

Sinead mentioned that fae nobility cultivates bloodlines. I suspect their version is to mine as fine horticulture is to shoveling pig shit on a cabbage field.

When I first recovered Constance from her mother's clutch, the baby was underfed and addicted to opiates. Her mother's caretakers gave up on controlling their charge and informed me of it. I did not blame them. They were to help with maternity, not control a drug fiend. It would have taken restraints to stop Nathalie Bingle from the ephemeral pleasures of artificial paradises. Although she had picked a different last name for herself and was nothing like her distinguished ancestors.

I considered killing her after the birth, but I realized with some pain that staying clean had never been part of our deal. I was to provide food, shelter, and a lump sum in exchange for the child. Basic self-respect was never a term of our agreement. So I did pay her three thousand dollars, then sent her on her way, knowing exactly how she would spend the money, knowing that she would be turning tricks again as soon as her body recovered enough, and the money ran out.

I remember carrying that bundle of cloth back to Marquette on Metis'. I still do not know why her mother named her after that one quality, constance. Was it because she had perverted it to its utmost, showing no signs of remorse in her pursuit of easy gratification? Was it a cruel joke? Or did she still harbor some hope that her child would do better?

Sometimes, I think Nathalie could have gotten rid of her pregnancy if she had really wanted to. It would have been easy for someone of her mental talents to find help. A controlled healer mage could have done so safely. I find it hard to identify motives with lost souls like her. Their minds are fleeting. Their essence tastes wan and never fully sate, the last drop feeling more dreamt than truly consumed. They have a tendency to flee ever forward as well.

I kept an agent on Nathalie after that and focused my attention on Constance. I think Nathalie noticed, but she did not care.

I am now sure Constance is the one.

Fate has been playing tricks with all of us.

Sinead ravished Louisa Watson and they had a son, a mage.

Alexandria Merritt had a child, Lynn, an enchantress.

Those two had Annie together before separating. Annie left home and met Alexander Bingle. The two made Nathalie together.

Nathalie charmed and raped Arthur Reynaud, one of my grand-nephews visiting Marquette to greet me.

There must be some cosmic joke at play. A fae prince, a vampire, a godling, and an archmage walk into a bar...

Constance carries the memory of many of those important people who crossed my path. She does not know it yet. In a way, this is not fair to her. In another way, I have kept my intervention to a minimum. I did not even take part in her education. The time when I could help with Ollie and Lynn is long gone now that my travels carry me all over north America. Leave for a measly two years and when you return, the children you knew are entirely different persons. It can make for a frustrating experience.

As such, I have left Constance's education to the city's well-funded orphanage. I made concessions so that it would be the best institution possible with mindful and kind caretakers. Specifically, I opened the positions to nuns and other religious figures despite my misgivings. Satisfied, I let her grow at her own pace. It is now nineteen oh three. Constance is eighteen. The time has come for her to travel as part of a Red Cabal team of mages for a practical exam.

This leads me to today, sitting in my office with a note on my desk informing me that Constance and three of her classmates will visit the city of Indianapolis for their training mission.

A cold shadow grasps my heart. Oh, misery, oh why? Here, at the heart of my power, my Dvor essence multiplies the acuity of my intuition, and I know with absolute certainty that I must go there and chaperone the group, so that my desire be done. Oh, tragedy, for I dislike Indianapolis. It is a dreary place with nothing that interests me. A logistical center for transportation from not Indianapolis to not Indianapolis, both points bound to be infinitely more attractive than Indianapolis.

Oh, who am I kidding?

I dread it because it is the world's third largest pork packing city.

Incidentally, Melusine directed enough funds and made full use of Chicago's prime location to turn the city into the world's pork packing capital. That degenerate. That swine-herding fiend. That absolute hag, the hog-born daughter of Circe. I should have spiked her when I had the chance. But at least, with no Bingle-blooded child in her domain, I can fully enjoy the opera season with no fear of porcine pyrotechnics. Indianapolis will be different. Oh woe is me, and that terrible curse. Why can I not get the gift of prophecy without being believed like a normal cursed lady? Why must it be pigs?

Desperate, I ring my bell.

