

Marquette, April 1927

*"What do you want?"* I ask the redhead sitting in front of my desk.

Melusine has free access to me as one of my oldest and most annoying allies. My door is always open to her, though our rivalry precludes long and friendly visits, thus she has never felt the need to make appointments as she has done now. It must be serious. Especially since she usually enjoys catching me at the most inopportune moment.

*"There is little need for artifice between the two of us. I have found Lady Moor and I intend to kill her."*

I lean back in my seat. Hmm. Lady Moor. It certainly brings back memories and not of the tender kind. Curiously, I held more animosity towards Melusine than I did towards Moor because Moor was an abject fallen politician whose cruelty felt distant and, shall I say, utilitarian. I was merely a tool in her arsenal and since she cared not for her tools at all, she did not care for me either. Even her 'lesson' when she asked me to lop off my arm stopped the moment I asked her to do so. I did not pursue the family of Mrs Boucher who was my governess when I was five and she was a rotten bitch.

Meanwhile Melusine was a moving stain. And I have not killed her yet. I can tell I have left Moor behind in the list of people who do not matter enough for me to expand any efforts on. Obviously, Melusine will think differently.

*"Well done, I remember you have been looking for her for a while now."*

*"Indeed. The shameless bitch ditched her execution in England by taking a ship to Algiers, then she absconded to the far east via the Suez canal and ended up in... Shanghai."*

*"Shanghai,"* I muse. *"Well, it makes sense I suppose. Enough foreigners to fit in, enough poor locals to feed on."*

*"Exactly. She has taken her new spawn with her and scurried but someone noticed her and the money trail does not lie. She is preparing her return, buying some Mask lords to arrange her return. She has done well pillaging the rotting corpse of the Qing dynasty. This is just like her, robbing away instead of building her own empire."*

*"I assume she does not intend to stay there for long."*

*"No,"* Melusine replies, showing a bit of fang. *"She will not."*

*"And while I would enjoy seeing her fall, I also assume you have not contacted me because you wish to share your vengeance?"*

*"She killed my vassal! Her stupidity and betrayal led to his death. I will never, never, never... I WILL RIP HER TO SHRED MYSELF."*

*"And you need help,"* I conclude.

Her fury dies out.

*“Well, yes. The trip by ship would take... not to mention there is no Allied branch to speak of there. I would be going alone against an entrenched foe, a lady besides. I can live with the possibility of my own demise, but not that of her survival. I need your ship and your presence but please let me kill her myself.”*

I consider her request. One cannot rush research and so I am left waiting and strengthening my position as I prepare for the next great offensive. I could use a holiday, and I could stand to visit more of the planet I am meant to defend. I would also love to see Moor suffer while making sure Melusine survives this ordeal. She has proven a great if insufferable ally over the decades.

*“I have two conditions,”* I tell her.

*“Of course you do.”*

*“No backtalk, supplicant, or did you expect me to ask nothing?”*

*“Name them.”*

*“First, the Colorado deal.”*

*“Yes yes, eighty percent for you. And I will toss in a silver mine I found.”*

*“Where?”*

*“Alaska.”*

*“Hmm...”*

That is great news as I always need more silver for the enchantments. The precious metal is no longer used for legal tender here, yet the demand remains too high.

*“My second condition is that once we arrive, we will conduct an investigation, just the two of us plus Constance, I suppose?”*

*“And your weird pair. I will not bring my own, as they are not warriors.”*

*“No, I have plans for them. They will be busy. In any case, you will keep secret and tolerate the fact that I shall be wearing trousers.”*

Melusine gasps and glares like a very offended, freshly caught fish.

*“The whole time,”* I precise.

*“I am avenging my vassal in a blood feud and you want to attend wearing PANTS?”*

*"I guess that if it is too much, you can always ask your other friend who happens to own the world's fastest flying ship and can toss ladies aside like they are mortals."*

*"Fine. FINE! I should not have expected a bumpkin to acquire a sense of decorum in less than three centuries. Trousers! Pah. It is such a shame that your bloodline does not let you devour intelligence."*

*"And if yours drew power from sperm you would not need my help. You could just swim there."*

*"OH!"*

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I watch the waters of the Pacific far, far below us. I must admit that after so many trips, the sea of clouds over a sea of water has lost some of its exotic charm, but when the light of the moon hits the cottony layer just so, I still enjoy drawing it. Tonight would have been such a night were it not for my official rival leaning against the railing by my side. Is she still a rival? Or should I consider her a friend?

No, absolutely not.

