"Poison?" I ask no one in particular.

"Little princess, remember the Vision of the Dead spell I wrote in the book I gifted you?"

The human skin book.

"Yes, I remember very well. It tracks the lingering essence left by the recently deceased."

"Why not cast it now?"

I swear and obey. I must remain wary of the dynamic he is trying to impose on our relationship. Unfortunately, he is right. As soon as the blood magic spell is cast, a gray film covers my vision. Everything appears in sharp contrast including the ghostly figure of those who died to fend off the hound. And behind them, wraiths cross the field with monstrously long, extended arms. Hair like braided wire, dislocated jaws and famished figures define this new threat. Tattered robes trail behind them as if dragged by an unseen wind. As I watch, one of them embraces and kisses a soldier who immediately gasps and falls, their life drained in an instant.

"Dammit!"

I race away from the platform. Rose extends and whips at one of the horrible creatures. The blade passes clean through to absolutely no effect. I swear again.

"Flay. Bolt!"

The spells are just as useless.

"They are already dead," Nirari remarks from behind.

"So are the liches! So what!"

"Impatient child. What keeps them together?"

"How should I know!"

"Can you not guess?"

"Can you not help?"

"I am helping, little one. tick tick, how long will it take for them to create a panic? You must make haste or all is lost."

Needled by frustration, I observe a feeding specimen. Envy. Greed. It is motivated by powerful emotions. It gazes up at me and... I feel a contact. The soldiers around me watch with fear while officers scream orders but we all know it is only a matter of time before they break. Men will stand against a cavalry charge but not against an enemy they can neither see nor comprehend.

Alright.

Time to put my heart where my mouth is. I can feel a strange sort of magic expand towards me, ghoulish and hungry. I grab it and pull.

My mind palace.

Even the greatest mind mage would get lost if they dared enter. A maze of thorny hedges and statues welcomes visitors into a torturous death trap no one ever managed to conquer. The defenses will heal so long as I live for no one can bear trauma like a midnight aristocrat. Shredding vines will grind down the most steadfast protections because no one can match our patience and ferocity. The size itself makes every fight a battle of attrition for no one lives longer than us in an endless pursuit of power. I had never felt fear until now.

I observe the wraith from the confines of my bedroom. The creature does not seem lost. To be lost would imply a desire to be elsewhere, a destination. The wraith merely moves away from a place where no prey can be found to another one. It will keep doing so until it finds a target or the universe ends. The fact that it avoids the hedges fills me with hope. So far, the creature had always moved through terrain as if it were not here. The desiccated, malformed corpse still fills me with worry. Is this truly a ghost? I had never observed one before, though there are stories. How did the lichs come up with such a monster?

I discreetly move a thorn in the creature's path. The thorn catches the monster's shroud and stretches it, wispy trails forming in its path. I feel that it is affected but I fear it will not be enough. Soon, however, I get a surprise. This creature has life essence. Very little of it, but life essence nonetheless.

"Interesting."

This time, I flay the entire creature with several branches. The shape stutters and blinks like a bad movie while more of the essence filters back to me. I sit down in a meditative position. I need to understand. A distant memory calls at the edge of my perception. I nudge my intuition to waken it, capture it. The memory is alone while most would be linked to others and yet it is so strong and so very vivid. I am close. Another attack leaves the wraith a ratty remnant of its former self.

I see it now.

‘YOU ARE GUILTY OF THE GRAVEST OF CRIMES. EMBARRASSING YOUR BETTERS.’

“No, please my undying lord!”

I almost recoil from the bizarre sensation that assail me. I have no body. My essence is anchored to a set of runes engraved in my own remains. I do not see. I perceive the information given by other runes set in my form’s eye cavities. I do not move. I impose my will on the many parts that move my shell. Everything is second-hand. Mechanical. Distant. The sensation is so antithetic to everything I am that it takes a great effort of will to stay. The one whose memory I stole is a lich, that much is plain. A weak one. Its master stands before it, bone claws grasping an obsidian athame.

The lich is bound. Emotions do not truly translate except as overwhelming cold swords that pierce through its mind. The lich is terrified. The athame falls.