"I will need a two weeks traveling arrangement to Indianapolis, please. It is a neutral territory. I will also need the Accords and Rosenthal information package on the city and its surroundings, supernatural population, risk assessment, and politics."

"I will have it prepared," Maybelle says. "Will you need an escort?"

"One elite squad, full gear. They will take the wagon to the city's outskirts as soon as they are ready. I will be traveling by train and taking residence at the city's best hotel. Find whichever it is and make a reservation."

“I will telephone them immediately.”

“And the automobile. Have the automobile go with the wagon,” I say. “I will use it to move around town.”

“Very well, I shall notify your chauffeur.”

I grumble in my heart but let it go. A decade ago, after a few... mishaps... I faced my first ever mutiny, and had to concede to my humans that I would not drive myself barring extenuating circumstances, such as being shot at. It is a thoroughly unfair situation. Sadly, I only have myself to blame. With the logistics arranged, the time has come to delegate most of my duties. I suspect this little escapade will tie me up for a couple of weeks.

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I take my quarters in the better part of the city, next to Monument Circle with its tall pillar upon which a goddess of victory stands, celebrating the nation's soldiers and sailors. The Grand Hotel is nice enough, I suppose, with cream colored stone under dark gray tiles that remind me of Paris' Hausmannian houses. Unfortunately, many of the surrounding buildings share our country's ubiquitous disdain for decoration. Those are functional, plain brick constructs that only accept adornments if those serve the pursuit of profit. The closest one advertises a popular brand of soap. Arguably, the local population certainly needs more cleaning and quite likely less drinking. The epidemic of alcoholism that struck the general population — and that I have managed to keep mostly at bay in Marquette — is in full swing here. I prepare Constance's arrival by reading the files delivered to me. It so happens that Indianapolis has a more diverse population than I expected. It appears that its relative isolation relative to the supernatural power structure has turned it into a haven of sorts.

First, we have the Silversmiths, a powerful local family with an interest in trade and shadow-based magic. An interesting bunch. Local power, not too expansionist, moderate illegal activities. I do not expect much trouble from them as the Rosenthal report qualifies them as pragmatic and the cost to benefit ratio of annoying the Hand is well known across the continent.

The second major group consists of members of the local black population. There are many mages forming a loose community, the result of years of underground railroad activity. Mages always had a higher chance of escaping, even untrained ones. By contrast, the white population has few mages and they all live hidden, like the Silversmiths. Such a distinction by ethnicity is not uncommon.

There are no vampires present here, not even transients. At least in theory. We have no need to keep the Accords apprised of our movements. In fact, vampires are notoriously hard to control when it comes to travel, making any such attempt doomed from the start. The only exception remains moving on another vampire's territory, because we dislike intruders even more than we dislike shackles. In any case, Indianapolis is indeed neutral territory, for now.

The last group is composed of werewolves.

I put down my coffee to read this passage again, then compare it to the similar entry in the Red Cabal information package, confirming what I, at first, found hard to believe. There are isolated werewolves here, living in a sort of commune and working in the meatpacking industry. They seem to be mostly outsiders, capable of handling their curses by themselves. The reports speak of a man named Quill who helps shelter his brethren. As for why they would not prefer the safety of Jeffrey's pack, I have no idea. It could be that they do not trust large groups, or perhaps they prefer to be alone. Werewolf communities tend to be... overwhelming at times. What with the public nudity. And the smell. By the Watcher, the smell.

Ahem.

My inspection is done and after taking a few notes, I send my escort team led by Lafayette to reconnoiter the surroundings, asking them to keep to their civilian clothes. There is no need to alert the locals about my arrival quite so soon, though they will undoubtedly learn of it in time. I have my automobile drive me along the central canal and visit the city market before returning to my room to fortify it. This is a public place, the perfect location to have me assassinated. I therefore ward the room to the utmost before using a spell to open a hole in the brick wall where I encase my sarcophagus. The room itself will act as a decoy. With my defenses now at an acceptable level, I prepare to slumber for the day.

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"Target has entered the building," Lafayette says.

I recline back in my seat at the Grand Hotel and resist the urge to order a coffee, which will be as terrible as the previous two. The large silvery mirror in front of me lacks color, but the details are quite realistic. It is the only way by which I can follow the progress of my would-be protege, given the human proclivity to work during the day. Oh, well.