*"I do not suppose you would be willing to land the Fury for half a day? I could use a distraction."*

*"The thought of your impending vengeance weighs on you?"*

She rolls her eyes.

*"Please. I am suffering from cabin fever."*

*"Well, the Fury has many advantages and one of them is the endless supply of energy the Aurora provides as it slumbers. Unfortunately, I had to proceed with some arbitration. This model of the Fury is not designed for the ocean."*

*"You mean that it is not seaworthy?"*

*"More... sea-floaty. But I would be loath to capsize during daytime. It would be best if we focused on making good time."*

*"Oh, very well."*

She sighs, a very human gesture that betrays her agitation.

*"Tell me about your plan for the dead world. I know you have been focusing your efforts on a solution. Knowing you, it will be a drastic measure."*

*“Why not? What do you know of the situation?”*

*“I know the frequency of incursions has increased.”*

*“Frequency and might. We are now talking about full scale, temporary invasions led by higher-numbered lichés. More powerful ones. It can only mean one thing: their factions have finally united to reap our world.”*

*“It only took them half a century.”*

*“Yes, well, they are doing it now and we face major difficulties. The German Empire is holding the line together with Brotherhood vampires. The constant struggles have turned their society even more militaristic, their leaders even more paranoid. The Kaiser has resigned in favor of his son.”*

*“I knew that! I do read the newspapers.”*

*“With the consequence,” I insist, “that the blame for the situation lies at the feet of the Triple Entente. They see themselves as robbed of victory in the Great War at a decisive moment because of supernatural reasons, and now more monsters plague them in an attempt to make the empire fall.”*

*“Do you really believe they could have won at Verdun?”*

*“No, though it does not matter. Only their perception does. This climate of patriotism and xenophobia has made cooperation all but impossible. If we are to rid our world of those locusts, it will have to be done in one decisive operation. We will never have the political capital to ensure a long cooperation.”*

*“Then what is your solution?”*

*“We need to win one decisive engagement and destroy them once and for all, and more importantly before they can bring their full power to bear. You see, the presence on the battlefield of the third for a mere moment turned the tide of a major battle in the territories around Munich. It stands to reason that the most powerful lichés are incredibly deadly, and it is with taking into account the limit they impose on themselves.”*

I take out a new page of my notebook and hastily throw lines to show the glimpse I had of the Last City, back when I left them with a nice bomb. The result is a chthonic landscape of towering buildings as high as mountains, their many windows like hive openings or the sores on some giant, decaying organ.

*“This is a small district of the Last City.”*

*“That place is enormous!”*

*“Exactly. Not just enormous but also heavily populated. Do you understand?”*

*“Understand what?”*

I glare a little.

*“The lichs have stagnated for a long time after the death of their world. Now that they have access to new wealth and the possibility to make more of their numbers they will not stop, but the only way to win is to destroy them on their own land and that will remove the limiter on what they are willing to do. The same stagnation comes not just from circumstances but also from careful management of their resources. None of this will matter if they believe they face their own extinction. They can extract power from the life of their followers, Melusine. There are millions of them here. Between killing half of their population and losing a single lich, you know what they will choose, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. Who knows what ancient horror they have slumbering under that blighted landscape, ready to wake at the first sign of a good meal? No, we need to blow them up before they realize we have that possibility.”*

*“I knew it would end with explosions with you.”*

*“Because they work,” I curtly interrupt. “We cannot possibly hope to defeat them if they fight us at full power because we have standards and they do not. Do you understand?”*

*“How, pray tell, do you intend to demolish a magically protected base the size of a small country? I am no stranger to military affairs. We do not have explosives that would make this even remotely feasible.”*

*“I have two leads. The first is to use life energy to make those globes I used the first time.”*

*“Fighting fire with fire?”*

*“Constantine has firmly vetoed that idea. I see no signs that he will go back on his decision.”*

*“Hmm. And you have followed his directives? Curious.”*

*“He is required for the project to work. Those advanced life magic are beyond me and besides, they feel...”*

*“Unnatural?”*

*“Yes. Destructive. If light and dark magic are two sides of a coin this is the pit the coin will fall into, never to be seen again.”*

*“I agree. We must not become them or the problem will only be compounded when we kill our world just as it wakes. What else do you have?”*

*“Well, the powerful nations of the world have realized the importance of flight. More viable planes with mundane engines are being developed, but the possibility of flying fortresses or even plane carriers excites every major general under the stars so a lot of money is being*

*poured into researching new energy sources. Are you familiar with the works of Rontgen and Becquerel?"*