Even as a dream, the pain I feel is unspeakable. Essence flows into the athame then into a canopic jar carved with angry runes made of edges and shard ends. The lich hungers yet it cannot feed, wants to die yet cannot fade. It loses itself. Behind, it leaves only its thirst for lifeforce.

I pull out of the memory.

The parallel with my own situation makes me somewhat uncomfortable. A wraith is nothing but a rogue lich. How upsetting. In any case, I know what to do now.

I grab the sheer terror of the obsidian knife and turn it into a mind render, a memory shaped as a weapon, a very personal one. It manifests as a sword in front of me. I grab it, then I break it.

Silvery liquid spills between my hand, then through the floor. Outside, thorns take on a silvery edge. They slam into the weakened wraith.

Its screech threatens to deafen me. The fright is so intense that it pops into white motes, drifting off into the unseen wind. A quick check shows that my physical form still stands outside, but the wraith is no more. A step in the palace brings me to the main square. I clap my hand to form a massive circle, hedges moving to accommodate my request. Thorns with silver barbs grow to form a cage.

A heavy stomp shakes the ground at my back. Loth’s statue, clad in his formidable armor, lurches forward brandishing a warhammer. The head shines silver as well. Next, Mannfred smoothly strides in caressing the edge of his axe, a revolver resting in his other hand. He still wears his knight armor set. Dalton arrives, twirling his dual pistol. Then the werewolf, then Sinead and Sivaya now wearing their original forms. Statues gather in a circle, humans, mages, werewolves and fae. A mob forms with weapons brandished. A flock of winged fae buzzes overhead led by the statues of fly-faced Nol and Makyas of the Court of Wings and Keyholes. And above still, a massive flap of wings sends white flower petals drifting to the ground.

“Right. Ladies and gentlemen, if you will give me a minute? I shall fetch dinner.”

There are now dozens of wraiths eating their way through the panicking ranks of the mortals. They have dispersed but most are still with the range of my Magna Arqa, and in here, space is relative. Relative to me. The first of them jumps at a nurse and faces a wall of thorns, then it faces me.

“Please step inside.”

It disappears. Inside of my mind palace, a shot rings.

One by one, I pull the wraiths in. The essence they feed me helps me perceive and understand lifeforce more though I have little idea what to do with it. Inside of my palace, the slaughter never stops. Soon there are no more prey to be found.

“I am going for a walk,” I inform Nirari.

“Good hunting.”

It takes me all of ten minutes to hunt stragglers. Men and equipment keep accumulating in the dead world while I work. I find the last wraith after it exits a tank, having devoured its crew. I had missed it the first time. Soon, I am on my way back. Urchin intercepts me as I walk under the cautious gaze of human soldiers.

“What was that, boss?”

“Invisible hungry ghosts.”

“Huh.”

The Vanheim master shrugs though his eyes never stop staring out towards the wall.

“The battle has lasted for an hour, there are hundreds of casualties and the liches have yet to show up.”

“There will be more traps before they deign to face us.”

Urchin flips his blade, the metal turning into a cane.

“They always go for the lowest bid.”

“Yes.”

“One would think they would make an example.”

"We will need to inflict more damage upon them before they even consider uniting. But for now, we need them to exhaust their resources one by one before they wake up and decide to throw too much at once."

"And you have a plan boss?"

"Of course. For now, we are just sitting in front of their door."

"And what's the next step?"

"We knock."

Three hours after the first soldier has set foot on the dead world, our camp has grown to host over eighty thousand men. The flags of twelve nations float on this foreign ground, limp because of the lack of wind. Mortals have tirelessly worked to dig trenches, install barbed wire and set up artillery installations. Stockpiles of shells and crates now dot the newly built fortifications.

The human leadership has decided to pause reinforcements now that the earth army extends for miles. A constant stream of trucks brings supplies to the farthest wings of our formation. Guns rattle constantly to fend off an unending stream of hounds and fliers, their survival instincts overridden by the promise of so much meat and life force to feed on. I have come to miss the stale air of this fallen world now that stench of corpses has come to replace it. For hours now, the humans around us have done their best to ignore us, though I have heard many whisper that I was to thank for the thorns and the dead ghosts. A sense of cautious optimism animates the men who have arrived after the early slaughter. Many mock the decrepit state of the walls as well as the lack of reaction of the besieged city. They are fools, of course. Let them enjoy their fleeting confidence.