The short squad leader angles the mirror to show me the entrance to an innocuous brick building at the periphery of town. This is a useless shot that shows me exactly nothing, but mortals who relay images with my small, magical camera always feel the need to point it at the most inane things. I tap the control panel to switch to the other camera's point of view, this one held by the woman in charge of overseeing Constance's squad's mission. She is a teacher by the name of Schindler, reliable but otherwise unremarkable. Her camera is held in a breast pocket, and comes with a much worse quality. The silvery image pans on the four sitting figures of my protege and her classmates. They stand at a steel table placed on the open space at the center of the building. I match every person to their file.

The first is Constance herself. Constance Snow, named after another name for orphans of unknown origin. She has dark hair and Sinead's strangely amber eyes. The file speaks of an extraordinary ability in ice and mental magic, but a stubborn personality and a lack of respect for authority. She has suffered from isolation in her early years on account of a powerful yet unchecked ability, though her isolation stopped with the help of her best friend, a member of her squad. As I watch, Constance turns her head.

She looks nothing like Sinead or my brother, though that would have been a shocking development. I do recognize some fae traits on her elfin, delicate face, though any sign of softness or vulnerability has hidden behind a slightly pointy chin and a gaze full of youthful confidence. Constance is rather tall for a woman, though she would not stand out in a crowd. By comparison, her companion is rather short.

Cute and dainty, Mille Willis would reach my shoulder with a proper posture and some good heels. She has little offensive potential to speak of, but managed to pass the defense test by virtue of a wild ability to detect presence at a range. She escaped the instructors without having to repel them in combat, thus passing the test. The file notes that she is Constance's only friend, having been protected by her from bullies. She is the carrot to Constance's stick and the charm to Constance's blunt approach to honesty. The two work together well, or so they claim.

She looks like a waif, one rude word away from bursting into tears, and her baby face destroys any credibility the group may have at this table. But I digress.

The third member of this group is a young man wearing thick glasses, clammy, and so thin he might have tuberculosis. The file calls him Jacob Van Graff. He is described as an able kinetic mage equally competent at throwing wards and people. The file also says he barely passed the physical aspect of the test on a second try and with the stellar grade of D-. Truly, a paragon of martial prowess. I would give him the raw physical might of the wet sponge with which he shares his complexion. Between the scars and the pimples, I would be too scared of slapping him and risk having to peel off the pus. I would also add that he has the charisma of a dead skunk and the confidence of a freshly castrated squirrel.

But none of this matters, compared to the last member of the team, the one on whom most gazes have fallen, the dominant male figure of this gathering. Aramis Boone. Named after one of Dumas' musketeers, the handsome young lad stands with a straight back and all the propriety his young age can command. Wavy black hair falls over a handsome, virile face full of brooding confidence. Top marks everywhere. A fire mage, according to his file. He and Constance should in theory struggle to match each other's style and yet they work together like a house on fire which would quickly get frozen. As the screen in front of me pans to the left to show the local mages standing behind their representatives, a fleeting concern crosses my mind.

Those look like the main character with her sidekick, the love interest, and his sidekick.

As soon as I think that I chastise myself for this irrational fear. Constance is no Bingle. She does not even share her last name.

But what if... Alexander came to recognize her and she adopted their name?

No. No no no. I must cast away those fears. I am not being rational. All will be well.

I shake my head and return my attention to the squad's vis-a-vis. Interestingly, both the instructor on the Red Cabal side and an old man on the local mages side have taken opposite seats at the heads of the table, while the squad and local negotiators face each

other four for four. Only two of them seem confident, however: a mature, handsome man with ritual scarring under his eyes and a bald, younger woman with a high forehead, her scalp covered in colorful tattoos. They are richly dressed in traditional clothes of unknown origin, though I can tell from the eclectic styles and vastly different traits that each of them belongs to a different ethnic group.

