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His name had been... Actually, he no longer remembered. He was a cackling dervish of protruding crystallised weapons formed from his hardened epidermis, onto which fell scores of innocent souls and helpless guardsmen.

In the wake of his ceaseless slaughter lay ruin and carnage, those few surviving the ordeal scarred and robbed of life, their eyes staring blankly around them in a mind-addled confusion.

He was heading east, or, rather, the Demon who controlled his body was. It roared in his mind about the battlefield they would find, all the blood they would shower in, and the flames and scalding winds they would conjure. It spoke to him of its *ascendancy*.

With naught but ruin and death dogging his heels, Raleigh hurled his reshaped vessel towards Octland and the delectable offering of power it contained within its borders.

“What day is it?” Jakob asked, carefully propping himself up with his right hand.

“You’ve been asleep for about a day and a half,” the Elphin told him, visibly concerned for his well-being.

“Do not look so distraught, Ciana.”

He looked around the carriage, spotting the back of Hessel at the front, holding the reins of the horses. Opposite him sat Wothram inactively. He wondered what sort of pillow they had given him, but then realised it was no pillow at all, as he looked at Ciana leaned above him, her long silver-blond hair hanging down her shoulders, tickling his exposed forehead. She had taken off her helmet.

“Where’s my mask?” he asked, laying his head back down on her lap, making the Elphin grin.

She handed him the crimson face-covering and he took it gratefully, inhaling a puff of the Misty Reminiscence without attaching it over his ears. After removing it and releasing a puff of the vapour, he abruptly shot back up, a sudden realisation in his mind.

“Where’s Zelesti!?”

Ciana’s wide eyes made him realise she had not even noticed the absence of the doll-faced Envy Demon. Hessel just grunted, finding it amusing it would seem.

“Demons do as they please, when their master is not available to scold them into submission or tie fast their bonds of servitude. Envious ones are the most troubling sort of servant, requiring constant supervision.”

Jakob sighed and lay back down on Ciana’s comfortable lap. She must have also removed her bone-plate leggings at some point, he realised, noticing the discarded armour lying next to the inactive Golem.

He lifted his stump into the air, staring at it for a moment, wondering what he could replace his lost limb with.

“She has served her purpose, so I suppose it matters not where she’s gone.”

Tress and her small army had been on-edge since the massive tremors had shook the earth beneath them. Even from a distance, it was clearly visible that *something* had happened to Rooskeld, given that a large portion of its northern sector was now a gaping hole full of abyss-black water.

The enemy, *that* lone pernicious Daemon, was no doubt aware of their arrival, but no defences had been mounted atop the town's modest walls, nor had the gate been barred from within, rather, it stood open wide, inviting them inside.

But one did not become a Royal by falling for the such tricks.

Tress gave the order to dismount about fifty metres from the wall, her contingent of nine squads spreading out in a defensive perimeter without needing to be told.

After they had secured their checkpoint and decided who stayed behind, they cautiously approached the town wall near the gate. But, they had only crossed halfway, when a small child, with her head down, came slowly walking out the open entrance into the den of the Daemon. Tress judged her to be no more than five years old, but her once-bright dress was bloodied and she held a ruined doll in her left hand, which dragged along the dry and coarse earth.

"Stay alert," she told her Guards, but a few of them still took some steps towards the young girl, their compassion defeating their rational minds.

The rest happened so fast she barely had time to react, but, as she observed the young girl, a loud *snap* sounded from atop the wall and a huge commotion broke out within the checkpoint camp, as their falconer, Tobias, exploded in a shower of viscera and that oh-so-familiar despicable black blood of the Daemon they hunted. As the black blood shot out of him in a hundred tiny shards, infecting and turning not only the majority of those at the rear who performed support, but also many of their mounts, they quickly found a horde of Undying Slaves emerging from the gate behind the little girl.

Tress was about to yell out her orders, when the girl looked towards her and an enormous ungodly abyss-black spear pushed its way out her mouth, tearing her face apart, before launching right at her.

"What is this place?" Jakob asked, looking about the little town. Surprisingly, it had no walls, but it seemed to be because it held a branch office of the Adventurers' Guild and thus its protection from bandits and marauders was ensured.

"Hekkenfelt," Ciana replied.

"You chose it?"

Heskel grunted.

"Should I have picked somewhere else? I thought maybe if we hid in plain sight, we might be harder to find. And I don't think the Guild in Helmsgarten and the one in Lleman gets along well."

"What do you think?" Jakob asked, looking to Heskel for guidance.

The Wight nodded, before adding, "**Ciana chose well.**"

"Very well," he replied, before turning back to the Elphin. "What should we do first? You are in charge."