As the hours pass, I am faced with an unexpected complication. Although the portal leads away from the city while Nirari and I face it, the coming dawn casts its purifying rays through the aperture not close from my position. I can feel the pressure on my back, taste ash at the back of my tongue. A faint memory of pain on my right side serves to remind me that, although I have grown strong, a few dozens steps back would be enough to end me forever.

Nirari does not seem affected. He casually lounges on his throne and since he displays no concern, neither can I.

Near noon of our time, the human army turns to the offense. First one, then dozens and eventually hundreds of guns open up, but they do not target the gate. They never intended to assault the city first thing. Instead, they aim at the complex of low structures standing between the wall and the first of the bloated skyscrapers. Once again, a constant, thunderous noise makes my ears ring. Black smoke and the tip of massive fires soon blots out the horizon, masking the city from view.

The Liches' answer is immediate. The gates open, this time fully and with an ominous creak of twisted metal. A tide of armored slaves emerges from it in thick ranks. This time, I see

towering constructs among their numbers, something we had never seen before. It appears they were amassing before the bombardment forced their hand.

Our mortals are not fools. Our guns soon focus on that thick mass of troops but as the first shell lands, it stops against a thick, transparent barrier.

"A shield. It looks like one of ours," I idly comment.

"It appears they can learn as well," Nirari replies.

"I suspect they remembered," I correct.

In terms of magic, the liches are our masters, not our students. Their understanding of the arcane arts likely overpassed ours millennia ago until lifeforce casting made most of it obsolete. What is the point of a shield when your foe can rip through it and your life as easily as taking candy from a child. Now that they face us, it appears they have returned to their roots in their endless quest for efficiency.

Battalions of soldiers march out under the cover of those shields as they are carried by what appears to be reanimated, elephant-sized beetles. I can spot the glint of lifeforce orbs under their polished exoskeletons. Titans of bone and metal march among them, each step lifting clouds of dust. Punishment that would level a city falls on the shields to no effect. Nevertheless, our mortals persist. They know that every protection has its limits. I am just unsure as to what those are. As for the slave warriors, they do not stop coming. Most immediately move to the sides, under their wall, to form a battleline of biblical proportions. The sunset light shines on the dull steel of their gear to form a tapestry of blood-tinged metal. When the fire of the artillery drops to a trickle, not one of the defenders' protections has failed and still more of their men leave the protection of their wall. What I took for a massive army is outnumbered by four to one, then five to one, then I simply lose count. Night falls on the Last City before the lich army has fully deployed. By then, an entire infantry division has reached us from earth as officers call for emergency reinforcements. A drop in the bucket compared to what we face.

To my surprise, we are approached by a group of humans. I turn to see General Stiglitz, his command staff trailing him with determined steps. Their shining uniforms are backlit by the light of our noon sun. I gather my will to resist averting my eyes and for a fugacious moment, they appear regal, here, walking fearlessly in front of hundreds of thousands of warrior slaves with their golden ropes, their medals, their berets and kepis. There is not a hint of fear on their traits.

They mask it well.

"It appears the welcoming committee has finally arrived. And still not a lich in sight!"

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," I reply.

"A dark goddess quoting the bible? Now I have seen everything," he jokes, and we all smile. We need it.

Also, I like being called a dark goddess. My papa would be very proud if he could see me now.

“I have some bad news and some good news,” General Stiglitz continues in what seems to be an unexpected bout of humor. I wonder how much of it is bravado but I admire him for it nonetheless.

“Always start with the bad news.”

“Good, I would have done so no matter what. The enemy’s wings have already started to move. It appears they intend to envelop us.”

“Ah. And the good news?”

“Soon we will be able to fire in every direction.”

This time I do smile genuinely. Our force are already defending the entire edge of the camp due to the constant threat of hounds. It still means that the warrior slaves can bring their entire force to bear, and with our artillery neutered, we have lost our greatest tool against human waves.

“I suppose you come here with a request. Do ask?”

“Yes. Since you can call winter and bloom an entire forest, I do not suppose that you and the other vampires could do something about those pesky shields?”

I consider our options until a smooth voice interrupts my musings.

“What do the mortals want, little princess?”

“To take the shields down.”

“Ah. I see.”