The instructor and the old man start the discussion by introducing each other and their charges, and I come to suspect that the Red Cabal is not the only group training members for new duties. The local firmly expresses his desire for deeper cooperation between the two entities while the instructor mentions the necessity to adhere to a common code of conduct and the proper exchange of information. The Red Cabal heavily relies on informants to identify its targets, after all. She finishes by saying the Red Cabal brought knowledge on wards, freely given as a gesture of goodwill.

I find it interesting that the instructor and the old man would present this as a negotiation. I know that, traditionally, an envoy would leave the package with the local authorities then wait for them to deliberate. By presenting the situation as a confrontation, they create tension that has no need to exist. Even using a round table or an informal setting rather than an exposed spot with allied mages sitting around to witness the process. I surmise they both agreed to turn this into a training event, since even a disagreement here could easily be remedied.

“Why did the Red Cabal send a child to talk to us?” the bald woman asks, her voice betraying her displeasure.

“I assure you,” Aramis says, “that everyone present is fully qualified. We have all been trained to the Cabal’s exacting standards.”

Ah, they picked the handsome stud to be the speaker. Good call, good call. Some would object to a woman leading the conversation while Jacob Van Graff possesses the charisma and presence of a drowned rat.

The woman waits for a second in silence, her eyes quickly drifting. Oh, what an interesting development.

“How long was that?” she further asks after the tiny delay.

“The Red Cabal asked us to represent it during those talks. I merely ask that you extend the same trust to us,” the handsome young man replies with a pleasant smile that does not quite reach his eyes.

“Hmph.”

The discussion resumes, with the Red Cabal trying to get the other side to accept more rules, most of them being of the nature of ‘please do not desecrate the dead by rising temporary rotten corpse golems to send after your rivals’ and other benign requirements, while the locals attempt to get more concessions in terms of knowledge and training.

I watch to see if Constance will catch up to the others' little game. She stares like a hawk but she misses the hand signals. The gentleman will wait until the talks reach an impasse, then signal his ally who will act as an attack dog, then he will reign her in and obtain a few more concessions. Rather than opposite sides of a faction, they are in fact in cahoots. Aramis is doing well but they are working from the wrong assumption, that the woman represents a reluctant faction they need to convince of their good intentions while, in fact, she is just here to milk them for more. I shall have to train her. Hmmm.

"This book is good and all, but you use western standard and nobody here has formal training in western technique. It's practically useless!" the local woman erupts.

"Who made the wards near the entrance?" Constance asks, talking for the first time.

The question takes the two locals off guard.

"I did," a man at the table says. He had been silent until now.

"Then you can help with passing on the knowledge, since you are more than qualified with western standard," Constance finishes.

She rests back into her seat, her eyes defiant. I admit that it was a good 'gotcha' moment and serves to destabilize the opposition. After that, Aramis is much more unwilling to agree to anything. The other side perceives the change and stops.

To my endless surprise, the negotiation concludes with both sides pleased with their results. The local mage immediately turns the occasion into a party with songs in several different languages. One of the guests makes a significant effort to get everyone drunk on ti'punch, which he calls 'tea ponsh', a mix of rum, cane syrup, and lime.

So, everything has gone well?

It cannot be; my instincts never lie.

I keep an eye on the party as it unfolds. The instructor who carries my camera in her pocket shows no signs of being drunk, instead dutifully moving around to give me a good view. I spot no anomalies, no murderous outliers offended by the agreement, nothing. A quick talk with Lafayette confirms that there are no dark forces preparing to raid the celebration, only revelers coming and going in a pleasant stupor. After an hour of partying, the event winds down just as my anxiety peaks, until finally I hear words of a new development.

"Mistress," Lafayette says, "someone is running in. He seems afraid."

Soon, the instructor's camera shows a harried lad rushing towards the corner where the negotiators have retreated. He stops, breathless.

"There... there's been a murder!"

Intense relief floods my soul. A murder! How quaint. How... not immediately threatening.

Perfect. I stand up from my seat, and walk, considering my options. The first thing I will need is knowledge. The night will set soon, then, I will make my moves.

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Instructor Schindler checks with me before delving into the problem. As the Cabal's main financial backer, I have a lot of pull on the organization provided I do not go against its core beliefs. I immediately agree to her request. What must happen, shall happen. I am merely here to limit the damage while allowing the young ones to grow. Let them solve this mystery. Perhaps it will be the crucible that forms them into a respected squad. Perhaps I shall end this little trip with a Servant candidate. Perhaps they will break. I do not know. In any case, the Red Cabal contacts the mayor to offer their services.