*"Who?"*

*"Those are scientists that study radiation," I explain with some impatience. "They observed that some materials like Uranium or Thorium emit a form of rays that become visible on a fluorescent screen. If something emits energy, then that energy could be harnessed."*

*"This seems like a very long shot."*

*"Indeed, but I have been experimenting with Thorium rounds and they seem to be animated with some innate power that bolsters certain forms of enchantment. Also, the metal turns black when touched by air and it looks quite fancy."*

*"Do you conduct any experiments that do not involve projectiles?"*

*"Would you like to take part in an interesting experiment on the aerodynamics of a tossed trollop?"*

*"Please continue."*

*"Thank you. Know that many major countries are pursuing this avenue of research with great interest."*

*"Are you funding the American one?"*

*"Of course not. We are not supposed to know about it. I shall just wait for one of the laboratories to succeed then steal their research."*

*"Naturally."*

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Our arrival at the port of Shanghai might have been a sensation. In fact, I am absolutely certain that Moor will be aware of the presence of foreign agents no matter what, so I make no attempt at secrecy. Perhaps she does not know that the Fury belongs to me. After all, there are no Rosenthal branches here. At least, not the information gathering kind. Nevertheless, we are welcomed by a committee of heavily armed local soldiers in khaki uniforms, bearing an insignia like a white sunburst on a blue background. They are accompanied by a pair of American soldiers and a couple of men in uniform. The mood is tense. The presence of three women and the subdued, cold aura of Andrew, Melusine's vassal certainly does little to calm them down. Those in power dislike engaging with those who threaten the status quo. Well, nothing to it.

"Hello," I greet. "Are you the welcoming party?"

The one who answers is a bespectacled old man with impressive jowls and large round glasses. He wears a full suit complete with a top hat, a curious choice in the warm and wet weather. His voice carries a thick English accent.

“I am certainly not that, madam. My name is Henry Douglas. I represent the Shanghai Municipal Council and I would like to inquire as to what you are doing here, at this time?”

Ah yes, the municipal council. The British control most of the industry of Shanghai, and the foreigners have enclaves here. Shanghai is Asia’s largest port and so the foreign population is quite significant, though I did not expect such a cold reception.

“We are here,” I reply, “to see relatives.”

A Chinese man in a well-tailored suit leans close to a Chinese officer with the countenance and warmth of a bulldog. He glares mightily under bushy brows. The insignias on his shoulders fit the German style, interestingly, and they mark him as a colonel. There are quite a few soldiers waiting by the pier. Two hundred or so, I would say.

Both Mr Douglas and the colonel inspect my obvious warship filled with obvious marines obviously armed to the teeth with obviously top-of-the-line gear obviously enchanted to the gills. They assess the likelihood that I have come for tourism. I can see the cogs grind in their heads for a quarter of a second. They come to the conclusion that the likelihood is low. Then, their eyes come to rest on my entourage. Urchin and John stand in modern beige suits looking the parts of assorted hired killers. Melusine practically wears a gown, a conservative one that would become stifling in the day and clearly marks her as an outsider. Constance is the only sensibly dressed person in a sleeveless dress with a nice hat sporting a fluffy feather (a fad, I am sure). The problem is the obvious holster around her narrow waist. As for me, I am regretting the choice to wear pants. No, I am not, but I am regretting the choice to do it now instead of later. I have a long vest that splits in the middle to form a sort of skirt so technically, technically, I could be wearing a skirt and leggings. A scandalously short skirt. That exposes the crotch area. AUGH.

I even placed a nice sunflower in my hair for the irony.

“My partner colonel Zheng and myself question your choice to come here, now, at such an uncertain time. We are concerned that your presence would destroy the proper conduct of large-scale police operations.”

I shrug and the gesture marks me as the leader of this little expedition, to the men’s obvious displeasure. Those two do not feel like the progressive kind.

“As I said, we are here to see a relative. Your operations do not concern me.”

“They do! The city is plagued by communists. Those wretched curs provoke the masses. They have pushed students into a frenzy! You would be wise to avoid the city for a while, miss, if you know what’s good for you.”

“As I said,” I patiently reply and this time I push the notion of threat through my aura, “We are here to see relatives. Your political purges are of no import to us.”

The air cools around us until the nearest sentry’s breath puffs in the deepening darkness of the night.

“You all seem to be quite busy, gentlemen. Surely you would not want to waste time and resources of poor little us while we search for our dear relative.”

The men stiffen because the supernatural is part of our world now, and I have firmly placed myself in that category. More precisely, at its top.

“It would be wise of you to let us proceed while you pursue your own agenda. Yes?”