Once again, my sire speaks in that old German I barely understand. The meaning, however, is crystal clear.

“You will focus your modern weapons on three shields at a time, until they break. You will remember that those shields are powered by stolen life force and that their servants cannot replenish them without the help of a lich. My kin shall assist you when the enemy draws near. And lastly.”

My sire finally turns. His dark eyes take in the entire group. They take a collective step back. His domineering aura smashes into them, blue light fighting back from hidden crosses in what should be a winning battle but, once again, those are not fanatics who lead Earth’s armies. Their faith protects them like an umbrella stops the deluge.

“You can honor your allegiances to your nations for now but if you come to us for help again, you will bow first or I will take your knees.”

All the goodwill I have accumulated melts like dew under a desert sun. The officers nod and flee as fast as their dignity will allow. Nirari's aura recedes once more.

"I shall count on you again, little princess. It will not be long now."

And indeed, it does not take long. Drums beat in the distance. Horns bleat. Slowly, the gigantic wall of soldiers move forward, brandishing spears and battle standards like a warhost of old but this time they have magic on their side while we have the hope that their shields will fail before we run out of shells.

Well, it is finally time to give instructions.

"Wait until the shield cores are less than a mile away to attempt destruction. Come from unexpected angles. Use the walkers and troops as shields. Do not engage too early or you will be singled out," I say.

A flurry of acknowledgements return, though less than half of the numbers of vampires who should be here. They are not dead. They are merely ignoring me.

Again, time slows down to a nervous crawl while the foe crosses the miles that separate us. All of the artillery focus on the three central shields, each one large enough to protect thousands of men. They disappear under a torrent of fire and steel. The air is now hot and it constantly shakes. Constant explosions deafen me, making any conversation impossible. The first line holds fire while the enemy approaches with the slow inevitability of an avalanche. Soon, even the mortals can see the faces of their enemies.

But then, the first shield breaks. It is too much for even stolen life force. A shattering noise heralds the breach after almost half an hour of effort. The brigade that used it for shelter is instantly obliterated. Shells still fall for half a minute before the cannons redirect their effort to the two shields near it. They fall soon after. I can now see the gate beyond a sea of ravaged corpses. It gives me a prim view of the unending mass of armed civilians it vomits. Malnourished bodies covered in sores, brandishing stones and cudgels run forward with abandon. Women, children, toothless wretches foam at the mouth in their urge to join the fray. There has to be some sorcery at play.

General Stiglitz sees the danger. Guns focus on the gates to stem the flood of maddened paupers. I dare not look. This is not a battle anymore. This is a senseless travesty of everything that makes a life, a hunt, civilization. The liches have emptied their poorer districts in an effort to end us. And it might just work. With our guns busy, the shields are about to reach us. The first soldiers enter the reach of my Magna Arqa. Well, nothing for it.

I am one of the first to charge forward. The shield barely slows me down. It is designed to stop projectiles, not people. I have sprinted past the first foe before they even realize I am coming. I notice javelin throwers and orb wielders hidden among the ranks of armor-clad men. The mortals have their work cut out for them.

It is merely a matter of a second for me to peel off the steel exoskeleton around the generator. A thrust of Rose and the orb collapses, bleeding lifeforce over the sweaty ranks in a refreshing breeze of energy. I am away and to the next before the closest slave even turns

to watch. I reach the next in an instant to inflict the same treatment upon it. They appear to have no traps. Perhaps I should have gone before.

In front of me, Urchin weaves between fiery tongues sent by the hidden orb users. Those who come too close catch a thrown knife to the face. He takes great care to step on as many officers' heads as he can on his way to the generator. I watch him extend his hand.

"Mine now."

The shield array's massive lifeforce ball lands in his hands. The spell fails at the same instant.

It remains an annoyingly useful ability.

Urchin runs back, cackling and holding his prize. Behind us, the mortals are eager to take advantage of the failing defenses. A torrent of fire and steel turns the attack into a carnage. There is nowhere to hide here, no time to run. They die where they stand or crushed under the weight of their fallen.

