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Iskandarr showed up to the hill near the treeline only a few minutes after Jakob had arrived, but still his disappointment at ‘losing’ was evident on his face. On Jakob’s shoulder sat bird of sculpted bone with gossamer-thin hairs on the shafts of its feathers. It still needed some work to be able to fly, as it was currently only capable of gliding, but the design was otherwise flawless.

Like Mayhew, it carried a Birthed Sentience mirrored to Wothram’s, but it had already begun exhibiting unique behaviours similar to how Invincibles’ equine frame had altered its mannerisms. It was strange that Wothram possessed such a capacity for mannerisms and uniqueness, but never ever exhibited any himself. A few times Jakob had wondered how the Golem would act if told it “Do as you wish,” but he was too useful a servant for Jakob to wish to experiment on.

About ten minutes after Iskandarr, Ciana arrived to the hill as well.

She looked between them confused, “Am I late? The sun hasn’t risen yet, but you’re both here.”

If his face would have allowed it, Jakob would have smiled, but alas. He settled for a chuckle, which, given the mask on his face, became an ominous sound.

“*Why is Mother here?*” Iskandarr asked Jakob.

“Because she might also benefit from these lessons,” Jakob replied.

“I thought I was here to help teach him,” the Elphin commented.

“You haven’t ever attempted to master other forms of magic than your gifted one,” he replied knowingly. “You may find there are other elements that favour you than the Keening One’s Sound.”

Jakob guided Iskandarr and Ciana through a series of breathing and focus techniques meant to stimulate the centres in their body which were capable of manipulating the elements, and already after just a few cycles, a crackle erupted around the boy’s right hand, before it violently exploded up and away into the cloud-filled sky as a bolt of energy that was stained with an unholy-and-filthy green glow.

As the energy hit the clouds it dispersed into them and there sounded a chorus of sympathetic rumbling, just like when Stelji had used her lightning magic in the past, though less potent.

Iskandarr fell to his knees, grasping his hands to his head as he experienced the backlash of the element he had invoked wordlessly.

“Lightning magic,” Ciana mumbled awe-struck, before coming to his aid.

Although Jakob had been born without the possibility of mastering magic, as it was a physiological and metaphysical trait of the people of this world, he was very familiar with how to discover and reign-in an elemental power if one’s body possessed the talent. It was of course thanks to Grandfather that he had this knowledge, as it was *the one* field where he had never shown any promise, hence his focus on rituals, rites, and the Chthonic Hymns that required no innate magical talent to perform, only knowledge and practice.

The incantations of magical spells were usually formed of two facets: to ensure minimal backlash to the caster; and to shape the magic according to the caster’s will. More facets could be added to incantations to achieve more complex magic, but they were generally favoured with only two facets, as this made them quick to cast.

Part of minimising the backlash was to limit how much of one’s soul energy was exerted on the spell, as the backlash was proportional to the output. Individuals who could release their magic

without the need for this protection were either stubborn fools who eschewed incantations and would succumb to their folly or those who possessed the magical control innately, like demons and their offspring.

Granted, there were also outliers, like the Rose-Gold Adventurer, who had wielded the Keening One's power through some strange grafted-on hand, and constructs like Stelji.

Of course, one fundamental part of magic affected all its wielders, and that was the fact that the magic in one's soul was not limitless. Even for a Wrought Servant like Stelji. Even for an Elphin like Ciana. For when it came to magic, its wielders all used their own souls like batteries. Some had a higher capacity than others, but each and every one of them were ultimately reducing their lifespans by using magic.

Grandfather had told Jakob that only weak and useless sorcerers lived past fifty, but Jakob had very little to compare the information with, as he had known only two old magic-wielders. One had been an unimportant low-ranked Adventurer, while the other served as the Advisor to the King of Helmsgarten. Part of him had wondered, even back then, if Grandfather himself had not simply been jealous of those who wielded magic, for he was, like Jakob, a 'hollow' as many magic-wielders haughtily referred to them.

A part of Jakob, a part that was rarely used, feared that Iskandarr's tremendous abilities would be his own undoing, as it was possible that he possessed a human-like soul, but contained the powers of a Demon Lord. If that was the case, he might not live for more than a couple years at most if he frequently utilised his powerful magic. Even with his gifted obsidian hand, he had been unable to ascertain if his worries were unfounded or not.

After Iskandarr had recovered from the violent backlash, Jakob guided him through the process of making an incantation. Ciana meanwhile continued going through the techniques to discover if she possessed other innate forms of magic. It was quite possible that she had been hollow from birth, but been made capable of magic following the ritual Jakob and Hesel had performed to align her soul properly with her demon half. Of course, there were no forms of conventional magic that could match that of a Great One's gifted power, but she would still be well-served with having a broader arsenal, especially as she had revealed that her power did not seem to work against the Flayed Lady's magic, as though the magic itself knew it was subservient to her, due to the Keening One being the Lady's vassal.

"I have decided on an incantation," Iskandarr announced.

Ciana stopped her exercises and watched alongside Jakob, as the young Sovereign lifted his hand towards a tree that stood by its lonesome back towards the tavern.

"Spark of creation, birthe a jealous spear!" he intoned in a beautiful form of demonic that Jakob knew belonged to the Pride Demons of the Solitary Spire. From the youth's half-opened palm came a dozen spidery legs of glowing light tainted muddy-green, before a single spear of energy shot from his palm and to the tree in an instant, producing a hideous *crunch* as it blew the tree out from within, sending smouldering splinters outward for several dozen metres in every direction.

Jakob noticed how, as the spell faded away, Iskandarr's left eye, the one that represented his Envious progenitor, glowed fiercely, seeming to leave behind a dirty trail that was slow to dim, when he turned his head towards Ciana.