Technically, the Red Cabal is a respected mercenary company that deals with supernatural threats, mostly lich incursions, giant beasts, and rogue mages or werewolves. The Supernatural Task Force enforces order in the civilian population, solving crimes committed with unnatural means. They would be better suited to solving this issue, were it not for politics.

Right now, two inhabitants of Indianapolis in five are not members of the white race. As American ethnic relations reach a nadir, a powerful reaction against all that is other has shaken many cities including this one. The establishment of an STF bureau was thoroughly refused and the mayor's office took the decision not to host 'those people' firmly, a decision confirmed by vote and enshrined by directives. As such, the murder of Ichabod Silversmith caught mundane law enforcement off guard, mostly because poor Ichabod was found savagely dismembered. Lafayette reports that the body was recovered in several small bags.

I have my escort keep a close look on the squad and manage to eavesdrop on the meeting that follows. The mayor, a tall, rotund man with a vicious gaze, allows Miss Schindler to investigate, though I can see the condescension and disbelief clear through the mirror. He considers her an expandable resource, a scapegoat to feed the papers if she fails. The chief of police who attends the meeting offers his most strenuous objection, to stay polite. He is overruled. I catch a few comments after Schindler leaves, mostly disparaging ones.

Now let us see how the young ones solve a murder.

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Before his mangled demise, Ichabod Silversmith used to live in a small cottage at the edge of town surrounded by rows of similar houses separated by high walls. Trees, clad in their fall garment, provide a fiery curtain to protect each's dweller intimacy. Or at least, I would like to imagine the leaves are yellow. The silver of the screen gets dull at times. I shall have to find a way to get colors to work.

The squad of younglings approaches, Schindler wisely decides to let Aramis take the lead. Despite his youth, he has countenance to be taken seriously while an older woman may not.



Her role is more to oversee and protect, in any case. The squad first heads to the crime scene, which happens to be a shed belonging to the victim.

Although the silvery image I see lacks color, I notice quite a few spots on the leaf-strewn lawn at the back of the victim's house. Their origin is quickly elucidated.

"Wah, it looks like someone here has been violently and repeatedly sick," Jacob says, once more demonstrating his suave charm.

The officer guarding the shed frowns mightily.

"You'd be sick too if you'd seen what was left, boy," he grumbles. "And what are you clowns doing here anyway? Magickers ain't welcome in this town."

"We have an authorization to conduct an investigation signed by the mayor himself," Aramis says with a deep voice. "We would like your assistance in bringing the murderer to justice."

The police officer spits on the ground — which taints the scene for werewolves hunters, but I digress — before grabbing the signed sheet none too gently.

"Hmph. Looks genuine, I guess. Knock yourselves out."

Schindler conducts an impromptu exercise by letting her wards inspect the scene, then hearing their report. Unfortunately, the lack of colors and relative darkness inside the shed play hell with the camera's controls, so I have to rely on their testimonies to understand the scene.

"The lock was closed, but it was forced by something supernatural," Millie says.

"How can you tell?" Schindler asks.

"The metal is broken and twisted, and it was done with great strength. There were wards traced here and there but the power broke them. A crowbar would not have sufficed."

"Anything else?"

"The damage was done with claws," Jacob says, "though we will need to see the cadaver to be certain."

"Given the amount of blood and... remaining viscerae, it appears to be the work of a werewolf," Aramis adds.

"In the city?" Schindler challenges without bite.

"Indianapolis has a population of city-dwelling outsiders. They certainly have the means and level of control required to take out someone like that, even if the target is a mage," Aramis whispers so the officer outside does not hear him. "We should... talk to them. Or their leader, at least."

“We will do that after we have more concrete evidence,” Schindler says. “You know werewolves.”

“They can be quick to anger, yes.”

On a secondary mirror, I hear Lafayette’s werewolf growl. Case in point.

“Was there something else?” the instructor asks.

The camera pans on Constance as she taps the ground with a wand, focused. She bites her lower lip.