"In charge? No, I was just—"

"Ciana," he interrupted, making her pause. "I have had a realisation, after losing my hand to Guillaume."

"A realisation? What does that have to—"

“Just let me finish,” he continued, keeping his voice level. “My enemies seek me, first and foremost, and, thus, they have come to understand my mode of thinking, at least to some extent. Hence, I thought, wouldn’t I benefit from letting someone else make the decisions?”

“Oh. I see. But, still, I’m not sure I could lead us well.”

Heskel grunted his disagreement.

“I have to disagree with you as well,” Jakob replied. “Elphin are not known to live long lives, but Heskel has told me that you are unnaturally long-lived.”

“Are you calling me old?” she replied with a raised eyebrow.

Jakob paused before answering. “Yes.”

Ciana laughed in response, but he was unsure why.

“One does not lead a long life being hunted by all who lays their eyes on you, without having a cunning uniquely suited for remaining in hiding.”

“But I used to live in forests, not in cities... not amongst people...”

“I think my point still stands. You gave this enough thought and came up with something that I myself overlooked and failed to consider. So, I ask again, where to first?”

“Are you registering as a party of three?” the Receptionist asked. They were one of only a few groups of people in the Guild Hall of Hekkenfelt, which, compared to the one in Helmsgarten, looked mostly like a rundown tavern, if not for the plentiful bounty boards and flyers for quests that occupied an entire backwall.

Jakob looked back at Wothram who stood just outside, protecting their carriage and its precious haul.

“That’s right,” Ciana answered, standing at the fore of their group.

“Very well, I’ll need your names, ages, and classes of expertise.”

“I’m the group lead, my name is Ciana, I’m an Enchanted-Sword Wielder, and I’m twenty-three.”

Heskel grunted, finding her modified age amusing. In response, the Elphin nudged him with her elbow.

“And the other two?” the Receptionist asked, watching their exchange with a tired expression.

“This one is Heskel, he’s a Brawler, and he’s...”

Heskel shrugged.

“Fifty-four,” Ciana then decided with a grin, the Wight grunting in a less amused tone now.

“Thirty-eight, isn’t it, Heskel?”

The Receptionist looked between them. “So which is it then? Fifty-four or thirty-eight?”

“**Forty-two.**”

“Alright... just so I’m sure I have it correct,” she said, while chiselling the name onto Heskel’s tin badge, “Heskel, forty-two, Brawler.”

“That’s right. And the last one is—”

“Goddarth,” Jakob quickly interrupted, since there was still a slim possibility that his identity might be double-checked with the badges of Helmsgarten.

The Receptionist looked up from his badge after chiselling in the name. “My uncle had the same name.”

Jakob just nodded. He had picked it because that was the name Grandfather had used half-a-century prior, when he became known as the Llemanian Widowmaker.

“Age and Class?”

“Sixteen and I’m a Support Alchemist.”

“We don’t get a lot of those,” the Receptionist replied, suddenly excited. “You’ll find a lot of work in Hekkenfelt if you have the willingness to advertise your talents. After all, we just had our long-time Alchemist move north to Libou.”

“That’s alright.”

Heskel put a hand on his shoulder suddenly.

“What is it?” he asked, switching from Llemanian to Chthonic.

“**Seventeen.**”

“What do you mean?”

“**Counted days in Mansion. Seventeen.**”

“I see.”

He switched back to Llemanian and addressed the Receptionist. “It seems I misspoke. Please put down seventeen instead.”

She nodded eagerly.

Moments later, they were each given a newly-chiselled tin badge to wear, and Ciana wasted no time picking a hunting quest for them. It was a task to find out what was happening to the sheep of a farmstead some kilometres southwest of Hekkenfelt.

“Did you notice how she was hitting on you?” Ciana asked, seeming at once excited and outraged.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Jakob replied.

“You really are quite bad at human interaction.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“No, but seriously, she wanted to—”

“**Procreate**,” Heskel interjected helpfully.

“That’s a crude way to put it... but, yeah, possibly!”

“I have better things to do,” Jakob answered simply. He was unsure why the Elphin found it so important to discuss.

“But, don’t you ever have... *urges*?”

Jakob looked to Heskel for advice, but the Wight simply shrugged.

“No.”

Ciana looked both shocked and happy, which he was unsure of the meaning behind. Her behaviour was quite hard for him to comprehend, but she seemed to have changed rapidly as a person from when he met her to now only a few weeks later. Perhaps this was her true self, and the timid self-doubting creature she had been at first was an outward façade. In a way, her new attitude reminded him a bit of Pernille, which was a comfort in itself. He hoped she could continue where his former Secretary had left off and broaden his tastes of the world.