"I want a rematch, now," he demanded.

Jakob touched the boy's forehead with one of his obsidian fingers, then said, "She will still defeat you. Though you put on a good face, you can only cast that a handful more times before you run out of steam."

Iskandarr grumbled, but did not argue back, instinctively knowing Jakob spoke the truth.

"There are more ways to utilise your newfound magic than a simple offensive strike," Jakob wisely explained. It was rare that magic-wielders learnt such ways, though Sirellius' form of Scrying was no doubt a unique example, but, with the right incantation, it was possible to enhance one's speed or defence or physical strength.

"Consider the element you wield," Jakob told him. "Consider how else it might serve you. Bend its power to your will and you will stand to gain far more than you can imagine."

Iskandarr seemed to absorb the lesson well, for once, and quickly fell into a contemplative silence, while Ciana continued rolling her breath through her body and moving her mental focus along the insides of her flesh. In many ways, the technique for intentionally uncovering magic was like trying to search through a series of rooms within yourself, using your mind's eye as a torch and your breath as the flame, such that the darkness was pushed back and something might be uncovered.

From what Grandfather had told him, alongside the things he had read, Jakob knew that most magic-wielders discovered their powers around adolescence and towards the end of their maturing process, generally always accidentally as a result of extreme emotions bringing the magic to light or some other extraneous trigger like grievous bodily injury.

He had once read of a Sorcerer nicknamed 'Inferno', who uncovered his magical powers when looking at a particular piece of evocative art, though Jakob doubted the veracity of such a claim as it seemed a bit too fanciful, not to mention that there were no similar accounts in all of the vast libraries of knowledge he had absorbed.

One thing he would like to figure out once he found the time to experiment properly again, was to see which physiological difference in the human body there was between those who had magic and those who were hollow. It was quite possible that it was just a matter of heritage, as many of the magically-gifted bore children with similar talents, and, amusingly, similar elements of magic. However, for such a grand study, he would need a lot of magicians to cut into and it would not make sense to do it within Helmsgarten nor Lleman, as both places were scarce in terms of Magician Families. No, for such a study, Heimdale was the best place to go, with all their mountain cities and schools of magic.

Suddenly a frigid wind buffeted both Jakob and Iskandarr, pushing them away from Ciana who had become the eye of an arctic storm. He had to put a hand on the boy's chest to stop him from charging into the blinding wind, but, as quick as it had arrived it stilled and disappeared again, leaving behind Ciana, who stood unscathed amidst a field of frozen-white grass stalks and upturned earth.

"How do you feel?" Jakob asked after a moment, when she showed no obvious sign of backlash. He knew that her blood vessels would be targeted by the backlash of the cold magic, while the wind magic would affect her lungs and stomach, and the combination of both simultaneously should have made her blood pressure spike and left her breathless, resulting in an immediate state of unconsciousness, and yet she stood unperturbed.

"I feel undefeatable," she replied with a self-satisfied smirk. Iskandarr seemed to not take this very well, as he no doubt felt upstaged by her again.

"You have uncovered the magic of your birthmother," Jakob replied after putting his obsidian hand on Ciana's forehead. "Archduchess Sköll is seemingly capable of both invoking the Keening One's power and a unique form of wind magic that bears a freezing cold."

The Elphin was speechless, so Jakob continued his muttering, while Iskandarr seemed busy trying to come up with another incantation to return the attention to him.

“It is bizarre that you did not manifest this power back when we realigned your soul,” Jakob commented. “But it is clearly an innate power you were owed, due to your lineage, and thus you are less perceptible to its backlash, similar to how the Keening’s gift has not stolen away your hearing.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, confused.

“Those Blessed by the Keening One often lose their hearing as a recompense for the tremendous power they are given. Grandfather had a theory that all those born with congenital deafness are people born to inherit the Keening One’s power, though, of course, most never live long enough for it to happen.”

“Do you think the Rose-Gold Adventurer was deaf?” Ciana wondered.

“Without a head to examine, I cannot say, but it is likely. After all, he was simply a mortal man with a powerful gift, nothing more.”

“But demons are different? Elphin too?”

“Demons seem to only attain the powers of the Great Ones if their Vice is birthed from them directly, and as such they are not gifted their powers, but inherit it through their ties to the Vice, meaning that the stronger they are, the more likely they are to inherit their unique power.

“As for Elphin, you are half human, and thus it is not unlikely you could be gifted a power, though I personally have never heard of it.”

“Nor I,” Ciana replied. “All Elphin that I have met have been magicless and powerless, aside from our superhuman reflexes and speed.”

Before Jakob could ask if she still knew of other Elphin, Iskandarr’s voice broke through the conversation, as he intoned a newly-crafted incantation:

“Spark of creation, alight this form on wings of pure energy, scald the eyes of all who watch, and make of me a Sovereign true!”

A boom of thunder emerged from the boy, trembling the earth beneath their feet, and then it was as if massive wings of that tainted green lightning flapped from his back, before he vanished as his body became one with the lightning and shot him forward a hundred metres, leaving a trail of glowing muddy-green motes of crackling energy that fell slowly towards the grass before dying out. From where he had stood to where he ended up was a furrow of upturned earth and sheared-in-half straws of grass and steamed seemed to be rising from the ground itself, as though it had been rapidly heated.

Then came the echoing boom and the world lit up in a flash of lightning, as though the result of Iskandarr’s incantation was only just now visible to their eyes.

The boy came walking back with a smug look on his face, before demanding:

“Mother, it is time for a rematch.”

Ciana grinned as his vainglorious expression.

“You’ll still lose,” Jakob remarked knowingly, but it did not seem to matter to the Sovereign youth.