On cue, the Fury deploys spell arrays which deactivate so the younger members of the crew can climb them for maintenance. Rays from the moon catch the blue engravings of the main gun just right. Soldiers here have rifles. Their ships have cannons. I have a ship killer.

It is, I believe the Poles who have the say: not my monkeys, not my circus. My hosts must easily realize that they have many monkeys to wrangle and that their circus looks eminently flammable. Brittle. Just like my patience.

Douglas turns to colonel Zhen and they speak in a quiet voice that I can understand well enough. There are enough ‘it would be wiser’ and ‘time best used’ and ‘probably not linked with our foes’. It takes ten more minutes and a considerable amount of threats, but the pair leaves with their goons in tow.

Just as Douglas turns, I replace my pleasant face for one of rabid fanged fury, promising punishment for the audacity he has displayed. He stumbles and when he looks up, I am my usual pleasant self.

“Are you sure I cannot convince you to join the communist purge?” Melusine asks sullenly in English.

“For the last time, pay your employees a decent wage and you will sap their strength.”

“You still see my business empire as some sort of self-contained little empire, huh? I do not have a monopoly on Dvergur tech like you do! There is such a thing as competition!”

“What is the break-even point of a can of ham, you harpy? Your profit margins— “

“Not that I have not heard this argument in one form or another a thousand times over the past five years, but could we please get one with tonight? Some of us will have to wake up at dawn to investigate matters, yes?” Andrew interrupts.

“You know old folks love their arguments,” Constance tells him.

Melusine and I hiss at her, then at each other.



“Don’t hiss at my servant,” I warn.

“And you— “

“You mentioned a contact?” Constance says with a frozen smile.

Melusine frowns. She knows we are being distracted, though she relents.

“Yes. A local vampire, of which there are very, very few apparently. She was the first to inform one of my agents. We will meet her first to get the lay of the land, so to speak. I have a map here to a meeting point.”

Melusine removes a folded paper from her handbag. She unfolds it again and again under our collective glare until we are now seeing a massive, extremely detailed map of the city down to the last building drawn as tiny squares. A large red cross marks our rendezvous point. A suggested route starts from the pier, having anticipated our landing zone with concerning accuracy. I order my men to stay on alert as Shanghai appears to be on the verge of a major conflagration, then we are off.

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We make our way through the chaotic streets through clouds of sweat, cigarette smoke, and a peppery scent mixed with frying oil. The architecture is quite unique here, and rather fascinating. Locals turn and gasp as we pass, which is not surprising considering our rather eclectic and exotic appearance. Men in thin sleeveless vests and without shirt watch us pass or work, carrying bags or dragging carts. Their thin bodies are taut with dry, long muscles and without a speck of fat. I take a note to draw them later, and they do the same with me, watching without shame. Others show the same curiosity though with more grace. Women in tight, colorful dresses smile with short black hair made wavy by a process that must be time-consuming, but it is the men who show the most variety in their clothes, and that is without foreigners who must be confined in their districts right now. On top of the poorest members of society, there are some who wear traditional robes the likes of which I had only seen in illustrations before. Others wear long, dark clothes under wide-brimmed hats. Finally, some have completely absorbed western culture and you could see their attire on every street of Paris or Chicago. Truly, this mix and match of eras and fashions speaks of a land between epochs where ideas clash, as they do tonight.

The deeper we go and the fancier the people become, though most of them seem to be in a hurry to be somewhere. Examples of foreign architecture creep in here and there until at some point we come across a checkpoint manned by nervous French policemen. On the other side I see a bistro, now closed, and a neat avenue bordered by platane like a vision of Paris. It fades as quickly as it came. At some point though, the wealth disappears again. Gang louts wearing green turbans replace angry students screaming. Soldiers of the white sunburst also become more frequent. There are corpses as well, heads smashed in. Here and there, I feel the aura of mages though they never show themselves and I taste something diffuse in their power. Interesting. I suppose I will find out soon enough.

The place of our meeting is, quite frankly, terrible. Whoever owns that filthy dump has made some token effort to make it appear as a palace of sorts, the least of which being the location. Anything looks good compared to offal-smelling slums and yet a dump will always be a dump. The lantern's paper is damp and discolored, the walls moldy, paper stained by constant smoke and the Watcher knows what else. Hostesses in scant clothes use the di, light to hide their sores and the cheap make of their garish clothes. The paint on their face clings to pimples. Their teeth are strangely black. We step up rickety stairs and make our way through a pungent cloud of burnt, floral scent. Opium. This is an opium den. A man tries to stop us while his bouncer looks on in sullen silence since I am, in fact, taller than him.