On the sides, other forces are not so lucky. Some vampires have died or failed or there were not enough to begin with. The shields get in contact with our lines and the warrior slaves charge. Javelins and massive spells woven from orbs answer rifles fired at point blank range. Spearmen charge on bayonets. The melee is immediately intense and the armored warriors overwhelm the first lines without stopping. For each of them who falls, a dozen take their place. They may know fear but they do not know disobedience. The left flank is immediately under threat. I run from shield to shield to disable them, feeling like I accomplish ver little. Even with my thorns attacking with me. There are simply so many of them.

Then I hear it, a drone like a buzz of very, very large wasps.

"They took their sweet time."

We do not rely on a single portal, of course. Other have been opened in air base all around Europe and the first squadrons have arrived, ready to deliver

The first wave of dive bombers must have received their instruction because the first ace dives fearlessly into a shield and reappears on the other side, no worse for wear. I suppose a plane is much slower than a bullet. This oversight will cost the liches dearly.

I suddenly feel an urge to step back. To see. This is not my battle yet. I can feel it. The mortals are pulling the thread of fate for now. This war is one of numbers, not champions. I want to watch it. Using a root, I jump up in the air and into a vista of apocalypse.

The earth base forms a star of interlocked defensive lines and scattered guns. Tanks for thick, impenetrable lines around flexible companies of defenders. By contrast, the warrior slaves of the Dead World advance in thick lines around their strange walkers, groups of javelin throwers and orb users providing support. A thick smoke blots the sky while the thunder of cannon fire covers everything else. It smells of meat, blood, fire, and death. Every sense is saturated before the unceasing fury of two alliances that can never be reconciled.

Where the shields have faded, the Earth's troops harvest the city's defenders in a nightmarish display of superior technology. Dive bombers smash formations before they truly form with hails of explosive bullets. Tanks patiently line walkers to blow them up mid step. Those who stand die. Those who hide burn. There is no escaping the jaws of progress. Where the shields still hold, however, the back lines cannot support the front ones. Waves of spearmen overwhelm the trenches, stabbing the defenders in the guts. The walkers stomp turrets and crumple them and the pilots underneath. Javelins catch machine gunners while pockets of resistance are torched by terrible spells. Screams in English, German and Italian echo the moans of the local, more guttural tongue. Mud covers both sides for the first time not because of rain but because there is simply so much blood in those tightly packed quarters.

I brought the Earth army here. This violence and death from wall to the horizon, I made it happen, but looking at this now gives me a strange sense of vertigo. I may have started this all but not even god could stop it now.

Enough of this. I will make myself useful.

I join the melee. Those metal walkers they have might be tough cookies but compared to what Loth can achieve, they remain awkward piles of junk as I smash them on my way to the next generator then the next after that. I do not lose myself in the thrill of battle. The real opponents have not arrived yet. They should. This is the perfect opportunity and they are nothing if not good at exploiting weaknesses.

Above me, stars of fire engulf a squadron of dive bombers. Their wrecks crash among the tightly packed men, leaving great and bloody furrows. I withdraw Rose from a walker to watch the new arrivals. All of us do. For a moment, there is a lull in the battle.

Tiny dots fly over the distant ranks of the rear guard. Small, yes, yet immeasurably more dangerous than those who precede them. Aura crashes against us to promise death or servitude. There are so many of them. At least fifty, each one more powerful than an archmage. A monstrous, six-armed figure leads them. It extends a massive scepter forward to the core of our formation. Terror strikes the earth fighters before whatever horror that thing is about to conjure can even manifest. Even I feel it like a solid weight above my shoulders. Power gathers to a blazing intensity.

And then the scepter explodes.

The lich screeches, one hand lost. Only then do I hear an extraordinary boom that breaks the oppressive silence. The enemy leader retreats behind a shield.

Svyatoslav joins my side, bow deployed. The undead aura of the life defilers recedes like the tide against another rock, more ancient and much more powerful. Silence spreads over the dead plain. Even the screams of the dying are silenced. For the first time in over twelve hours, the land before the Last City is quiet. Two worlds hold their breaths.

"Rejoice," a voice deep says behind me, and somehow I know everyone can hear it, and everyone can understand it.

“Rejoice, children of earth, for tonight, you fight under the gaze of the heir of Enlil, the scion of Babylon. Rejoice, for tonight, the First Clan joins the hunt.”

Purple light blazes, bathing the battlefield. The time of numbers is over. The hour of champions is now.

Nirari stands up.