“Ichabod Silversmith knew the killer was coming. The attacker may have let him know to toy with him. It was either personal or to send a message because nothing was taken. You can see it from the blood pattern.”

“It could have been taken before he was killed?” Millie objects, but Constance shakes her head.

“No. Look at this track here, near the lock. The victim started to bleed immediately when the ward was breached. The pattern is uninterrupted, here and there.”

“How do you know he saw his end come?” Schindler asked, suddenly more serious.

“Because no one locks themselves in their tool shed.”

Ah, good catch. There could be other reasons, of course, but they are less likely. The others nod. After that, the squad decides to ask the attending officer if neighbors heard anything and get told to fuck off. Constance manages to sway him by speaking of duty and the importance of getting this menace taken down. And also a generous dose of mind influence, I suspect. Nevertheless, the neighbors heard nothing and the attack happened at night. It does not mean much.

The squad leaves to see the body in the local morgue. I can tell from Millie and Jacob’s violent retches that the corpse is in as bad a situation as expected, and when the camera focuses on the pile of meat resting on a gurney, I cannot quite make head nor tail of what I am watching. Mostly because I cannot find said head. I will have to visit in person.

“Multiple...” Schindler says before taking a few shallow breaths, “Multiple lacerations. Oh God.”

“Here, let me cool the air,” Constance says.

I wait until the group’s breath eases.

“Much better. Now it does not smell quite so strongly,” she comments. “Now, where to begin?”

Aramis puts on gloves, then lifts a mangled arm for all to see.

“Definitely no tools were used to cut that, not even a rusty blade. Our victim was killed with natural weapons, making the theory of a murderous werewolf likely.”

Not to be outdone, Constance grabs a rib pointing out of Ichabod’s eviscerated chest.

“Absolutely, the strength needed to pull out a rib like that without a tool is monstrous. Even with appropriate tools, it would have taken a determined human too much time to inflict that sort of damage.”

There follows a strange game where the two companions attempt to outgross each other, pushing me to check their files again. Hmm. They were in different classes until last year. Aramis was given the express direction to protect the girl after he arrived here from Europe with his family. He has no relationship with the Bingles. I read his family tree just to be sure. The *Watcher* protect us if there are two of those in the same place.

It looks like they care about each other’s opinion. I do not know what to think of it. Teenage love? Pah, it matters not for now.

Soon enough, the inspection is done. They did manipulate the head and found no trace of vampire bites near the neck, or what was left of it. I applaud their vigilance and watch them take their leave.

“Still, I cannot get over the complete lack of bite marks. Werewolves always bite,” Jacob observes.

“Could it be that the werewolf did not want to leave teeth marks? I read that each is unique,” Millie answers.

“Can a werewolf even reach this level of control?” Aramis muses.

“We can ask them in person,” their instructor says. “For now, we will retire to our hotel to eat dinner and refresh ourselves. Tonight, we will impose upon the hospitality of the Silversmiths to ask them a few questions. This attack could be deliberate. Let us learn what we can.”

The squad nods. I let the spell fade. Immediately, I feel better.

“*By the Watcher, that was draining,*” I say to myself.

Night is falling. As soon as the sun dips behind the horizon, I take a deep breath of intense relief. It is time to do some legwork.

A quick call summons Lafayette and my escort back to the Grand Hotel to rest, except Amaruq, their Inuit werewolf, who will keep an eye on their wards for a little longer.

“Have my automobile wait near the Silversmith residence, with my trunk” I tell my chauffeur.

Now, finally, I am free to play. I race to the crime scene via rooftop, dressed in light armor. I do find the place where the attacker waited by correctly identifying claw marks. My, what an impatient little hunter they are. The crime scene stinks too much to get anything worthwhile, but the remains of Ichabod Silversmith reveal what I need to know. I find the attacker's scent all over the corpse, then I spend half an hour criss-crossing the city until I find a matching trail. Soon, I track it down to the killer.

What an intriguing culprit. And the implication of their existence is delicious. Nevertheless, I shall let my proteges prove themselves if they can by finding a solution of their own. In the meanwhile, I have an appointment with the Silversmiths to eavesdrop on.