*"Should we ask them our destination? They might not speak any European language,"* Melusine says.

*"Can you not detect the aura of our host? It comes from deeper, straight ahead,"* I tell her reproachfully.

*"I do not have an all-seeing Magna Arqa!"*

*"I am not using it."*

*"Oh."*

*"You are just bad and lack practice. Slacker. Slouch."*

*"Cease!"*

Our small banter makes our progress unopposed as everyone here is either at a loss on what to do or lacks the required brain matter to act. Those people lunging here have so little vitality, I could drain the lot and get less energy than in a single healthy adult. And they stink! A rancid, diseased stench that crawls under the flowery touch like poppies on a bed of dung. Revolting. At last, we find the backrooms and a more comfortable, cleaner space. Lights shine on a richly dressed woman waiting in its midst. We have found our destination.

"Hello hello!"

The person who welcomes us, sitting with crossed legs on an elaborate silk pillow, is definitely a vampire. The use of English does not surprise me as her essence screams 'Vanheim' and the old monster has never seen it fit to make its descendants fluent and, for that matter, normal.

*"Why are all Vanheim such lunatics,"* Melusine grumbles.

*"For the same reason we all build empires, and you are all sardonic twats,"* I reply.

Then I turn to the woman. She is clearly of mixed descent as I have seen before, but this one shows clear signs of European and Asian ancestry in equal measure. Her eyes are dark, shaped like almonds yet less so than some of the other locals. Straight hair fall to her

shoulder freely, black yet shiny even under the dim light. Her face is sharp and perhaps on the thin side, with skin a shade darker than my own. Her smile is wide over ruby lips and there is something in her iris, something ephemeral yet incredibly colorful.

I also notice she wears a qipao, a local, close-fitting dress. A pipe rests in her hand, though it lacks the small receptacle used for opium. It looks like a custom creation with a thin, graceful body like the neck of a swan. The design is quite unique and reminds me of... hmmm.

Just as I frown, she puffs and a delicate, otherworldly floral scent caresses my nostril, bringing back memories of lush carpets and walls of living wood. Vivid colors swirl in her iris. and I see a hint of denuded shoulder, of very long black hair. Shadows of a dangerous smile. Memories flood back from my short stay in the Court of Spring.

"You can call me Cassilda. Carnaciel said hello again, little one," she tells me in perfect Likaeen.

Melusine steps back, shocked. I am amazed that Vanheim would pick up someone with the gift of gab as a spawn and still manage not to transfer the mastery of Akkad, but my humor fades quickly. Cassilda is linked to someone even Sinead was terrified of.

"Please extend my greetings to Lady Carnaciel, and I long to dream with her again. Some day."

Cassilda took a puff, her smile extending to show fangs in a malicious rather than intimidating way.

"She said you would be formal and to call her auntie. She also said she would like it if you married Sinsin, put some fervor in his head. He is too smarmy. Thinks about plots and politics too much. Remind Summer of the old days, back when Spring had... a lot of fun."

"Auntie?"

"She is so old, you know? She said you will grow tired of conquest like she did if you play the game long enough, once your tree is big and sated. Maybe you will, maybe you will not. I am not so sure, but what do I know?"

"What you know is what we are here for."

"Ah yes, business. A blood feud."

Cassilda taps the pipe against an ash cup, sending ember to fall. The fire attracts my eyes because I fear it, and Cassilda's smile widens. A glare sends her hands up in surrender though she never stops smiling.

"You," she says in English, "are a tarantula. Powerful. Kills even birds. The fire one is like an orb weaver. She will wait at the center of her net. But the one who seeks, why, she is a huntsman. You will not see her until she has bitten."

“We expected Moor to hide.”

“She is hidden, yes,” Cassilda admits. “And she will know you are here before you find her. Too many eyes, too many strands. Even your mere steps shake the weave.”

“Will she run?” Melusine hisses.

“She may. She may try to kill you first, red one. She may think you are too much of a bother while the tarantula prefers her birds. Too busy for revenge. She has slain Enrico, my lover. He was too involved. Too visible.”

“Is that why you told me she was here?” Melusine asks.

“Yes. If I am too weak, I can find someone strong, the enemy of my enemy. You are that, yes?”

“We are,” I confirm.

“Then we can look for her. But first, we must corner her a little. Search for her with strength and determination. Force her to move from her trunk. Rattle the cage a little.”

“Don’t worry,” Melusine says as she points at me. “Chaos is practically her middle name.”

“Oi!”

My middle name is Lucille.